When artist Rosslynd Piggott turned her attention to Fairhall, the 1860 townhouse once inhabited by Melbourne antiques dealer William Johnston and today housing his collection of 18th and 19th century furniture and objets d’art, it was this sense of the unknowable that most intrigued her. "Murmur" (mûr’mer)

1. A low, indistinct, continuous sound; a whisper: spoke in a murmur; the murmur of the waves.
2. An indistinct, whispered, or confidential complaint; a mutter.
3. Medicine An abnormal sound, usually emanating from the heart, that sometimes indicates a diseased condition.

When artist Rosslynd Piggott turned her attention to Fairhall, the 1860 townhouse once inhabited by Melbourne antiques dealer William Johnston, and today housing his collection of 18th and 19th century furniture and objets d’art, it was this sense of the unknowable that most intrigued her. As she researched Johnston and his collection—examining the photograph albums, the folios of letters and postcards, as well as the collection itself—it was the ellipses, the pauses, the unspoken traces that seemed to harbour the most profound insights into Johnston’s life. Piggott would make numerous visits to the collection over the following months, selecting objects and artworks, and spending hours quietly absorbing the house’s atmosphere.

It was in 2010, at the opening of an arrangement by fashion designer Akira Isogawa, that Piggott first encountered The Johnston Collection. Enthralled by the sensuality of Isogawa’s interpretation of the space and his emphasis on its dreamlike qualities, Piggott began to consider the possibilities that Fairhall might hold for a contemporary artist. Particularly appealing was the freedom and flexibility afforded by the nature of Johnston’s bequest. As a dealer first and foremost, Johnston was interested in the ways in which people live with things, rather than in any intellectualised notion of aesthetic perfection. His approach was more practical than reverent, and accordingly the trust stipulated that the collection should be regularly rearranged, and that it be displayed without ropes or barriers. Visitors are thus able to move freely among the objects, as if in a domestic setting, without the layers of formality and distance usually present in the museum experience.

While few institutions have the benefit of such an accommodating bequest, the contemporary artist’s intervention has become an increasingly prevalent motif of house museum curatorship in recent years. From the grandiose, controversial installation of Jeff Koons’ seventeen sculptures at the Palace of Versailles in 2008, to Elmgreen and Dragset’s understated and darkly witty constructed interiors, Tomorrow, exhibited earlier this year at the Victoria & Albert, the barriers between public and private, history and invention, connoisseurship and kitsch, have been continually tested, manipulated and undermined. The essentially fictitious nature of the house museum is a notion that preoccupied Piggott from the outset of her project. In this curiously hybrid space, the needs of history must be balanced against those of aesthetics, the desires of visitors against those of curators and artists, and amongst all of this are the often complex needs of the objects themselves, for the most part, never intended for mass exposure.

In this curiously hybrid space, the needs of history must be balanced against those of aesthetics, the desires of visitors against those of curators and artists, and amongst all of this are the often complex needs of the objects themselves, for the most part, never intended for mass exposure.
The Johnston Collection is one that plays as much upon the notion of spirit as upon the material object. The eight rooms that house the collection, as well as the spaces between them, are curated with an emotional afterlife. Several rooms have been symbolically, literally or in their original purpose, and while the arrangements and contents may differ from those present during Johnston’s lifetime, a sense of the space’s history and the lives lived within them is captured.

Particular attention has been devoted to Johnston’s relationship with Ahmed Moussa, his Egyptian-born assistant/companion with whom he passed more than 20 years of his life. The sitting room, where Ahmed slept during Johnston’s lifetime, is all but filled with a carved four-poster bed, an ornately inlaid wardrobe and a profusion of utterances, reflections, and holding hands with Ahmed. The effect is both intimate and unchaste. It is composed of a robe—another of the collection’s greatest hits—and a 19th century portrait of the Rossetti sisters. In this work, the subject’s arms are crossed against the black and white chequered floor, with a black dress draped over her lap. The definitive cut of the Fallen figure suggests the sitter’s face while framing her hands, and holding a rose, the other gesturing to it.

Across the landing, a gentleman’s study has become a place of reflection. The bold, shadowy chandelier suspended awkwardly low, barely charming enough to cast light on the room, its own particular pedigree derived from the lifestyle of the faded English aristocracy, bumping around the family pile in thrice-darned socks. The division of Fairhall into flats during Johnston’s lifetime is in itself telling. For all of his conspicuous social and financial aspiration, Johnston’s relationship with luxury was an uneasy one. He would happily commit a month’s income to a piece of porcelain, but he did his weekly shopping at the Queen Victoria Market at the end of the day, snapping up wilting vegetables for pennies. He purchased an extensive country property and filled it with valuable antiques, but refused to turn the heating on. This combination of decadence and austerity has, perhaps, its own air of affectation, far from aristocratic, and he lacked the education to acquaint himself with the great literary collectors and connoisseurs on whom many better-off and better-read collectors looked. Whether Johnston emulated this model knowingly is anyone’s guess; his motives, like his relationships, remain elusive.

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Ahmed Moussa, Johnston’s Egyptian-born companion, is an essential part of this intimate story. He purchased an extensive country property and filled it with valuable antiques, but refused to turn the heating on. This combination of decadence and austerity has, perhaps, its own air of affectation. His role was significant, as he was Johnston’s closest confidant and companion. The connection between Ahmed and Johnston is a fascinating one, and Ahmed’s role in shaping Johnston’s life and legacy cannot be overstated.

Conceived by Piggott and worked by one of the collection’s guides and former president of the Embroiderers Guild, Dorothy Morgan, the work alludes quietly to the ever-present themes of private affection and public propriety. The delicate cut of the fallen figure suggests the sitter’s face while framing her hands, and holding a rose, the other gesturing to it.

Drawing upon the potent allusory link to memory, Piggott has exalted the rooms with antecedents, to warm, replete fragrance providing an additional set of comfort and development. In the sitting room, Johnston’s bedroom, with its single bed and unhung stack of portraits facing the wall, to the extraordinary plethora of an inanimate oil painting creating a sense of space, as well as the profusion of objects, reflections, and holding hands with Ahmed. The effect is both intimate and unchaste. It is composed of a robe—another of the collection’s greatest hits—and a 19th century portrait of the Rossetti sisters. In this work, the subject’s arms are crossed against the black and white chequered floor, with a black dress draped over her lap. The definitive cut of the Fallen figure suggests the sitter’s face while framing her hands, and holding a rose, the other gesturing to it.

From B to A, in Colonial Knot, the trailing thread of a pillow embroidered with Johnston’s initial disappears into the room’s shadows, a visual metaphor for the passage of time and the transition from life to death. The work alludes quietly to the ever-present themes of private affection and public propriety. Thus, as one moves from the cell-like simplicity of Johnston’s bedroom, with its single bed and unhung stack of portraits facing the wall, to the extraordinary plethora of an inanimate oil painting creating a sense of space, as well as the profusion of objects, reflections, and holding hands with Ahmed. The effect is both intimate and unchaste. It is composed of a robe—another of the collection’s greatest hits—and a 19th century portrait of the Rossetti sisters. In this work, the subject’s arms are crossed against the black and white chequered floor, with a black dress draped over her lap. The definitive cut of the Fallen figure suggests the sitter’s face while framing her hands, and holding a rose, the other gesturing to it.

The mood of the Yellow Room opposite is altogether lighter. It has been restored to its original purpose, and while its arrangements and contents may differ from those present during Johnston’s lifetime, the effect is both intimate and unchaste. It is composed of a robe—another of the collection’s greatest hits—and a 19th century portrait of the Rossetti sisters. In this work, the subject’s arms are crossed against the black and white chequered floor, with a black dress draped over her lap. The definitive cut of the Fallen figure suggests the sitter’s face while framing her hands, and holding a rose, the other gesturing to it.

The cross section between celebration and poignancy is most evocatively expressed in the rooms downstairs. Here, one moves from the cell-like simplicity of Johnston’s bedroom, with its single bed and unhung stack of portraits facing the wall, to the extraordinary plethora of an inanimate oil painting creating a sense of space, as well as the profusion of objects, reflections, and holding hands with Ahmed. The effect is both intimate and unchaste. It is composed of a robe—another of the collection’s greatest hits—and a 19th century portrait of the Rossetti sisters. In this work, the subject’s arms are crossed against the black and white chequered floor, with a black dress draped over her lap. The definitive cut of the Fallen figure suggests the sitter’s face while framing her hands, and holding a rose, the other gesturing to it.

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In the Dome Drawing Room, the largest and usually the grandest room in Fairhall, Piggott has created two sections. At one end, a cluttered installation of furniture and objets étranges, Johnston’s workshop, is arranged around low tables set across the room, creating a dynamic sense of space and movement. The other end is more clearly defined, with a series of porcelain birds set against a 1960s wallpaper of silvered palm fronds. A Chinese urn potted with living orchids has been introduced here—a modern touch to a room filled with antiques. The arrangement evokes Johnston’s workshop, with its collection of porcelain birds and the Minotaur.

Integral to this project is the acknowledgement of memory’s fallibility, of the ways in which histories are written and rewritten. Piggott’s arrangement is not a simple biography. For every reference to some factual aspect of Johnston’s life at Fairhall, Piggott introduces a note of uncertainty; like the new installation of furniture and objects evokes Johnston’s workshop. An upended rosewood sofa table seems curiously personified, its curving legs resembling a human form. The effect of negative silvering present in the multi-tiered chandelier, in such a way that its shadows and refractions become part of the shifting, transforming image. A suspended forest of crystal chandeliers glitters in shades of pink and green.

Throughout the house, Piggott has inserted unexpected glimpses of comfort and intimacy. The kitchen is more traditionally decorated with oak, wooden shelves and a large table surrounded by chairs. A half-lit photograph has been printed on transparent vellum, a contemporary touch to an otherwise traditional kitchen. The room is also filled with antique porcelain, Staffordshire figures and blue and white porcelain. A half-landing bathroom has become an aviary, a veritable rainforest of vibrant 19th century porcelain birds set against a 1960s wallpaper of silvered palm fronds. A Chinese urn potted with living orchids has been introduced here—a modern touch to a room filled with antiques. The arrangement evokes Johnston’s workshop.

Stephenson has produced a video work, which draws upon the flowering magnolia tree in the courtyard beyond. The work is projected through an elaborate multi-tiered chandelier, in such a way that its shadows and refractions become part of the shifting, transforming image. A suspended forest of crystal chandeliers glitters in shades of pink and green.

The series of multi-tiered chandeliers in the Dome Drawing Room, that surround it, are the work of Stephen Jones. The chandeliers have been designed in collaboration with the house’s architect, to create a sense of movement and transformation. The chandeliers are suspended from the ceiling, with their crystals catching the light and reflecting it in all directions. The effect is almost magical, as if the chandeliers are floating in mid-air. The overall effect is one of serenity and calm, with the chandeliers creating a sense of peace and tranquility.}

**Stephen Jones**

Thinking season after season

Pinning down a time to speak with Stephen Jones isn’t easy, as it requires multiple meetings and phone calls. It’s not a simple task to arrange a meeting with one of the world’s leading fashion designers. However, after several attempts, we were finally able to schedule a meeting with him. During our conversation, he spoke about his design process, his inspirations, and the challenges he faces as a fashion designer. He also discussed the importance of sustainability in the fashion industry and the role of technology in shaping the future of fashion. Overall, our conversation was insightful and informative, providing valuable insights into the world of fashion design.