

In 1925 Sir Charles Thomas-Stanford drew up a deed of gift, leaving the estate of Preston Manor to Brighton Corporation. Charles died in March 1932 and his wife Ellen, whose family house it was, followed him less than a year later. She in turn bequeathed the entire contents of the house to the town. Succeeding generations of curators and custodians have endeavoured to document and preserve the atmosphere and furnishings of this modest country house.

Le Corbusier memorably described a house as “a machine for living in”.¹ In its heyday an Edwardian house such as Preston Manor would have epitomised such a ‘machine’. The daily tasks, necessary for the smooth running of the household, were routinely performed by more than a dozen servants and were inextricably linked to the regular rituals observed by the owners. The ‘machine’, however, was powered by creatures of flesh and blood. Beneath the surface of these mechanical activities, primal emotions pulsed and throbbed: love, hate, joy, fear and grief. With the departure of the occupants the machine ground to a halt and the life of the house ebbed away, leaving a soft pall of melancholy in its wake.

When its doors opened to the public in 1933 Preston Manor was already a museum, its rooms a series of frozen tableaux based on inventories and snapshots taken when it was last inhabited. In the most exciting experiment of recent years, the members of Unravelling have undertaken an emotional exploration of the Manor. In the spirit of Ellen’s mother Eleanor Macdonald, who held séances here, they have attempted to make contact with the life of the past. Inspired by the house and its restless ghosts they have used an astonishing range of techniques and materials, both traditional and innovative, to create exquisite and thought-provoking interventions. They have imaginatively evoked the lives of individual members of this Edwardian household and its spirit of time and place.

Stella Beddoe Senior Keeper and Keeper of Decorative Art. April 2010

1. *Vers une Architecture*, 1923

UNRAVELLING THE MANOR HOUSE

The unravelled group of artists and curators developed from a desire to explore the overlap between fine art and craft, blurring where one begins and the other ends, celebrating the uneasy line between them. When we were setting up the group, we realised that we needed something solid to aim for during the project. Therefore, the opportunity to exhibit at Preston Manor which itself sits on the line between stately home and museum was the perfect location for us.

After decades of viewing art in ‘white cube’ environments, where, according to the artist Johan Van Geluwe “Art is the captive of the Museum. The Museum alienates art from her own environment,” it is refreshing to see work placed in a non-gallery setting. During the installation of the exhibition numerous surprising incidents of serendipity occurred. With all the best planning in the world, it is only when new objects are finally placed in a setting that you can recognise the curve of a chair arm

being picked up in a textile or the ability of shadows to make an object jump out at the viewer.

Historic houses and stately homes are set up as oases, set apart from the troubles of everyday life. Rooms don’t change and preserving the status quo provides a comforting and reassuring retreat for the visitor. However these houses were not built to stand still. The foundations of the building at Preston Manor are early seventeenth century and subsequent occupants have put their stamp on the site – building on rooms, selling off land. The everyday signs of life also developed over time – wear on stone steps, scuffing of woodwork.

The twelve artists showing at the Manor are just the latest in a long, long line of people who have changed the house, albeit temporarily, to suit their own needs and make their own mark. The works were specifically developed in response to the house, and most



of them would not, or could not, have been made for or shown anywhere else.

The scale of the house has been really important to this project. It is a 'modest' stately home. It is almost conceivable as a modern domestic dwelling as the room sizes, especially the bedrooms, aren't too vast. This allows us as visitors to relate to the spaces and their domestic use more easily. It gives us a closer connection with the inhabitants of the house than we might have in a grander residence, making the spaces more personal, and allowing us to consider living in those rooms ourselves. Creating a relationship with the rooms has been a fascinating process.

We were very conscious that we wanted to have dialogue – conversations – with the house. Some artists wanted to talk to the owners of the house, others to the servants and a few wanted to talk about the objects left in the house by the occupants. We hoped that these conversations would help bring parts of the house alive to visitors, to help them see what we saw in the Manor and explore some of its less publicised pasts.

There is so much 'stuff' in Preston Manor that it becomes hard to see anything, so viewing the house through the artists' eyes has been an illuminating part of this project. Each of the artists has looked at small aspects of the house in great detail - metaphorically placing a magnifying glass over objects that we wouldn't necessarily notice. These included overlooked paintings and the porcelain figure group of a woman birching a child in the Drawing Room, which has become a favourite of the project team for the sheer inappropriateness of the subject matter to contemporary taste. Looking at things through other people's creativity has given this project its validity. As holes in a sponge allow it to absorb water, the interventions in the house draw visitors in to engage with its past. Without them there is a potential to see the house as 'other' and sterile.

With a house of this age, there were thousands of stories we could tell. The former occupants of the house have returned to the Manor through the work of a number of the artists, often taking the artists away from their usual practice into figurative work. Figures

variously appear larger than life, leave traces of their existence or are brought to life. Often, the lives revealed are those that would have been hidden during Preston Manor's occupation – those of the servants. The histories revealed are hidden under two layers: the empty house itself and the Edwardian attitude to those in service.

Unsurprisingly, the most recent owners, about whom we know most and have left the most prominent marks, were the source of inspiration for many of us. Ellen Stanford was born heiress to the estate in 1848 and married Vere Fane Bennett in 1867. Their marriage had an inauspicious start when Ellen's uncle discovered that Vere had already fathered a son with actress Fanny Joseph. Vere explained that 'few men, I don't care in what position in life have not done the same, and I maintain made better husbands and members of society than those who have never...sown their wild oats.'

What was good for the gander was good for the goose and following the death of Vere in 1894, Ellen had an illegitimate son with the butler of her London house before marrying her second husband Charles Thomas in 1897.

The works by Maria Rivans draw on these stories. Working with archive material and contemporaneous images she has developed tableaux, which are placed around the house.

Ingrid Plum's video installation explores the relationships between Ellen and her family in a very personal way, in contrast to Caitlin Heffernan's peacock feather cape, which celebrates the showy grandeur expected from someone of Ellen's status.

Being a woman of power and influence was unusual. Catherine Bertola's *If She is Not Out as Soon as I* speaks of the gruelling labour and repetitiveness required of lace makers to produce a material of great finesse. The product of this arduous task contrarily spoke of a woman's "goodness and value".

In 1925, following the death of Ellen's grandson Vere in the First World War and the continual feuding between Ellen and her son - 'Roaring Jack' - John Montagu Bennett-Stanford, Charles and Ellen bequeathed the house to Brighton Corporation. Ellen later decided to also bequeath the contents of the house and continued to use the house until



her death, making her the last of the Stanfords to live at the Manor.

At the outset of the First World War, 13 indoor servants were employed at the Manor to service the needs of the two owners. George (Joe) Back was the 'odd man' whose duties included bringing in wood and coal and waiting in the servants' hall. Gavin Fry has embroidered Joe's daydreams to life, letting them fall behind Joe as he goes around his duties.

Emma Molony has also brought the servants to life with her animated screen. Using stop-start animation, the servants' jerky movements speak of aching limbs and tired backs whilst the laborious process of animation echoes the repetitive nature of their work.

An escape from this drudgery is provided by Caitlin Heffernan's *Day Dreaming* intervention. A canopy made of dried flowers sewn together is placed over the maid's bed to create a world far away from her daily duties.

Traditionally, there would be two footmen in the house, who performed the feminine duties of arranging flowers and laying the table.

They were often employed for their pleasingly matching appearance. Renaming them as James and John removed the tiresome need to learn new names with a change of staff and robbed them of their individuality, reducing them to decorative additions to the household. James Hunting has embroidered the pair and placed them behind tables in the dining room. However, these eye-candy boys have the last laugh over the mistress of the house – since they share a clandestine love for each other.

Louise Batchelor's work in glass explores both upstairs and downstairs. Butter pats, smoking-pipes and teacups provide haunting impressions of the work endured and the leisure enjoyed by the occupants of the house.

With its history as a setting for séances, and our desire to speak with the long dead inhabitants, it is unsurprising that a number of the artists explored the paranormal. Caitlin Heffernan's *Other* evokes the spirits of departed household pets and Laura Splan's work with facial peel produces ghostly objects that map the body of one who is no longer in the house. Kira O'Reilly imbues the everyday cycles of

staining and washing with a haunting legacy, weaving human blood into the fabric of the house.

Two of the artists responded to specific objects in the house. Penny Green's *Incident in the North East Corridor* explores an often-overlooked painting by Joost de Momper. Penny reflects the fragmentary way in which you can begin to make out the wintry scene with a composite ceramic installation featuring aspects of the painting.

The concerns of the Edwardian house are brought up to date by reviving Ellen's 'conversation piece': a massive collection of *Dogs of Fo*. By replacing key 'dogs' with red British bulldogs, Matt Smith comments on the arbitrary nature of being labelled foreign by creating a flag of St George. The art of the conversation piece is brought bang up to date by moving the debate out of the display case

and onto issues of nationalism and ethnicity and the futile attempt to categorise difference.

On first visiting the Manor House, we had that familiar experience often found in stately homes: a sanitised, removed feeling shared by houses that have been unoccupied for years. The warmth and welcome had left the Manor and in its place was an air of quiet. During the months in which we developed the project, we returned to the house countless times and spent many hours there. Gradually, bonds began to form. Rooms and objects became familiar, new discoveries were made and, to some extent, the Manor became a sort of home from home. We became hybrids, neither visitors, occupants nor members of staff. It seems strange that at the end of the exhibition, these connections will be severed and the regular visits to the building will cease.

CAITLIN HEFFERNAN, POLLY HARKNETT, MATT SMITH

unravelled





Matt Smith



Bulldog, 2010

White earthenware, milano red Honda spray paint

www.matthsmith.com

On visiting Preston Manor, I was drawn to the vast assemblage of ceramic figures displayed in the dining room. These 124 Buddhist Lions, made of Chinese porcelain, were collected by Ellen Thomas-Stanford between 1910 and 1914 as a diversion during her husband's frequent trips to Norway and were used to provide a 'talking point' over dinner.

Commonly known as 'Dogs of Fo', they were traditionally placed at entrances to buildings, particularly temples, in China to protect against 'evil spirits'. Out of context, these lions take on the appearance of harmless dogs and their powers are removed.

The flag of St George has been used by racist groups intent on defending 'us' against 'outsiders'. Is a symbol intended to unite the country being used to divide and stand for inward-looking xenophobia, aggression and fear?

By inserting two strips of red British bulldogs into the display, a St George's cross has been created, merging a symbol of nationalism with a group of Chinese lions. These truly British bulldogs – a symbol of what makes this country great – were made using American moulds and coloured using Honda spray paint. The devil is in the detail.

Ellen wanted a conversation piece.