



HOUSE

charged space

Fritz Buehner

Bruce Monteith

Shellburne Thurber

Mark Wethli

June 11 – September 16, 2001

McMULLEN
MUSEUM
BOSTON COLLEGE





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Alston Conley, Curator

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House : Charged Space

ALSTON CONLEY

Whatever a house is to the heart and body of man—refuge, comfort, luxury—surely it is as much or more to the spirit. Think how often our dreams take place inside the houses of our imaginations! —MARY OLIVER

Images of houses contain powerful psychologically and emotionally charged associations. In his writings, C. G. Jung (1875-1961) used a multi-storied house as an analogy for the human psyche: “We have to describe and to explain a building, the upper story of which was erected in the nineteenth century; the ground floor dates from the sixteenth century, and a careful examination of the masonry discloses the fact that it was reconstructed from a dwelling-tower of the eleventh century. In the cellar we discover Roman foundation walls, and under the cellar a filled-in cave, in the floor of which stone tools are found and remnants of glacial fauna in the layers below. That would be a sort of picture of our mental structure.”¹ Painted with a broad brush, this image opens our imagination to both the complexities of the human mind and the potentially rich associations of houses. In another essay Jung credits a dream, containing an image of a

house, with one of his important psychoanalytic discoveries: “One [dream] in particular was important to me, for it led me for the first time to the concept of the ‘collective unconscious’ . . . This was the dream. I was in a house I did not know, which had two stories. It was ‘my house.’”² Our houses are the protected environments that we dream in, and through our dreams, we find evidence of ourselves.

The poetic imagination of space, which Gaston Bachelard has explored in literature, is a useful concept for examining space in the visual arts. Bachelard writes, “Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent.”³ We transform space into containers of our desires and fears. Whatever the specifics of our own experience, from the country dwelling, to densely stacked urban apartments, or to suburban sprawl, each of us carries an archetypal image of the house. As Bachelard puts it, “all really inhabited space

bears the essence of the notion of home,” where the imagination “comfort[s] itself with the illusion of protection.”⁴ Imbued with associations of “home,” images of houses invite viewers to explore their own musings, forgotten moments, and unconscious leaps.

An image of a house evokes the domicile of the viewer’s adolescence and childhood. Bachelard argues that when we remember, “space is everything, for time ceases to quicken memory. Memory—what a strange thing it is!—does not record concrete duration . . . For a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates.”⁵ The spaces of our home become the touchstones of our early memories. We experience these moments of our past not as a series of factual records, but as daydreams, which combine memory with flights of imagination. Bachelard writes, “it is because our memories of former dwelling-places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time.”⁶

The house contains a variety of spaces, each with its own potential reading. Each

room has separate associations; attics evoke a different response than bedrooms, kitchens, hallways or basements. While the interior spaces can have associations with the protected innocence of youth, they can also be confining, or on occasion threatening. Likewise, the exterior of a building gives us clues to what it previously contained: isolated lives, perhaps communal embrace, the warmth or trauma of family. Each building contains a history of its inhabitants, an archaeology of memories, a few explicit, others implied, some lost.

Because our houses contain powerful associations, they have enormous appeal to visual artists. In this exhibition, four contemporary artists from New England, Fritz Buehner, Bruce Monteith, Shellburne Thurber and Mark Wethli explore the psychologically charged image of the house.

1. C.G. Jung, *Contributions of Analytical Psychology*, translated by H.G. and Cary F. Baynes. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928, pp. 118-119.
2. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1961, p. 158.
3. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p. xxxii.
4. Bachelard, p. 5.
5. Bachelard, p. 9.
6. Bachelard, p. 6.



Shellburne Thurber

MCMULLEN BUILDING: VIEW OF ENTRYWAY

chromagenic print, 1998, 30 x 30 in.

For the last two decades, Shellburne Thurber has examined the psychological qualities of space through the medium of photography. She first addressed this theme in a series of images of her mother's childhood home shortly after her death. Thurber states, "I became intrigued by the uncanny way in which inhabited spaces take on the energy of those who live and work in them." The works presented in this exhibition document a group of older Southern houses. Although they are no longer inhabited, each contains vestiges of its earlier occupants. Curtains still hang on some of the windows, reminding us of a recent dweller. Other windows, stripped of such comforts, are bare and sometimes broken. Occasionally a chair, couch or bed occupies the room. More often, the rooms are empty of furniture. The eye is drawn to crumbling architectural details: a door, a window, a fireplace, fading paint or wallpaper.

Light is a central element in Thurber's images; it both illuminates and defines the interior spaces. In *The Abandoned Mill House: Room with fireplace and disintegrating brick*,

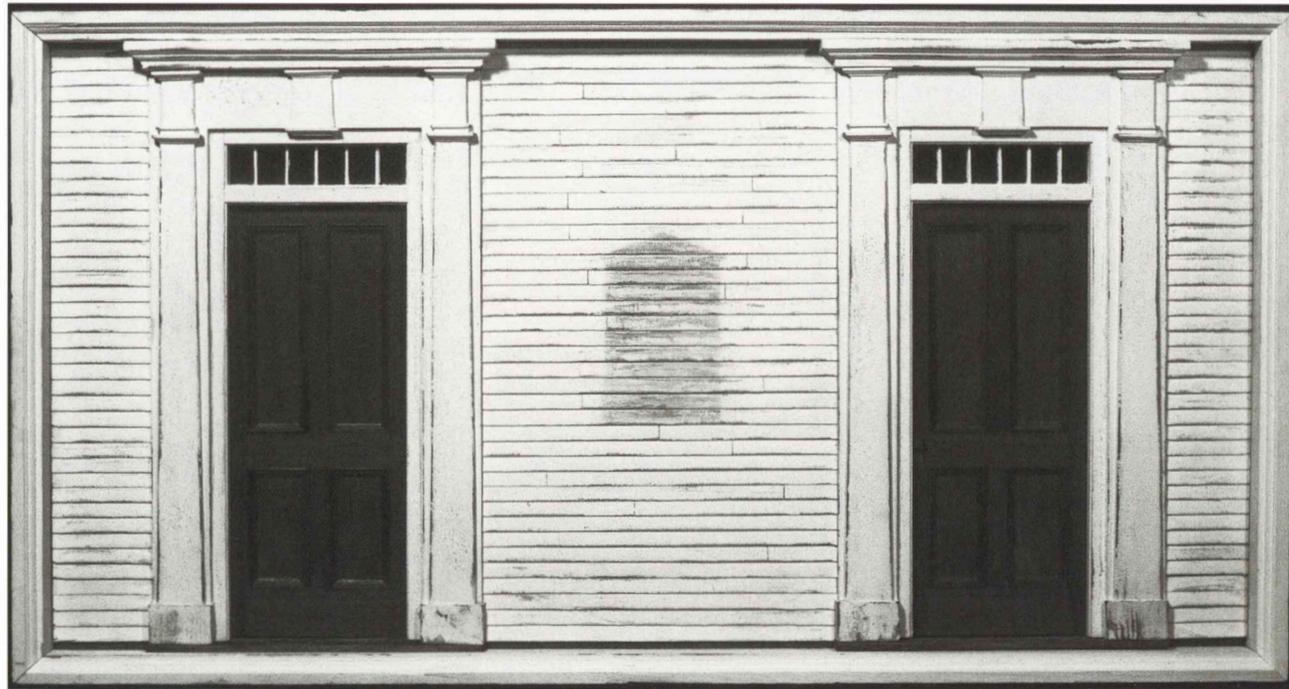
we view a run-down building. The plaster has partially fallen off the walls, exposing the brick and wood structure of the house. The water-damaged plaster walls retain some of their former color, a reminder of their past grandeur. The room is abandoned and decayed, yet it does not register as gloomy. Instead, the light streaming in from the open door and window sets the tone of the picture. The brightly illuminated room becomes a document of change, the passage of time and our inevitable mortality. Thurber's images powerfully invoke the houses' former inhabitants. The viewer imagines people living in these houses years ago, and also remembers other old houses, the dwellings of parents or grandparents from the same period. This combination of memory and imagination gives these spaces their psychological charge.

Bruce Monteith

HOUSE OF GOD

mixed media construction, 1998

15 x 22 x 2 in., Private collection



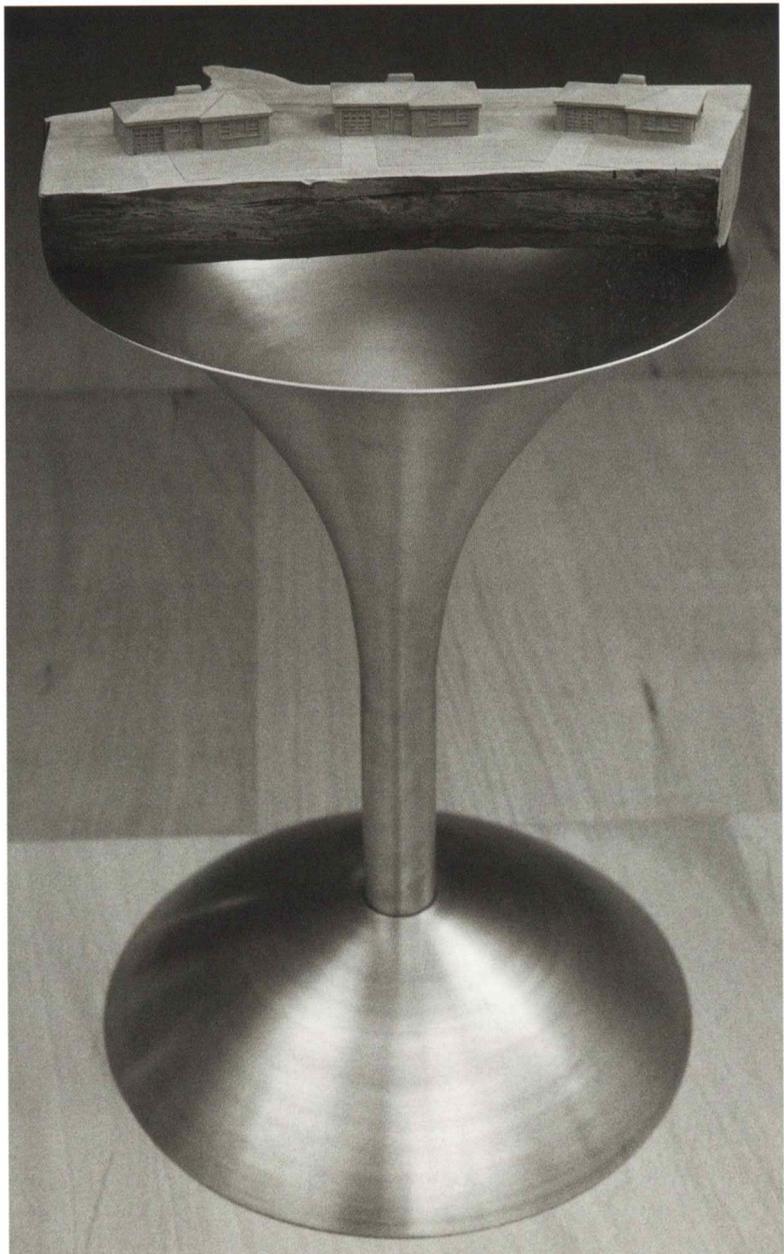
In his sculpture, Bruce Monteith explores the evocative power of architectural space constructed in miniature. An inversion in scale is typical in art, but the miniature, which reduces a large building to an intimate size, draws intensely on the imaginative powers. We can't enter physically, but only through our imaginations. As Bachelard writes, "Here the mind that imagines follows the opposite path of the mind that observes."⁷

The specific details of Monteith's architectural facades are painterly in their execution. Some display the faces of once-grand buildings. Rows of columns grace the porch of a stately Greek-Revival style building in *Grandfather's House in Virginia*. *Plymouth* portrays the roofed Federal-style entry to a white clapboard house. The front door, its paint peeling, is surrounded by panes of true-divided light—individual panes of traditional handset window glass, which have been replaced in recent decades by anonymous prefabricated inserts. These works draw their emotional power both from the detailed description of the building and from the viewer's memories

of similar buildings. *Plymouth*, *Summer Time* and *Dormer* are explicit references to old New England towns. *Dormer* hints at the low ceilings, angled roofs and claustrophobic interior spaces of the New England cottage, broken by the occasional window that opens to the light and the exterior world.

In *Summer Time*, we can look across a porch and through an open window to see light emerging from behind a partially open door. The implication that the inhabitants of the cottage are just out of sight appeals to our curiosity. The scene recalls summers past and the mystery of new neighbors. In *Dormer*, the viewer has the vista of a neighbor, looking across from a high vantage point. We see through an open window into an interior hallway, where a stairwell leads to hidden rooms. In *Insecurities*, the glow of light around the edges of a shuttered window announces the unseen occupant's presence, and offers an invitation to imagine.

⁷ Bachelard, pp. 151-152.



Fritz Buehner

CUL-DE-SAC

carved maple on spun aluminum base

2000, 24 x 24 x 40 in.

Fritz Buehner has sculpted 1950s colonial and tract-style houses set in the space of the suburban house lot. The houses come from his own childhood experience in suburban Connecticut, but they also reference the broader suburban developments of the fifties. The scene of a suburban house isolated in the landscape reawakens the peacefulness of childhood. The sculptures evoke the protected dreamer of youth, the ability to escape into a fantasy world of play. According to Bachelard, “miniature is an exercise that has metaphysical freshness; it allows us to be world conscious at slight risk.”⁸ However, Buehner also addresses the intrinsic class inequities and environmental violence of the suburban landscape. The artist states, “by carving away a greater portion of wood than is left, I address, metaphorically, another level of violence—environmental degradation that is linked to suburban sprawl, and the desire to conquer and dominate nature.”⁹

Buehner carves the sculptures out of sections of tree trunk, retaining the recognizable exterior curve of the original log, but stripping

it of its bark to expose the wood grain and growth-rings. Each piece, then, has a shifting scale; the life-sized physical reality of the log contrasts with the miniature virtual world of the carvings. The sculptures are presented on spun aluminum forms that taper down to the floor, making a funnel shape. The sculpted log appears to float across the wide mouth of the funnel. It is raised from the floor but not separate, not isolated on a base. The overall effect is contemporary, and yet reminiscent of another childhood memory: the movie scene of a tornado carrying the house off to Oz.

8. Bachelard, p. 161.

9. Fritz Buehner, unpublished.



Mark Wethli

UNDER A NORTHERN SKY

oil on linen, 1992, 54 x 48 in.

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine

Museum Purchase, George Otis Hamlin Fund

In Mark Wethli's paintings, light entering through doors and windows defines the interior spaces of New England. The rooms are devoid of figures, but architectural fragments and bits of furniture, such as an empty chair in a room or a small table in a hall, document a human presence. Most pictures open into an immediate space which leads the viewer into another, partially hidden space. An open doorway ushers the eye into the next room, which is illuminated through a window. Light falling across a stairway leads the viewer to imagine rooms upstairs. The intensity, angle or quality of light implies a time of day, a northern location. *Under a Northern Sky* was Wethli's first conscious attempt to paint about living in Maine after residing there for several years. In a synchronistic reading of the image, the foreground interior space represents winter, the view out the door summer, and the mud-room in between, spring or fall. By imaging the seasons as a transition from interior to exterior space, this work comments on the way that memory binds space and time together.

The paintings are formally rigorous; each tightly constructed image has its own underlying geometry. Yet it is the mood that carries the paintings, an atmosphere created by light falling through and defining space. For Wethli, light can convey a spiritual inspiration, a representation of grace, as well as the depiction of the physical world. He writes: "I like to think that these greater aspirations are as present and apprehensible as the light of day that falls around us constantly." Perhaps it is because Wethli contemplates and records light so serenely that his images contain illuminations of more than the observable world.

Although the pictorial descriptions are specific, we each bring our own associations with houses to Wethli's images. Our experience of these works is shaped as much by our memories as our observation. It is in the nature of their subject to evoke rich associations in which we participate.

Shellburne Thurber

1. Dozier House: Living room with front door and wooden bird
chromagenic print, 1998, 20 x 20 in.
2. Dozier House: Kitchen window with frilly curtain and potholder, view #2
chromagenic print, 1998, 20 x 20 in.
3. George Houston House: Blue wideboard room with two windows and fireplace
chromagenic print, 1998, 40 x 50 in.
4. Chesson House: Bedroom corners with broken windows, view #1
chromagenic print, 1998, 40 x 50 in.
5. Abandoned Mill House: Room with fireplace and disintegrating brick walls
chromagenic print, 1998, 30 x 40 in.
6. McMullen Building: View of entryway
chromagenic print, 1998, 30 x 30 in.
7. Abandoned Mill House: Pink room with fireplace and window
chromagenic print, 1998, 30 x 40 in.
8. Mitchell Ward House: Upstairs hallway with staircase and window
chromagenic print, 1998, 30 x 40 in.
9. Chesson House: Bedroom corner with damaged wall
chromagenic print, 1998, 30 x 30 in.
10. Gholson Homeplace: Upstairs hallway with window and torn curtain, view # 2
chromagenic print, 1998, 30 x 30 in.
11. McMullen Building: Room with torn Xmas wallpaper and view of the outside
chromagenic print, 1998, 30 x 30 in.
12. Grandfather's House in Virginia
mixed media construction, 1999, 20 x 28 x 6 in.
13. Plymouth
mixed media construction, 1999, 20 x 28 x 6 in.
14. House of God
mixed media construction, 1998, 15 x 22 x 2 in. *Private collection.*
15. Play House
mixed media construction, 1997, 13 x 21 x 5 in.
16. Off Season
mixed media construction, 1994, 18.5 x 28.5 x 2 in.
17. Old Friends
mixed media construction, 1991, 22 3/4 x 53 x 3 1/2 in. *Private collection.*
18. Insecurities
mixed media construction, 1991, 14.5 x 12.5 x 6 in.
19. Pamet
mixed media construction, 1982-1991, 18 x 15 x 12 in.
20. Shingled House
mixed media construction, 1984, 18.25 x 48 x 6.5 in.
21. On the Way to the Briggs'
mixed media construction, 1981, 12 x 16.5 x 6 in. *Private collection.*
22. Summer Time
mixed media construction, 1980, 12 x 19 x 14.5 in.
23. Dormer
mixed media construction, 1979, 17.5 x 15.5 x 20 in.
24. A View To Die For
carved purple heart on spun aluminum base, 2001, 24 x 24 x 44 in.
25. Cul-de-Sac,
carved maple on spun aluminum base, 2000, 24 x 24 x 40 in.
26. Colonial
carved purple heart on spun aluminum base, 1999, 18 x 18 x 40 in.
27. Dream House
carved cherry on spun aluminum base, 1998, 24 x 24 x 40 in.
28. Drive By Shots: Haddley, Belchertown, Amherst
color snapshots on aluminum, 2001, 4 x 108 in.
29. Drive By Shots: Omi, Chatham, Valatie
color snapshots on aluminum, 2000, 4 x 108 in.
30. Mercer
oil on linen, 2001, 48 x 36 in.
31. Illumination
oil on linen, 2001, 48 x 36 in.
32. Flight
oil on linen, 1997, 72 x 48 in. *Bernarducci-Meisel Gallery, New York.*
33. Summer
oil on linen, 1996, 66 x 48 in. *Collection of The Farnsworth Art Museum, Museum Purchase 1997.*
34. New Hampshire
oil on linen, 1996, 30 x 20 in. *Collection of Henry and Joanna McCorkle.*
35. Sentry
oil on linen, 1995, 66 x 48 in. *Collection of Dr. and Mrs. George M. Lazarus.*
36. Autumn Light
oil on linen, 1995, 30 x 20 in. *Collection of Katharine J. Watson and Paul L. Nyhus.*
37. Under a Northern Sky
1992, oil on linen, 54 x 48 in. *Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, Museum Purchase, George Otis Hamlin Fund.*

Fritz Buehner

24. A View To Die For
carved purple heart on spun aluminum base, 2001, 24 x 24 x 44 in.
25. Cul-de-Sac,
carved maple on spun aluminum base, 2000, 24 x 24 x 40 in.

Bruce Monteith

12. Grandfather's House in Virginia
mixed media construction, 1999, 20 x 28 x 6 in.

There are (dream) houses that pin themselves upon the windy porches of mountains, that open their own windows and summon in flocks of wild and colorful birds—and there are houses that hunker upon narrow ice floes adrift upon endless, dark waters; houses that creak, houses that sing; houses that will say nothing at all to you though you beg and plead all night for some answer to your vexing questions.

As such houses in dreams are mirrors of the mind or the soul, so an actual house, such as I began to build, is at least a little of the inner state made manifest.

—MARY OLIVER

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Edited by Thea Keith-Lucas
Produced by the Office of Marketing Communications, BCP 1857, May 2001
Above quote: "Building the House", *Winter Hours: Prose, prose poems, and poems*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1999, pp. 7–8.
Front cover: Shellburne Thurber, *George Houston House: Blue wideboard room with two windows and fireplace*, *chromagenic print*, 1998, 40 x 50 in.