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Wharton Esherick, re-interpreted

Edith Newhall

The potential to lure new audiences to historic properties by displaying contemporary art is now becoming clear to organizations in and around Philadelphia. Who doesn't enjoy seeing something in an unexpected context?

Some recent successes that come to mind: painter Jane Irish's installation at Lemon Hill, sponsored by Philadelphia Contemporary; Stacy Levy's Art@ Bartram project involving Bartram's Garden and the Schuylkill; and 2017's ceramics group show at the Hill-Physick House, in collaboration with the Clay Studio.

The exhibition "Becky Suss/Wharton Esherick" takes a slightly different tack. Currently on view at Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, which represents Suss in Philadelphia, it will reappear in a different iteration at Malvern's Wharton Esherick Museum in the spring.

It's a remarkably copacetic fit between the gallery and the museum, and between contemporary painter Suss and the influential Pennsylvania modernist Esherick (1887-1970), known primarily for his woodwork. (But he was also a self-taught architect, printmaker, and painter.)

At Fleisher/Ollman, Suss' paintings are displayed together with Esherick's furniture, paintings, and prints,

Her paintings of the rooms and objects in his house and studio (now the Wharton Esherick Museum) were made specifically for this two-person show, and it's fascinating to see how she responds to his minimalist aesthetic. You can also see the progression from her earlier paintings of the interior of her grandparents' modernist house.

Suss' crisp, flat style of painting — I think of Will Barnet as another possible muse — perfectly sets off Esherick's sometimes curvy, often angular architecture. More than once, I had the uncanny sense I could walk right into her large paintings, such as Wharton Esherick Bedroom and Dining Room (Wharton Esherick).

Esherick's contributions to the show are mainly works on loan from the museum, and they look surprisingly contemporary in the context of a white-walled gallery. His three-legged stools, his books, cutting boards, and ceramic plates appear to have

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"Dining Room (Wharton Esherick)" (2018) by Becky Suss

magically materialized from Suss' paintings of them.

Esherick's dollhouse-scale maquettes of his designs for rooms are fun to see. So are his watercolors, some of which are extremely peculiar -- depicting what appear to be single female nude figures dancing in the rain at night.

A careful arrangement of his neatly folded, well-worn shirts is there, too, underscoring that art and life were one and the same to him.

Through Jan. 26 at Fleisher/Ollman, 1216 Arch St., 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays. 215-545-7562 or fleisher-ollmangallery.com