

offerings

*on an alley, a brick row house
its interior excavated to bare structure
its view obscured by soot licked windows
three floors, airless and hot*

*from the attic
hollow wax heads
laid in a steel and glass vitrine
melt to the floors below*

*stalactites and stalagmites accumulate
over under around
a steel table and ledger book
falling,
littering the floor below*

*the evidence of a slow dissipation within
the sound movement smell of
free flying canaries*

In 1991 I worked in a three-floor row house adjacent to the Mattress Factory in the Mexican War District on the North Side of Pittsburgh. This early opportunity to meet the integrity of an entire building for the Carnegie International was one of three related projects the same year, each a different scale and social circumstance: the San Paolo Biennial where related elements occupied a temporary two room gallery built alongside other spaces inside the vast Niemeyer building where the Biennial is held, the four galleries of the original 1920's beaux arts galleries at the Henry Art Gallery at University of Seattle and this, the only domestic context.

The scale and architectural references of each shaped their common elements: candle soot, free-flying canaries and wax, but it was in the Carnegie piece that the work was most intimate—perhaps even the most alive—in its daily processes and means of access.

Wedge into the attic's narrow eaves was a heated glass and steel vitrine filled with wax castings made from ex votos brought back from Brazil. These hollow wax heads, representing man, woman, and child, lost their individual forms by melting and dripping through bottom perforations to slowly form stalactites as the wax fell and cooled in the surrounding air. Under the vitrine, heating rods installed between the floor boards continued to melt wax. On the second floor it fell onto a table and in time engulfed the large ledger book open on its surface. A faint dusting of wax etched the perimeter of this table on the entry floor.

Everything about the condition of working in the house was ideal: the collaboration with Barbara Luderowski and Michael Olynijk at the Mattress Factory, the conversations with curator Lynne Cooke, the time to work on site and make decisions based in the experience of the space. Just as the process of making is an act of finding, so too perhaps was the singular experience of access the situation allowed. Alone or with a group, visitors were given a key to enter the darkened house with its raw walls, narrow wood stairs. The only light filtered through a soot licked window and a single light bulb on the second floor. The warmth, the smell of the melting beeswax and the sound of canaries were there to be found without the mediating presence of a guard. The question that was primary—what are the conditions the work needs and how do we make that possible? It was a gift and a question I am still asking.

In retrospect, I can see how unique the circumstance was and how difficult it would now be to even allow or recreate within a contemporary and more litigious environment. The kind of experiences and object

relations possible in a museum are so different from working in a site with a lived social history. Many objects are removed from their original condition and end up preserved and represented in museums but many contemporary works of art are made for and assume the museum as their context. I love what is possible in both but working in the Pittsburgh row house ruined me forever. Ever since, the chance to work in response to such locations is what gets my heart beating.

— Ann Hamilton, 2018