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Too Much Reality
A guided tour of an artistically rigged house provides some surprises and some heavy-handedness

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When reality and art collide in the same time and space, post-modernists assume, what happens is a discomfiting tear in the fabric of experience. How big a tear -- how discomfiting an experience -- is a matter of artistry, and, consequently, a measure of the artist's ability to get a viewer to sit up and take notice.

In the case of Christine Altman's "Starter Home" installation, the surreal chemistry of an actual home and a variety of stage-managed effects definitely has its moments, but it also suffers from a bit too much reality and a few too-obvious "seams" in her juxtaposition. When she hits, the effect is genuinely magical, a fact that her misses only make that much more apparent.

That the house in question is Altman's own home is a complicating factor, since so many of the details that confuse a viewer (from the evidence of careful home-improvement and creative restoration, to the character of the art and furnishings, the contents of closets and cupboards, the Stephen King novels on the book shelves) do so because it is impossible to discern if these are deliberate stage dressing (and therefore pointedly meaningful) or inadvertent contradiction.

At its heart, this "installation" is an ambitious and carefully considered fabrication. It begins when the viewer is greeted by a real-life real-estate agent, who briskly lays out the history of the house, detailing its particulars -- that what is now a three-bedroom, one-and-a-half-bath home with a crawl-space foundation (note the two trap doors in the floor), and a now-enclosed exterior staircase began its career as a bar.

While HGTV drones quietly on the television in the front room, our agent, Amy Vinisko of Morla, Moore and Associates, LLC, points out the essential features of the downstairs, paying particular attention to the half-bath/laundry (wedged between the front room and the kitchen) with its new sink and toilet. "New" toilet, she reiterates.

Vinisko steps away. Curious, I follow her into the kitchen, only to be called back to the bathroom by my companion.

"Pat," he says. "Come back here."

He points into the toilet bowl. The word "fantasy" shines up at me out of the water. Looking up, we notice the projector mounted in the ceiling. While we are distracted, silently, the word in the water changes to "reality." (On my way out of the house, it had changed again, to "grime.")

We are beginning to get the message: keep your eyes peeled. In the freshly painted kitchen, the recorded sound of rhythmic slapping fills a room that is otherwise swept clean of clutter. On the L-shaped counter, just past the sink, a cutting board glows under the light of video projection. The "slapping" sound generates from here -- where the ghostly image of a woman working dough plays out upon the little arena of this wooden board.

We're wise to the scheme at this point, and pause to watch, my companion runs his hand between the

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light stream and the image to see if the wood-grain is virtual or actual (both, actually), opening the cupboard above to find the projector mounted into the upper cabinet. (Don't expect a home-improvement maven to just walk away from the deus-ex-machina.) I open other cabinets, find liquor bottles, spice jars, dishes.

In the meantime the video churns on, the anonymous hands kneading, rolling, buttering, folding, cutting (into a snowflake, a string of paper dolls).

Breaking our reverie after a respectful pause, the agent points to a little step-stool. "You might get a different perspective from here," she suggests. Ah, another effect, I think, stepping up. Nothing to see. No new projection, no magical little movie to greet my elevated eye. I step down, ask my companion to try. Nothing. OK. Bewilderment. We are directed upstairs by our smiling-but-no-explanation agent.

At the top of the stairs, tucked in a tiny bedroom is surveillance central -- a technological workshop of computer monitors (we can see every room in the house, other guests touring the spaces we have just vacated). The existential wizard-behind-the-curtain, in a bedroom crammed with a bunk bed and piles of books, a wall-mounted Wallace and Grommet clock, a glittering plastic "magic wand" laid down in front of the computer array.

The best effect of the whole house is installed in the bathroom on this floor -- a woman, projected into the vanity mirror and refracted onto the shower curtain, dances suggestively, 1950s suggestive, that is -- in a prim, strapless shirtwaist dress, her hand gently placed on her belly (is she pregnant?) swaying in slow gyration. Dreamy, smiling, she is a ghost of the past, the present, the future, the virtual, all at once, but thrice removed.

The lamest effect is also installed on this floor -- a skeleton in the closet, in a white veil (a woman, get it?). She is presumably a second iteration of the figure represented by an empty wedding dress that is stuffed and laid out in effigy on the queen-sized bed in the master bedroom. Cut-out cardboard images of flowers cascade from under her skirts onto the floor, these disks are dangerously slippery on the shiny laminate flooring.

At this point, in the master bedroom (where a laptop computer displays a sales agreement form), the tender magic deflates. Quirky surprise gives way to heavy-handedness, and delicate puzzlement is undercut by the rib-jabbing "get it" of overt narrative clues.

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