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Top Stories

In Torrington, Real Estate and Art Equal a Message

By: Melanie McMillan 09/23/2004

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TORRINGTON-"Welcome home," "Honey, I'm home," and other phrases common to domestic settings, such as "there's no place like home," may be more loaded than you think, and one area artist is hoping to drive that point, well, home.

Christine Altman, who was born and raised in Torrington and owns a house near the city's downtown that she is literally turning in to a piece of artwork called "Starter Home," hopes that people who tour her multi-media installation will go back to their own homes "and take a more critical look ... and maybe wonder about it ..."

Although the project has been four years "actively in the making," the truth is that the project has always been a natural for Ms. Altman.

"I am from a real estate family," explained the artist, who is the daughter of Annesa Borla of Borla-Moore Associates, a Torrington-based real estate company. "I grew up listening to all of the phone conversations."

And what she has gleaned from her years of exposure to the industry-and what she hopes those who visit her display of sculpture and multi-dimensional artwork presented in the context of a real house will take away with them-goes beyond the standard thinking that buying a house is an emotional experience.

Ms. Altman wants to encourage people to look beneath the surface and examine the reasons of just why this is so.

From her observations, Ms. Altman has formed the belief that people buy homes that brand them, and the dwellings tend to represent "who you are to the world." But the psychological and sociological impact doesn't just stop there. It also includes the seller validating the buyer's purchase and providing a rationale-so that you feel good about telling your friends and family why you indeed bought a particular property. "That was very fascinating to me," Ms. Altman said. So, to Ms. Altman, there is more to a home than meets the eye. "Houses," she maintained during an interview earlier this week, "constitute our identity Architecture affects our state of mind."

Borla-Moore agents have volunteered their time to "show" Ms. Altman's house/art project, which she said is not listed for sale on the market. But then she playfully added, "Anything's negotiable."

The artist has instructed the agents not to treat their duties as a performance, but to simply behave as they would on the job.

"Starter Home," for which there is no admission charge, will be operated like an actual real estate open house. The "open houses" are to begin Oct. 8 and run through Oct. 31. The exhibit will be open to the public each Friday from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Ms. Altman's hope is that those who tour the house will include a "nice mix" of a



traditional art crowd and local residents who might not ordinarily have access to this type of art exhibition.

The artist, who is a 2004 recipient of an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism, has literally moved walls in order to make "Starter Home" work. She had to open up areas of the house in order to install components of the exhibition, such as video and sound elements, and to install the set, decorated by a fictitious family, in a way that she describes as "very well-intentioned, but not quite right."

The artist has also pondered the proliferation of reality shows that make things over, wondering if the home makeovers constitute transference of women's body image: If you're not happy with yourself, you can makeover your home and feel good. "So much energy goes into these" makeovers, Ms. Altman noted.

As "prospective buyers" tour the house, they will have the opportunity to be that proverbial fly on the wall. While experiencing all of the elements of the exhibit, which Ms. Altman called, "multi-layered," the artist hopes that visitors to "Starter Home" are "challenged to make comparisons between cultural ideology, economic reality, family relationships and the meaning of home."

After visiting her exhibition, Ms. Altman said that people can "come away with their own narrative" for their own homes.

Those who attend the exhibition, she noted, will also bring meaning into the "Starter Home" project through their own interactions with the space.

"Our living situation is so complex," said Ms. Altman, who is a student of environmental psychology. "The same thing that can be so joyful can be a horror." She cited "angry cleaning" as one element in the exhibit that will demonstrate the complexity of home life.

Although you may be cleaning, she pointed out, you may be banging cupboard doors while you're doing it. "You're letting people know how you [really] feel," she said.

Another "layer" of "Starter Home" is illustrated in its kitchen. The artist explained that she washed the floor with honey water, so that when visitors walk across it their feet will stick and make a sound when their foot comes up. This caused an interesting observation during the initial walk-through of that part of the exhibit's installation. Instead of noticing that the floor was dirty, one visitor theorized that too much cleaner had been used.

Ms. Altman also said that the real estate agents who are working the open house will invite visitors to come up off the sticky kitchen floor by stepping up on a ladder to observe the ceiling, where there will be a piece of glass as a metaphor for the sociological feminist theory of sticky floor versus glass ceiling.

"Women can't get out of menial tasks," the artist said, asking, "Are we going to [just] concentrate on the glass ceiling?"

For more information on Ms. Altman's "Starter Home" project, visit the Web site, www.starter-home.com.

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