

Proposal for the St Fagan's Residency

Sensory Anthropology – Collaboration between Natasha Mayo and Toril Brancher

Etched into the floor, walls and objects of the houses in St Fagan's museum, lies evidence of the lives of the people who have entered each room to explore its history. Whilst the presence of the original occupants may have long since been wiped away by the buildings' reconstruction, visitors often seek to emulate their movement and activities, and the houses continue to accrue a living history.

'Sensory Anthropology' is an ongoing collaboration between artist Natasha Mayo and photographer Toril Brancher that explores ways in which we gradually compile essential, irreducible components of an idea of 'home' and assemble them almost as a sensory shelter within the bricks and mortar of our houses. The residency at St Fagans', presents a unique opportunity to examine the continuity and change in sensorial properties that identify 'home' through different stages in history, specifically from the perspective of a child; from areas and objects designated for children (beds, toys, clothing) to ways in which the material fabric of the house gives way to, and retains evidence of, interactions between a child's energy and the walls, corners and furniture that seek to contain them.

From our choice of cinnamon and lemon air freshener to sounds, textures, colours and arrangement of furniture, we overlay olfactory, audio, tactile and visual properties that approximate that subjective feeling of being 'at home' in our surroundings. For a child this compilation is only just beginning. The choices that shape their environment are not in their control, instead, they enter into a symbiotic relationship with its properties, negotiating which spaces and shapes best accord with their needs.

As architecture directs the child's pathway across the front room, through kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, in return, they scrape walls and wear down wood as they interact with their surroundings. More than this, the house becomes invested with new meaning through their imaginative play, and the sensorial values that constitute 'being at home' gradually become entwined with notions of comfort or hardship, safety or fear.

Over time, the sensorial properties of the house become etched in their growing idea of what it is to be at 'home' and understanding what interactions and stimuli are necessary to achieve it, inextricably bound to their sense of identity.

Sensorial Anthropology is a unique approach to exploring the significance of materiality in the domestic sphere and how our interaction and growth within the fabric of a building can shape who we become. This residency will enable us to examine, and almost reconstruct, the living history contained within the fabric of the museum by observing the movement of visitors as well as the gradual accumulation of evidence that informs us of the lives of the original inhabitants.

The project will roll out in four main stages:

- 1)** to work with the staff to understand the nature and history of each building, the lives of those who lived there, family structure, approach to children, movement around and use of their houses, and seek material evidence of this life caught within the fabric of the buildings.
- 2)** to understand equivalents between the sensory fabric of historical and contemporary homes such as markers of a child's scale denoting movement along a wall, changes in patina on a door or cupboard, capturing their interaction or equivalents in toys or objects of play.

- 3) to explore how we might capitalize on these instances through arrangement, photography and juxtaposition of imagery, involving working closely with curatorial and learning departments.
- 4) to work with education staff to understand how such a project can be applicable to schools and educational groups.

The Artists:

Toril Brancher's work focuses on visually recording the creative process as well as outcomes, using a mixture of still and moving images. Her approach is unusual in entering into a collaborative partnership with her subjects, from individual portraits to social commentary. Most recently she has worked with the artist Julia Griffiths Jones documenting her work within the context of Llanon Museum Cottage capturing the juxtaposition between linear, expressive values of her textiles within a historical setting, one imposing potential narrative upon the other.

Toril's work is in the collections of the V&A London and National Museum and Galleries of Wales Cardiff as well as private collections worldwide.

Dr Natasha Mayo is a practitioner and researcher in material arts, freelance writer and since 2004 Senior lecturer at the National Centre for Ceramics Studies in Wales, Cardiff School of Art & Design. Her research involves examination into the potential role of parenting or family as a research methodology, a perspective from which to share common histories, personal, cultural and social narratives. The project 'Sensorial Anthropology' arose from her recent project 'Parental Conversations' identifying how creativity can create the time and space to explore the world with children: <http://drawingparentalconversations.com>