

faced by the custodians of a heritage collection, which is in constant use. The symbolic meaning of the furnishings of the house is important and interesting, but so is the fact that some of these symbols are used every day and, yet, they have to be preserved. A careful visitor will notice that most of the contents of the building are still on their trajectory to become artifacts in a museological sense of the word. Even though these items may be referred to as artifacts during the tour, they are in fact treated as working objects. For example, one of the featured paintings is placed in full sunlight and exposed to wind from an open window, and objects are handled without gloves. In this context, it would have been interesting to hear more about constant negotiations between the use and the preservation of the objects.

The tour is only a brief introduction to the State House and its history. More details can be found in a book titled *Most admirable. The Rhode Island State House* by Janet Hayden Jagger; the book, however, was not available at the local bookstore at the time of the NCPH Annual Meeting in Providence. An interested visitor will have to talk to the librarian and to the Commission to find the answers to his or her questions.

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*Art + History*. The Nightingale-Brown House, Providence Rhode Island.

ROSEMARY BRANSON GILL and MEG ROTZEL, curators. [www.artplushistory.wordpress.com](http://www.artplushistory.wordpress.com)

During my recent visit to Providence, someone was shooting a movie on Benefit Street. It's a steep, picturesque area amidst the Brown University campus, overlooking the namesake river running through the heart of downtown. The neighborhood offers a low-key yet stunning mix of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century landmark structures—First Unitarian Church, the Providence Athenaeum, Rhode Island School of Design, the Nightingale-Brown House, and privately owned homes.

Amidst this wealth of New England material culture, the Nightingale-Brown house, home of the John Nicholas Brown Center for the Study of American Civilization and the center's program in public humanities at Brown University, stands as a commanding presence on the streetscape—three full stories with a widow's walk. A symbol of New England mercantile achievement, which for the Browns included extensive dealings in both the Far East and the triangle trade in molasses, rum, and slaves, the house was built over two hundred years ago and was inhabited by five generations of family. The home and its outbuildings and grounds have been carefully restored and are open to the public on a limited basis—partly as a learning laboratory for public humanities projects.

The *Art + History* exhibit, co-curated by Meg Rotzel and Rosemary Branson Gill, is such a project. Both undertook the project while graduate students

in the public humanities program at the John Nicholas Brown Center. Branson Gill and Rotzel commissioned two artists to visit the Nightingale-Brown house and develop site-specific arts works that spoke to the collections there. The central question that interested all participants was: “what happens when new hands rifle through and refold the contents of a historic home?”<sup>1</sup> Judging from information posted on the project Web site, historical and artistic collaborators also shared an interest in probing similarities and differences in creative processes in their respective fields—the subject of a short essay by Clarissa Ceglio.<sup>2</sup>

For *Art + History*, sculptor Jill Slosberg-Ackerman, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, created *Import/Export*, based on collections of chinoiserie china and items related to family life in the building. Elements of her piece were installed in the pantry, the dining room, the central hall, and the library—as thoughtful, deliberate intrusions in the rooms. In the dining room, for example, a contemporary constructed “frame” made of painted wood and featuring a reproduced historic photograph of a child’s birthday party was placed on the mantel under the portrait of a child—possibly the same child celebrating the birthday. The photograph also displays the same very unusual leather screen that stands before the adjacent service door in the room. A lacquered tray with a piece of fine china was set on the dining room table atop a wood burl. An increasingly elaborate series of Asian calendar art images and small gilded and unfinished wood and birch bark objects was arranged at one end of the dining room, culminating with a bamboo étagère displaying wooden ware reminiscent of dishes.

The Nightingale-Brown dining room in which this installation reposes is relatively simple, yet high style Colonial Revival space and a dominating presence in itself—completely paneled, wide planked floors (like the paneling, probably a later addition) with Oriental carpets, an oval dining room table with Chippendale chairs, a great deal of museum-quality export china on display, five eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portraits on the walls, simple yet luxurious silk draperies and several lovely occasional pieces of furniture. My personal favorite was the Chippendale highchair, which showed definite signs of use but was not identified. One hopes that it is a Brown family high chair and that any known stories are shared with visitors in other media. There was little signage beyond identification of selected historic art works in the dining room or elsewhere.

Slosburg-Ackerman described the Nightingale-Brown house as “a series of overlays” with “hints of disjuncture.”<sup>3</sup> Her installation(s) in the pantry develop the disjuncture theme further. The pantry is a beautiful, functional wood room, hard worn in places, featuring floor-to-ceiling cupboards and shelves and mar-

1. Press release provided to author by curator Rosie Branson Gill via Art + History Web site, [www.artplushistory.wordpress.com](http://www.artplushistory.wordpress.com). Accessed April 5, 2009.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

velous light from windows to the outside and to the interior service hallway. One small Slosburg-Ackerman sculpture tucked into a shelf displays a reproduced candid photograph showing a Brown child operating a garden hose with a nurse or governess in the background; the photograph is mounted alongside a piece of export china that depicts a boating outing. The other pantry sculptures are wood chip constructions, about the size of hornet's nests, placed in a cupboard and on the floor—referring to restoration and reconstruction processes. These processes can be easily seen by a careful eye in the joinery of the pantry. Even on the darkest day, the room is flooded with natural light, the gift of an eighteenth-century or possibly a Colonial Revival architect.

The second participating artist, Carla Herrera-Pratt, located her installation, "*Keep the word vanishing until the end,*" in the parlor. Project publicity describes her installation as being informed by family portraits and asking: "what does it mean for a family to be remembered through portrait photography?" However, as it developed, the piece appears to be less about portraiture and self-representation and more about historical methodology. The artist traces the history of photographic studios in Boston, Providence, and New York City that took numerous photographs of Brown family members over the decades, using photography to show past and, in a few cases, current locations of the businesses. In essence, she explores the decline of what had once been a flourishing profession serving elite and then middle-class audiences into an increasingly do-it-yourself situation in the contemporary world.

For Herrera-Pratt's installation, the parlor was stripped of furniture except some occasional tables, lamps, and a piano used to display information. A chain stitch rug, wallpaper, bulls-eye mirror, and wall sconce remain to remind visitors of the historic setting. Information and drawings about photographic studios used by Brown family members are set out on plywood sawhorses, lit by ordinary house lamps. A slide projector on automatic feed displays selected details from unidentified Brown family portraits against a plywood backdrop. The installation includes an audio piece, placed on the parlor piano, in which the artist reads a letter describing the Brown family portraits from her point of view and the research design for photography studio presentations.

The *Import/Export* installation was by far the more evocative experience for this visitor. Slosburg-Ackerman engaged the house as physical space; she used the china and photographs in ways that made me imagine a range of family and servant relationships within the building—who was getting those teacups from the pantry shelves, drinking tea in the library, organizing children's activities and so on. Her arrangement of contemporary Asian art images served to underscore the colonial wealth and mother country relationship (conscious or not) that the dining room paneling suggests.

Although I appreciate the artist as historian reference in Herrera-Pratt's history of the portrait studio, it seemed quite removed, especially given the presence of the Nightingale-Brown house itself. While inside the home, one really wants to know more about the family members who created such a powerful place. To this day, the site bespeaks the privilege of the Providence

merchant class and is maintained with fastidiousness that few organizations, no matter how well-endowed, can muster. I wanted more stories, not methodology—as instructive as that might be.

Nonetheless, there's much to admire in this exhibit. Branson Gill and Rotzel hit upon a central question regarding creativity in historical and artistic processes that could be explored with success. They nurtured truly imaginative work with collaborating artists and devised public presentation and education strategies to support it. As the co-curators pointed out in reflecting on the project, the physical demands of both installations were quite challenging. *Import/Export* required finding ways to confront historical fabric without altering it in any way. *Keep the word* stripped a historic space, injected raw wood and other nonhistoric elements, and then re-injected selected historic household furniture in a supporting role.<sup>4</sup> Neither is an easy task. The curriculum materials developed for *Art + History* engage both the historic site and the guest installations on their own terms. They also encourage participating students to use literary skills and analysis to report on visual experiences.

I do have some caveats. The *Art + History* Web site is attractively designed and offers considerable information. However, it took several trips to the site to succeed in printing out short essays and curriculum materials. Perhaps my problem, but somewhere in my travels I encountered a Web site “counter” recording several hundred visits and only a few dozen downloads. I wondered if others had shared my challenging experience. My second caveat resides with audience focus. When I asked the co-curators about their intended audiences for this project, they identified fellow students, professors, and pedagogical agendas in the Brown program as their primary concerns—ahead of museum visitors, school groups, and art aficionados.<sup>5</sup> I recognize that the Nightingale-Brown House is a laboratory and that graduate students with grade and degree stakes are designing these projects. Yet, it seems to me that public audience experience is primary in public history endeavors, that pedagogical and theoretical insights properly flow from that beginning place. To do otherwise is to reduce visitors to guinea pigs—surely not the intentions of such a distinguished program and such thoughtful curators.

That said, the *Art + History* project goes far to meet the standards Henry Glassie suggests for public history projects: “. . . [to adhere] to a standard of excellence . . . to be oppositional on behalf of . . . complexity against simple argument. [Projects] ought also to be beautiful . . . because that's the way you catch someone and bring them in.”<sup>6</sup> I look forward to future works from members of the *Art+ History* team and to future installations at the Nightingale-Brown house.

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4. Personal communication to author, July 7, 2009

5. Ibid.

6. Henry Glassie and Barbara Truesdale, “A Life in the Field: Henry Glassie and the Study of Material Culture,” *The Public Historian* 30, no. 4 (November 2008): 83.