

# LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD

Carol McMahon: Home Front  
 Kathleen Volp: Within These Walls

Bromfield Gallery  
 450 Harrison Avenue  
 Boston

Through March 30

A light snowfall exhales into the swirling beginnings of a blizzard as Carol McMahon opens the door to her carriage house studio and invites me inside. The detritus which McMahon transforms into elusive, yet whimsical mixed-media constructions is set around the cream-colored space: dismembered plush toy parts lovingly laid out on pedestals, a white-washed antique dollhouse mounted sideways onto the wall, a dotted line of disembodied dreadlocks delineating a no-man's land upon the floor, a stack of colored thread spools leaning like a staff in the corner.



Kathleen Volp, *In My Room, (Gladys)*, 2012, photo transfer and oil paint on damask fabric, 48" x 60" x 2".

McMahon stocks her artist's toolkit with found objects, ranging from antique fair finds and debris from the local transfer station to highly personal items.

"I like pieces of things ... they become very

important to me," muses McMahon as she sifts lovingly through a vitrine of shredded fabric — patterned remnants that once padded the interior of a plush toy.

This March, McMahon and her fellow mixed-media

artist, Kathleen Volp, will populate the Bromfield Gallery in Boston's SOWA District with distinct yet interrelated exhibits premised on concepts surrounding the house and home.

White and cream are the dominant colors in McMahon's new work, calling to mind a timeworn yet freshly painted apartment awaiting a new tenant. In heavily layered assemblages, pops of bright color peep out in unexpected places. The furl of a paint-encrusted corner of fabric yawns like a small, red wound. A sparkly pink pompom "dust bunny" clings to the ceiling of an up-ended dollhouse.

In a wall-mounted installation of seven small, boxy units titled "Thank You Notes," McMahon layers various materials, which she has "whited out" with thick coatings of cream-colored paint. One unit's crusty stratae are formed from strips of vintage fabric, carefully unstitched from a set of beloved Indian dolls — a childhood gift from McMahon's father. While glimpses of color betray the fabric beneath, "basically, it's gone," McMahon marvels.

"In each case there is something that has been worked over," she said. "Something that I actually liked being buried under the paint."

While McMahon's paintings and assemblages explore feelings she has for objects found inside of the home, Kathleen Volp's mixed-media paintings

and sculptures focus on the psychological framework of house and home, and how the rooms within help to both shape and serve as metaphors for personal identity.

These themes sparked Volp's interest a few years ago, after her elderly parents passed away. As Volp and her six siblings worked to clear out the family home built by her father, old photos were unearthed.

"I'm more an object-oriented person," explained Volp during a studio visit. "It wasn't until my parents' deaths that I started looking at [their] photos. I'm interested in snapshots — those instantaneous moments."

A large, photo-transfer and oil painting on stretched fabric titled "In My Room" depicts the artist's godmother (and great aunt) Gladys — her back turned to the viewer, sitting at her lamplit desk in a sparsely furnished room. The monochromatic composition ripples with the underlying texture of a damask cloth, which bubbles up underneath sections of the main image into the silhouettes of sepia-toned, blowing leaves. Ethereal light streams onto the seated figure's back, likely from a window located off-frame. Volp's godmother suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for her entire adult life, an affliction that restricted her to a very narrow social life. Although imprisoned by her body, she did enjoy a rich spiritual life. "My family was very devout," said Volp.

"House" documents the ubiquitous façade of a ranch house where Volp and her family resided for a three-month span while her father constructed their permanent family home. "My father was an amazing contractor," gushed Volp, describing a "materials sensual" home with cork floors, blonde wood walls and a cobalt-blue linoleum kitchen floor with saffron highlights.

A strong fissure divides the composition of "House." Ghost impressions of scotch tape fail to reinforce half of the façade, which appears to slide toward the edge of the frame as if knocked from its foundation. Emphasizing the anonymity of this temporary home, both window shades are pulled — the larger of the two overexposed in the original snapshot toward a blinding white.



Carol McMahon, *No Hat Trees*, 2012, wood, fabric, acrylic, gesso, 17" x 7" x 5.5" (photo by Stewart Clements).

In "I Am My Father's Daughter," a tribute to the figure who so strongly influenced Volp's attraction to materials, the artist wields her toolkit in a refreshingly chromatic way. On a "canvas" of painted, faux wood paneling repurposed from a theater set, photo-transferred Lincoln Logs tumble past construction-cone-orange pushpins. A growth of yellow tulle blooms inside of a fissure like a jubilant fungus — a woman's aside on gender roles assumed within the home (private), outside in the material world (public), and within the self (personal). Volp adds a flourish of flocked Lincoln Logs and a faux ice-fishing pole around the work's perimeters. These afterthought elements function like costuming — a child's dress-up game.

Carol McMahon and Kathleen Volp met several years ago; however, it was McMahon's 2011 "The Age of Un-Reason" show at Bromfield that convinced Volp to join the member gallery and arrange to exhibit together. "She is someone who could come into my studio and finish any piece I started," claimed Volp, who is thankful to McMahon for "always reminding me to have fun" in the studio. At press time, the duo's plans for the Bromfield's smallest, interior gallery III are yet loose, but the two object-makers hope to collaborate on an improvised, joint installation using surplus from both of their expansive materials collections.