

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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Step Up 2011 is a series of six solo exhibitions open to emerging artists living in New York, New Jersey or New England. The *Step Up* exhibition series seeks to provide emerging artists in our region an exhibition and publication opportunity at a critical moment in their careers. The *Step Up 2011* jurors were Yona Backer (Director/Curator, Third Streaming Gallery); Xaviera Simmons (Artist); and Susan Talbott (Director and CEO, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art).

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Real Art Ways is an alternative multidisciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work and creatively engages, builds and informs audiences and communities. As Real Art Ways grows, our commitment to supporting young and emerging artists remains a touchstone of the organization.



Dennis Maher



Installation view *House of the Unmaker*, 2012

"House of the Unmaker": Dennis Maher

By Peggy Deamer

Dennis Maher's "House of the Unmaker" explores the particular state of anxiety we all feel when confronted with the domestic: cozy and claustrophobic; immediate and mediated by memory; familiar and surreal; intimate and overwhelming. He then complicates this by exposing the particular apprehension that the designer/architect brings to this domain as aesthetic choices, at the outset of construction, need to be made: off-the-shelf or custom? material authenticity or affordable simulacra? ornament or no ornament? historically referential or contemporary? homey or efficient? self-conscious or self-effacing? Add to this the subliminal trope necessary to placate this multi-layered angst—that our homes are of lasting value, permanent duration, and stable meaning—and you have the makings of the psychological disarray that forms the substance of this work.

Maher, an architect teaching at SUNY, Buffalo, takes the detritus of houses that are being demolished and redeploys the recovered materials in installations that question the duality of making and unmaking; the fallout of failed architecture becomes the armature of regenerating art. But what makes his work in general and this piece in particular richer than this intellectual construct is the uniquely architectural way in which this redeployment is orchestrated and the feeling of the uncanny produced—"architectural" in the sense that this, while clearly art, is a

Exhibitions by Dennis Maher have been presented at such venues as Black and White Gallery and Project Space in Brooklyn, NY, Pulse Miami Art Fair, the Pittsburgh Biennial, Galeria Antoni Pinyol in Reus, Spain, Superfront in Los Angeles, CA, The Carnegie Center in Covington, KY, and Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo, NY.

Maher has been selected as the 2012 Artist In Residence at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY. He is also a recipient of the Real Art Ways STEP UP Award (2011), the Black and White Project Space Prize (2010), a NYSCA Independent Projects Grant (2010), and a MacDowell Colony Fellowship (2008).

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On the cover: Installation view *House of the Unmaker*, 2012 (detail).

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

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controlled spatial experiment. The first impression—that this is a pile of used-to-be-house that fills a single room—is counter-balanced as the constructor/architect's hand reveals itself, playing its tricks with both the physical and temporal status of the pile. While a thrusting aggressive spear of wood threatens entry into the exhibition room, a tub set on its side with its bottom cut out offers a visual invitation into the depth of the room. Drawn into the room, the viewer is still shoved to the periphery as the central pile fills the space. But the feeling of centrifugal rejection is then counteracted as the object itself spawns vignettes—smaller stacks of discarded objects—that occupy the periphery with you, embracing you in that liminal space.

This reading of dissolved-object and engaged-viewer is reinforced by strategically placed “windows” within the central object that offer vistas across and into the pile,

making it less a solid than a framing device for itself and the surrounding room walls: what is object and what is context get blurred. And moving around the central pile, the seemingly haphazard colors of the materials—the brown of the wood, the white of the sinks, plastic, and painted siding, the pink of the linoleum, tiles and wallpaper, the blue green of the real and fake ceramic tiles and patina-ed metal, the gold of the curtain and the painted cage—prove to be organized in specific ways, transitioning from one to another and forcing a rotational pull around the room.

The vignettes that are both of the central pile and birthed from it are made of objects—dollhouses, birdcages, jewelry boxes—that waiver between being mere objects and being small representations of things much larger than themselves—carriages, closets, rooms, houses. Their presence, besides the spatial dispersion they participate in, also conceptually

realign the installation. The ambiguous scale forces a reconsideration of all the material in the room as both natural and contrived; as both their found selves and a world to be inhabited by tiny people. At the same time, they destabilize the temporal stakes of the material. In conjuring up the study maquettes that architects use to envision the house that has yet to be built, they collapse the past study of the hoped for future house with the current reality of that failed hope. And perhaps more hauntingly, their story-telling quality makes the piece not just an abstract composition, but a narrative, representational one.

While these formal and conceptual manipulations clearly evoke an anxiety of objecthood, they may seem to have little to do with reframing the domestic. But they engage it precisely because this aesthetic overlay offers a critique of the nostalgia of the domestic. This critique conjures up but is different from Gordon Matta-Clark's, who, like Maher, was a student of architecture at Cornell and exploited the destruction of found and abandoned buildings. Matta-Clark's attack on buildings was a Situationist comment on the hubris of architects thinking they controlled spaces and the lives therein. Maher's critique is not against hubris, but against the aesthetic migration that attends it. If architecture, according to Matta-Clark, should not waste its time in domestic design, according to Maher, it should not waste its time in supplying tropes for gentrification. In the normal set of design questions that architects bring to a project—those listed at the beginning of this article having to do with style and the positioning of authorship—formal choices actually mask the beauty that matters: the material itself and the manner in which it makes space and marks time.

Or perhaps “critique” is too unambiguous a term; Maher's approach is more subliminal than political, more nuanced than negative. The psychological territory he explores waivers too much between delight and disturbance; design and disorder. And the result is equally ambiguous—both sublimely beautiful and casually off-putting. In the end, the uncanny resides not in the art or lack there of in the normal “domestic” nor in the making of the unmaking, but rather in seeing something so familiar that we have not seen before.



Installation view *House of the Unmaker*, 2012



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Peggy Deamer is a Professor of Architecture at Yale University. She is a principal in the firm of Deamer, Studio. The work of her firm has appeared in Dwell, the New York Times; Architectural Record and House and Garden, amongst others. She is the co-editor, with Phil Bernstein, of Building in the Future: Recasting Architectural Labor and BIM in Academia, both the result of symposia held at the Yale School of Architecture. Recent articles include “The Changing Nature of Architectural Work,” in Design Practices Now Vol II, The Harvard Design Magazine no. 33; “Detail Deliberation,” in Building (in) the Future: Recasting Labor in Architecture; and “Practicing Practice,” in Perspecta 44. She is the editor of the forthcoming Routledge publication, Architecture and Capitalism: 1845 to the Present.