

Kissing the Picture Rail

On Thea Djordjadze at Sprüth Magers

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Imagine moving house, but only being able to take a selection of your furniture with you. Think carefully – you'll want the best stuff, but also the stuff that's best for the new space. You make your selection, pack it up, and send it ahead. Now imagine that, when you arrive and start unpacking, you realise that you need to make adjustments to your items. You paint the walls and floors white, you turn the bed on its side and push it into the corner; you hang images at foot level, just above the skirting boards, or off-centre over an antique fireplace. You empty each item of furniture of its use-value, turning it and turning it again, until it barely resembles a seat, a dresser, a shelf. These were the same objects you had in your old house, but the act of resituating them in tune with the new space has altered them entirely.



Thea Djordjadze, framing yours making mine. Installation view, Sprüth Magers, London, February 23– March 28, 2024 © Thea Djordjadze / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024. Photo: Ben Westoby

“I had to look down at my feet to feel anchored in the Kubrickian white space, where Djordjadze’s objects crouch in the corners, leaving an expanse of brightly-lit floor open and empty”

And now imagine that you designed and built all of those objects – only they weren’t items of furniture, but sculptural works of art, and the new space isn’t a house or an apartment but a gallery. Such is the installation process of contemporary German-Georgian artist, Thea Djordjadze, whose solo exhibition framing yours making mine is currently on view at Sprüth Magers’ London gallery. For Djordjadze – whose work draws on modernist architectural motifs – the install is an integral part of the process of artmaking; creative thinking leaks beyond the studio into the exhibition space, and each gallery inflects the work in its own, distinctive ways.



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At Sprüth Magers, Djordjadze's minimalist aesthetic pushes against the architecture of the 18th-century townhouse, and it's this tension that makes the show sing. Covering the floors in white canvas and painting the walls the lightest imaginable shade of grey, framing yours making mine stages spatial contrasts between the four exhibition rooms and the passageways that link them. Stepping from the marble-floored lobby into the exhibition's first room, one is struck by a feeling of floating: I had to look down at my feet to feel anchored in the Kubrickian white space, where Djordjadze's objects crouch in the corners, leaving an expanse of brightly-lit floor open and empty.



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Elsewhere, the artist has relied almost exclusively on natural light, adding only a single spotlight to the exhibition’s smallest room. Looking at the objects in this space – a wooden structure that might resemble a table if its height were commensurate to its length; a pair of wall-mounted metal containers, containing nothing; a print, depicting one of the works on show downstairs, hanging so high on the wall that it kisses the picture rail – one senses that the objects are secondary to the space; or, rather, that they serve to reconfigure the viewer’s relationship with space. That’s not to say that Djordjadze’s installations take a backseat to the gallery itself, but that there is a holism to each space: no single object exists for its own sake, but functions as a contingent element within the room’s composition, like a brushstroke on a canvas – or like a brick in a building.



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Architectural associations abound, and Djordjadze is often explicit about this influence – it's a discipline she has come to know intimately through her husband, who works as an architect. This explains her acute awareness of what she calls the 'romanticisation' of architecture by artists, and it's this self-awareness that makes her work exciting. Freed from the pragmatism of building design, Djordjadze's artworks break the rules, indulging in the possibilities of play. This impulse to empty utilitarian approaches of their utility is reflected in the works themselves, many of which resemble practical domestic items: a folded blue shirt has been turned to sculpture under thick layers of white paint and a mesh cage; a long, low cushioned bench looks as though it is trying to escape from the room, as two of its feet clamber off the raised floor; a shelving unit masquerades as a bed masquerading as a chalk board. There's something vaguely Rauschenbergian about all these non-furniture items – though Djordjadze's sleek minimalism is about as far from the grimy aesthetic of Rauschenberg's paint-encrusted Bed (1955) as one can get.



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When I see framing yours making mine, it's the day before the exhibition opens, and Djordjadze is still making finishing touches. On my way out, I glimpse her in the stairwell that leads to the basement, painting the windows with soft washes of watercolour. A few of us stand quietly around, watching the artist at work: she's immersed, as she might be in the studio, and utterly unaware of our presence. Walking back through the galleries, I wonder how many viewers of this show will sense the process of installation-as-artmaking as they move within the space. Will they know that Djordjadze was here painting these windows, or that the hang of an image is as integral to her creative thinking as the cast of a sculpture? In words, no; but each time they look down to remind themselves that they are standing on solid ground, then the art – not only the objects, but the unseen processes of composition – will be singing for itself.