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MATT MCCLAIN/WASHINGTON POST

Former President Barack Obama gazes at his wife's official portrait.

Changing how we see presidents, first ladies

BY CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
 Los Angeles Times

Video killed the radio star, but, save for a few exceptions, photography killed presidential portrait painters.

As painting genres go, presidential portraiture was, if only for a few decades, the only way our head of state's visage could be recorded and interpreted for posterity. Now U.S. presidents

(and their wives) are among the most photographed people on the planet, supplanting most traditional reasons for painting a world leader's likeness in the first place.

On Tuesday, his-and-her painted portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama, commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution, went on public view at

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Artwork that says home

Elmhurst museum group show steeped in offbeat accessories



LORI WAXMAN

Blankets, curtains, cups, cuddling, companions, dish towels, egg cartons, framed pictures — if you have a home, it likely contains most of these elements at least some of the time, though not necessarily in alphabetical order and so heavy on the C's. McCormick House, the iconic suburban dwelling designed by Mies van der Rohe in the early 1950s and annexed to the Elmhurst Art Museum nearly half a century later, now has them again too.

The occasion for this redomestication is "In This House," a display of new and old work by Paula Crown, Michelle Grabner, Brad Killam, Tony Tasset and James Welling. Grabner, the show's conceptual matriarch, invited the other artists to join what had initially been proposed to her as a solo project, so there are the companions. The exhibition also marks an auspicious start to the next stage in the restoration of McCormick



JAMES PRINZ PHOTO

"In This House" is in the Elmhurst Art Museum's McCormick House.

House, which began in 2015 when the museum's administrative offices moved out and continues today with fundraising to separate the two buildings and restore the original carport and front entry.

Is it cozy? Nope. Nor do Grabner's black iron egg crates, Tasset's framed zebra skins or Crown's painted plaster Solo cups wish to be. Homey is for your home and mine, not a gallery in a former residential structure displaying art objects that reference the trappings of domestic life. There's nothing snug about that.

What there is, though, is a serious and sustained consideration of the formal qualities of

homes and the stuff that fills them. This is different from the obsessions promoted by shelter magazines and design shows: visitors won't leave "In This House" full of furniture envy and a renewed sense of how to make their home more chic.

It's different, too, from the merging of art and life that Grabner and Killam, who are married, have specialized in. For 15 years, the pair ran an internationally renowned noncommercial gallery called The Suburban out of a converted garage in the backyard of their home in Oak Park. If that sounds implausible, it is but it shouldn't be. Art and

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Eclectic artwork says home, but little emphasis on coziness

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life aren't actually incompatible, and the real interest of "In This House" is its discovery of the aesthetic richness of garbage can lids and picture frames, leaf piles and plastic cups.

Grabner sets this tone in every one of a dozen artworks. Large, meticulous paintings of gingham, achieved through the repetition of hundreds of pink, red and white squares, each the size of a single half-inch brushstroke on contrasting green burlap, hum with all the serenity of an Agnes Martin. Lumpy stacks of folded throws and wash-

cloths, cast in bronze and glittering in the sun, enshrine their rhythmic weaves with a fastidiousness and permanence normally reserved for the precious and unique.

The domestic has for decades provided Grabner with an arena in which to explore repetition and order, both in terms of the tactile patterns — such as gingham and knit — that outfit the traditional American home and the experiential patterns — think of daily life with kids — according to which it runs. The latter figured in a group of short videos Grabner and Killam made in the

mid-'90s, showing their son having his diaper changed, leaping from bathroom transom to hall carpet and slipping around a kiddie pool. In "Restraining Oli," on view here, they try a handful of holds on their squirmy, sleepy toddler. It could be a piece of endurance performance art, and in some ways it is, as is a lot of parenting when considered from a remove.

It's also really funny, both as a bit of fatalistic slapstick and because the video, in which Oli sports red-and-white footed pajamas, is installed adjacent to floor-to-ceiling oversize red-and-white check cur-

tains that Grabner has hung across one of Mies' iconic glass walls. Would the modernist architect have been able to see past the kitsch of those curtains to recognize their isolation of basic patterns and colors? Hopefully the rest of us can.

The red-and-white pairings continue like an ironic take on color-coordinated decoration schemes — with Crown's nearly 100 vessels, each of which is a unique painted plaster replica of a squashed Solo cup. "SOLO TOGETHER" is a pleasing play on the tensions between permanence and disposability, individuality and sameness, the hand-

made and the machined.

Full on parody, meanwhile, comes as ever via Tasset, who has lately been creating wryly monumental versions of snowmen, deer, rainbows and other symbols of the middle American outdoors, but who in the late '80s had his eye on the indoors: namely, on home decor. A set of his wall sculptures — animal hides dyed blue or green and mounted in matching wood — masquerade as framed pictures. They're a joke that only an art historian, or an artist wanting to poke a bit of fun at certain highbrow trends, would get. They crack me up.

What Tasset's "Domestic Abstractions" don't do, what none of the artworks in "In This House" do, thankfully, is make me want to throw out all the unfashionable stuff in my own home. On the contrary, they just might help me appreciate it.

"In this House" runs through March 18 at the Elmhurst Art Museum, 150 S. Cottage Hill Ave., Elmhurst, Ill., 630-834-0202, www.elmhurstartmuseum.org.

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