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Not Your Ordinary Apartment: Interior by Manon Cleary

by Lee Fleming, February 19, 1998

Artist Manon Cleary leads the way through the shadowy rooms and corridors of her Adams Morgan apartment as if navigating the crypts and catacombs of Paris and Rome. At every turning, objects grouped on the floor or at table height catch the eye like relics of a vanished civilization -- a beautifully formed raku bowl paired with feathers, or a combination of vases, tiny stone and bone figures, and beads and deer bones. Even the strong arches and pillars of Cleary's neo-Gothic furniture and her collection of paintings and drawings, while no doubt vivid presences in other settings, contribute to the sense of a stage set steeped in Victorian otherworldliness.

Cleary, a figurative painter whose surreal oils have dealt with subjects ranging from ancestral portraits to Pompeii's Villa of Mysteries, absorbed this "big and dark" aesthetic at her parents' St. Louis house, where her doctor father and homemaker mother created a comfortable, Victorian-influenced environment for their twin daughters (Cleary's sister, Shirley, is a noted Montana landscape and fishing painter).

Nostalgia aside, Cleary isn't above making a visual joke out of the castle-like solidity, arranging her collection of ceramics along the top of her bookshelves like self-important sentries. "You need humor in a space, especially if you've got art," she says. "I put things in so no one takes my collection any more seriously than I do."

That's why a weathervane plane is displayed as if dive-bombing from the ceiling, and why cacti stand like furry babies between party guests and more fragile pieces of art.

"I keep the light levels low all the time -- curtains drawn except in the dining room, where the plants need sun, and windows painted over in my studio," she confides. "And I entertain at night, when dust doesn't show."

At those gatherings, guests are lit by battalions of candles sprouting from glasses, plates and vases. "Canned lights for the art, and candles for faces and food," she explains. "It's the most flattering way to treat objects and people."

Living her philosophy, she lights her unusual assemblies of objects from below, using small canned floor lights. The result is a play of light and shadow that suggests vast recesses and overarching heights -- exactly the illusion Cleary, a realist figure painter who is celebrated for her ability to create depth and volume on flat canvas, is after.

These "altars" (her term for the groupings of objects) are camouflage for the time-worn interior of her pre-World War II apartment, circa 1915.

The studied quality of the arrangements and the light levels is intentional: "The whole point," says Cleary, "is to keep people looking down."

Cleary, 55, has worked her downcast magic on the place for nearly 20 years, first as a renter, then as an owner when the building was converted to a cooperative. Her particular space had been an office, with fluorescent light fixtures above and linoleum spread on the floor like a bilious ocean.

Her first move was to remove the floor covering, revealing hardwood under layers of black tar that she then stripped and refinished by hand, one square yard at a time, because she lacked the funds to have the job done professionally.

Removing the existing ceiling light fixtures was an equally expensive proposition, so she opted to redirect the eye downward, through a combination of floor lighting, wall paintings and object arrangement.

Using light, shadow and illusion, Cleary applied a "now you see it, now you don't" approach to the cracks and gouges. Dappled paint treatments of cloudy blues and misty reds make walls seem to dissolve when viewed from across a room. The palette evolved from convenience.

"Actually, there was a hardware store on 18th Street that was selling off all its paint, and they had all this Delft blue that the man told me was used as a base for other colors," says Cleary, "so I bought up all that he had left."

That bluish-gray black color, a neutral to be blended with other pigments and gessoes, was the foundation for the apartment's paint job. Depending on what she mixed with the basic shade, the rooms are predominately red, green, blue or gray.

"The best thing about this kind of 'uncertain' surface where you're not quite sure what's foreground and background is that it covers a multitude of flaws," she explains, adding, "I still have half a can left, just in case."

The dappling of the finish was a response to "really heavily nail-holed walls." For her first foray -- her bedroom -- Cleary used a blusher makeup brush to achieve a moody layering of reds, from blood tones to crimson to pink.

Here as elsewhere, intensities have been adjusted according to the walls they're on, to make it appear that each wall has the same color value. For example, the darkest application goes on the wall opposite a window or other light source, to keep the whole effect balanced.

"It's subtle," she says, "and people may not know what is going on, but they're affected by it." During her wall-painting binge, she used one of her few contemporary pieces, a "cheapo couch," as a brush wipe while doing her small living room. By the end of the project, the sofa literally blended with the wall's painted layers.

A dearth of "practical" elements -- like seating at the dinner parties to which Cleary, an accomplished cook, invites crowds of artists and embassy types -- seems a small price to pay for admission to see Cleary's visual sleight of hand.

"Anyway, most people wander around or sit on the floor," she says. "Which is okay. I don't have an apartment that's designed to be comfortable. It's an apartment that's designed to be seen."

And it's not just guests' eyes that get directed through clever painting and arrangement; spirits (the otherworldly kind) are carefully rerouted too. Recently, a psychic versed in feng shui whom she met at a party told Cleary that the corner of the bedroom where she kept her dirty laundry was her fortune corner. She immediately replaced the hamper with green candles, pots filled with pennies and a picture of herself signing autographs for her show at the Gulbenkian Foundation of Modern Art in Lisbon -- another altar. Again responding to the psychic's feng shui advice, she created an assemblage in the room's "love" corner, with pictures that contain water and show emotion, a plant ("a growing thing"), a nude self-portrait, firecrackers -- and more candles, red this time.

The combined objects conceal the little floor lamps' hardware. The freehand medley of objects also was a way to display the many unusual jars and bowls -- good small pieces of sculpture and ceramics, and tchotchkes that she'd accumulated on her travels. In the process, these altars assumed a magical dimension when Cleary filled the many vessels with beads, rocks, pebbles and pieces of jetsam. Suddenly, amulets and sorcerer's stones came to mind.

But there was another pragmatic side to this heaping of tiny pebbles and crystals in the containers: "It kept people from putting ashes in pre-Columbian pots."