

## (Un)homely Bodies

A review of Domestic Bodies, an exhibition by Áine Phillips and collaborators at 126 Artist-Run Gallery Galway August 2024

by EL Putnam

Entering the gallery, I see eight spot lit white tapestries hanging on the walls. These linens are stained with large red amorphous forms, appearing as blood stains with their layers of crimson variance. As I come closer, I realise that they are stained with fruit, as the seeds and entrails of flesh linger in the threads. The stains of the tapestries resonate with Rorschach ink blot tests, though this test is not just in the content of the image, but pertains to the staining material itself – what flesh made these marks: the fruiting bodies of humans or plants?

These material traces provide insight into the multiple, slippery meanings accumulating within Áine Phillips's latest exhibition *Domestic Bodies* at the 126 Artist-Run Gallery in Galway. Curated by Emily Lohan, the show features three works: the collaborative performance installation *Embedded* (performed with Ella Bertilsson); *Red Couch/ Archeology* (performed by Dagda Semler); and *Tender Morsels* (film and live performance created in collaboration with Helena Walsh). As a whole, the exhibit encompasses an alive and throbbing gestural exchange that defamiliarises the domestic sphere as a lived space, presenting it through a series of ambivalent uncanny, relational encounters.

The gallery space has a sort of sacred ambiance, amplified by the sense of silent reverence from the audience cautiously filling the room for the performances on the opening night. On the ground is a giant white duvet, also stained with what is evocative of blood. The oversized quality of the item brings St. Brigit's cloak to my mind. According to Irish lore, Brigit's cloak grew to a miraculous size to cover acres of ground, claiming it for the building of a church. A church is considered a spiritual home, a sanctuary for the soul. There is slippage between home and sanctuary throughout the exhibition, though twisted from influences of patriarchal organised religion to a femme-oriented, sensual semiotic register.

A red couch is parallel to the wall as I walk in. Since I anticipated staying the full duration of the two-hour performance, I almost sat on it until I noticed toes peeking through a gap in its middle. There is a print of an x-ray above the couch framed with a red ribbon that conveys a double hip replacement, placed on display within this strange tableau of domesticity.

My use of the term strange here is in reference to the exhibition's overall sense of uncanniness, as domestic bodies multiply and familiar everyday things are defamiliarised through performance actions. The uncanny, or *unheimlich* in German, which translates to "unhomely," is a term used to describe scenarios that are familiar yet unfamiliar in a manner that can be uncomfortable. As an aesthetic quality, it is associated with scenarios when the familiar may intersect with the unfamiliar, and vice versa, cultivating destabilizing situations that are affective but also revealing. Within this exhibit, the uncanny is experienced through the ambivalent treatment of the domestic as both sanctuary and suffocating, as meaning oscillates through performed gestures and material exchanges.

As I sit down to witness *Embedded*, I begin to see movements underneath the massive duvet. Subtle mounds begin to rise and fall within the lumpy mass of textile as the sounds of slipping fabric fill the room. A recognisable tear of Velcro cuts through the near silence as a hand slowly emerges from a newly formed hole. Movements continue as limbs slip in and out, pushing through an increasing number of orifices emerging in this soft biomorphic form. Bodies are presented in fragments, stretched out across the space of the floor. An object is pushed through a hole—an empty hot water bottle. I am struck by this familiar item of comfort, rendered useless when it is empty. It sits flaccid on the ground, made abject from the unseen underworld beneath the fabric mass. A common item of care, it becomes a literally empty symbol, tossed to the side in a futile gesture of comfort.

As time passes, the textile mass increases its vitality as Phillips and Bertilsson continue to explore an unseen space, pushing through holes or excreting other things commonly related with domestic care or comfort – toothbrushes, slippers, a sleeping mat. Other objects emerge – empty plastic shopping bags, a suitcase – commonly seen clustered around the sleeping places of those who are homeless. At this moment, the stains on the duvets take on different meanings as they evoke the outdoor environment of rough sleeping.

Just next to *Embedded*, the toes that I initially perceived as emerging from the red leather couch grows into a pair of legs. Stopping at the pelvis, these legs transform the couch into a Chimera of human and furniture, where they body rests at the liminal space of the vaginal shaped opening; an almost supernatural image that is both amusing and disturbing. The legs move irregularly, readjusting as they come to rest. At one stage, the knees part with the feet coming together, revealing the vaginal gap of the sofa in a manner that mirrors the X-ray hanging above it. It is an x-ray image of Phillips's pelvis, displaying her double hip replacement. Phillips has noted that she is unable to continue performing in this couch since the surgeries. The couch has been a key aspect of previous works *Buttered Up* (2019) and *Escapology* (2021). Within this current iteration, *Red Couch / Archaeology*, Phillips is present through the x-ray above the couch, with Dagda Semler performing in her place. While Phillips's skeletal interior is made visible, Semler occupies the invisible mysterious underworld of the red couch with only legs aloft, as it is not quite certain where the rest of the body resides.

In the third work of the exhibition, the film *Tender Morsels*, two women are in a red-decorated kitchen space and dining area, preparing a meal. One woman (Phillips) moves through the kitchen, as close ups show her preparing yonic and phallic food objects. A second woman (Helena Walsh), dressed in the same manner as the first woman, appears to awkwardly fold herself unsuccessfully into the architecture and furnishings: her head sticks in the microwave, she sits in the kitchen sink with her limbs extruding, she lies back on the red couch as she holds her folded legs and stares at the viewer, she sits under the glass tabletop with her hands pressed up against the glass. Walsh is present yet out of place, as Phillips continues to make the meal without acknowledgement of her existence. Phillips's gestures of culinary preparation take on a certain violent sensuality, where the innuendo of food items become more explicit while simultaneously reaffirming that she is preparing

cuisine. For instance, she holds a cucumber, framed in a manner that it takes on the appearance of a phallus. However, as she begins to penetrate and cut with a knife along the tip, this association becomes a visual double entendre as it oscillates between foodstuff and sexual organ in gestures that are hilarious and violent.

Overladen trays of food continue to be prepared, cultivating a rich and colourful still life. The film ends with both women seated at the table, as one pulls out the book of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1979); an iconic work that celebrates the often-undervalued contributions of women artists. While Chicago's installation is comprised of various dinner settings of vulvar forms around a massive triangular table, with each setting referencing a named woman artist, Phillips and Walsh's film conveys the invisible labour that is involved in preparing a dinner party, as they sit together to converse over the resulting abundance of food. The domestic scene within this film is not merely celebratory, however, but rendered ambivalent by means of Walsh's spectral presence as Phillips's doppelganger throughout the process of preparation.

As noted, uncanniness is evoked throughout the exhibition, including the defamiliarizing of domestic objects of comfort and care in *Embedded*, the supernatural tableau of *Red Couch / Archaeology*, and the doppelgangers of *Tender Morsels*. As such, Phillips and her collaborators unsettle the stability of the home in a manner that reveals the vulnerability of bodies and relations that occupy it. These extend beyond the performers, as these aesthetic encounters are affective, drawing the audience into shared relational experiences.

Over the duration of the opening night performances, which maintains a steady pace of restraint and patient movements, the audience moves closer to ground. I find myself getting lower and lower, even lying down at some points. I start to build kinaesthetic empathy with the performers. I feel the coldness of the concrete against my flesh in my attempts at maintaining a respectful stillness. I imagine heat accumulating under the duvets: are these items of cosiness starting to smother in their bulk as the performances progress? I become aware that items I have brought with me have begun to sprawl in the space around me. I pull them in closer to me in gestures of self-conscious acknowledgement of my clutter. Instead of physical fabric restricting my movements, as in the performances I see unfolding before me, it is the shared social mannerisms and decorum around personal space that create the invisible membranes that connect and separate us. I make sure to keep my body in a shape so that it does not impede too much on others' capacity to view the actions. I become aware of these relations that are so familiar to even become unnoticeable within social interactions that are now rendered strange, as I self-consciously readjust to fit within this uncanny scenario.

The strength of Phillips's exhibition resides in such dynamic complexities. Through performed gestures, the meanings of objects morph as sensations transform. Encompassing works that are both deeply personal yet relationally relevant, *Domestic Bodies* presents an abundance of sensory and sensuous experiences that are wonderfully uncanny and significantly revealing.