

# Critique Supplement

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Elaine Byrne

'RAUM'

Kevin Kavanagh, Dublin

10 January – 9 February 2013

AN airy and hauntingly familiar structure greeted viewers upon entry into 'RAUM', Elaine Byrne's latest exhibition. The structure was reminiscent of a Mondrian painting. Its elements, painted in bright tones of red, white, yellow and blue, seemed to have been greatly magnified, pulled apart and re-assembled to create a dynamic spatial arrangement with a chimerical presence. Floating a few centimetres off the floor, it suggested a strange type of cloud. The eye-catching construct

inhabitant's humble belongings within that sophisticated space. Moreover, the objects displayed within that volume fall into two distinct groups. Byrne has grouped a collection of dust laden and dilapidated artefacts that includes practical objects and kitsch in one half of the structure. Artfully arranged, these items simultaneously complement and contradict the pristine planes of colour on which they have been placed. The other half of the structure holds a set of C-prints that document the present state of decay in the cottage. Just the idea of these pictures suggests lifelessness, but rather than reveal materials denuded of colour and purpose, these vibrant images bristle with detail and provide ample evidence of activity. The eye gets joyfully lost surveying the tonal richness and textural intricacies, and the plant growth sprouting from decaying furnishings, signs of insect infestation, and actively flaking layers of paint and peeling wallpaper all belie any notion of stasis. An accompanying wall text shows how Kiesler decries the state of the urban environment. In this excerpt, taken from his 'Manifesto on Horizontalism', which appeared in a 1925 issue of *De Stijl*, he likens houses to coffins and views the city as a place defined by its walls, walls and walls. In response, he sought to disengage the city from its earthly mooring.

The conjunction of Harty's dwelling and Kiesler's exhibit design engenders speculation on the various ways we think about and manage space. It, for example, juxtaposes elements that urge consideration of what is real or imagined, long-term or provisional, private or public, retrograde or progressive, simple or complex. One setting has been cobbled together by a woman with little formal education who found security in a domain cluttered with religious pictures and wistful decorative objects. The other was developed by a university-trained architect and designer. Its bright, unadorned and suspended partitions redefine space and, by extension, our experience of it. Rather than define limits, it advocates spaciousness. Kiesler described these stripped down forms as 'architecture on adieu' and attributed its development to the austere conditions of post-war Vienna. His designs are linked to notions of hygiene and form an aspect of the war against germs and grime.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite being poles apart, the co-occurrence of these two structures exacts a kind of synthesis that echoes in the strange mix of traditional and modern that informs much contemporary domestic architecture. These newly constructed buildings typically distort and romanticise the past. Byrne's presentation, on the other hand, conveys poignancy in the way that it speaks about the dreams and desires of two people from very different times, places and cultures. The installation never seems trite, nor is it jarring. Subtle correspondences of colour between the objects and the surfaces that support them also mitigate the disparities. Though the work conveys an air of melancholy, its impact is thoroughly illuminating.

**John Gayer is a writer and artist based in Dublin.**

Notes

1. Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation [www.kiesler.org](http://www.kiesler.org)

2. P. Ovary, *Light, Air & Openness: Modern Architecture Between the Wars*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 2007, 53



Elaine Byrne, That washer bed, she'd have no other, 2012



Elaine Byrne, Suppose that was the thing then, everyone did it, 2012



Elaine Byrne, RAUM, 2012



Elaine Byrne, No, she never went anywhere, 2012

was made up of an interconnected set of partitions, open framework, platforms and shelves, and had been modelled on the exhibition design 'Raumstadt' (City of Space) Austrian architect Frederick Kiesler devised for the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. But, whereas Kiesler's structure showcased proposals for new theatres, stage sets and costumes by Austrian architects and artists,<sup>1</sup> Byrne's re-articulation contains objects, images and sounds drawn from a ramshackle and abandoned County Limerick dwelling once occupied by Hanni Harty, an Irish traveller. As such, it forms a most incongruous presentation that nevertheless draws viewers into its maze of spaces and treats them to oft startling views of a domestic space in the process of being re-appropriated by nature.

Bi-lateral relationships, in fact, inform all levels of this exhibition. Byrne has, for example, scaled the size of the structure – which operates both as display system and sculpture – to that of Harty's cottage and situated examples of the former