

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

De Kooning House: Subject and Object

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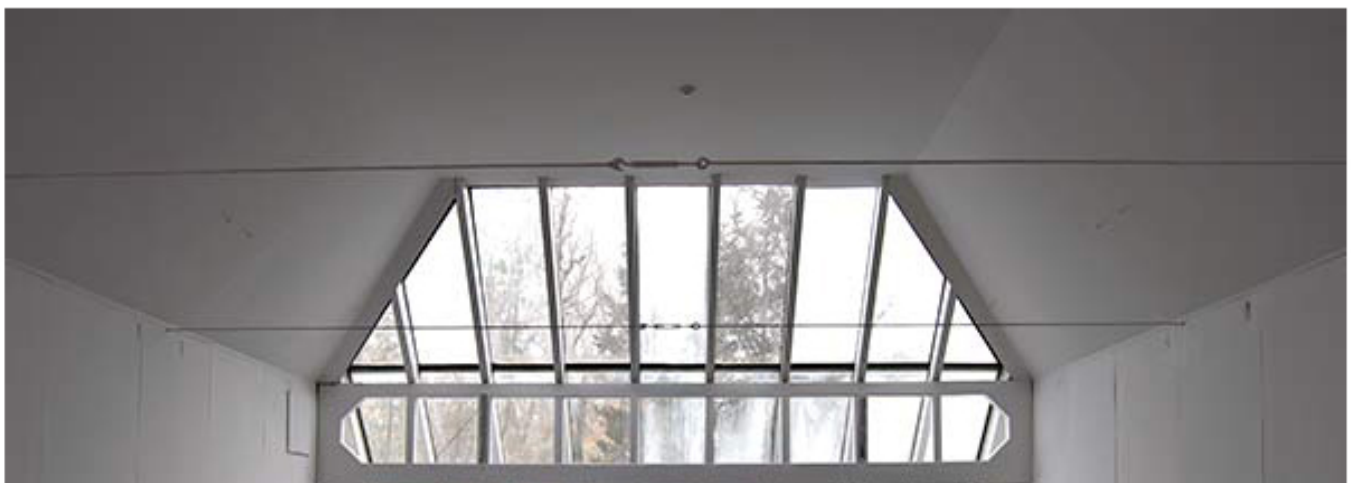
Christopher Byrne knew the significance of the house he purchased on Alewife Brook Road way before he thought about living in it. The remnants of previous artists who lived there, such as Elaine de Kooning and John Chamberlain, were still evident when he visited years later as a friend of Richmond Burton, who lived there after Chamberlain.



Chris Duncan was one of the recent residents who used the house itself as part of the work, with the finished result now on view in the space that inspired it.

Walter Weissman and Halsey Mckay Photos

When Mr. Burton listed the





house for sale, Mr. Byrne worried that an important legacy would be lost. “I would hate to have this house not be this house,” he said last week. With visions of game rooms, media centers, and other “improvements” taking over the atrium and open art studio de Kooning had lovingly added to the spare saltbox she bought in 1975, he decided he should buy the property and attempt to keep its spirit alive.

“From being out in East Hampton and going to the Pollock-Krasner House I was always a fan of how simple it was. . . . This is not Pollock’s house, but it has a rich history. I decided to invite friends to come use the studio, since it was a studio and that’s what it needed to be.”

It turns out Mr. Byrne, who went to art school, has a lot of friends who are artists, many of whom live and work in cramped spaces in Brooklyn. His first resident was a friend who needed a large space to get works ready for a museum show. Amy Pilkington, an artist and Mr. Byrne’s girlfriend, moved in last fall and took over a studio space under the kitchen. “It’s not an official residency. It’s my home. I invite artists into it who are my friends,” he said.

Yet, people just outside his immediate circle are beginning to hear about it and that’s where Chris Duncan enters the picture. Ryan Wallace and Hilary Schaffner from Halsey McKay Gallery in East Hampton knew Mr. Byrne and represent Mr. Duncan, who has a body of work that uses sun-bleaching of fabrics to create maps of constructed spaces and objects. They proposed that Mr. Duncan use the building for one of his pieces, which he had developed a few years ago while pursuing an M.F.A. at Stanford University.

The project began auspiciously, on a flight from San Francisco to New York. The New

Jersey-born Oakland transplant had a great day shooting full-circle rainbows in the clouds below him from his seat on the plane. “I had never seen light perform that way, and I’ve taken hundreds of thousands of photos of clouds, the moon, and the sun. Light and shadow are what my work boils down to, but I’ve never seen anything like that before in my life.”

He employs light to record and reflect on the effects of time passing, and uses no accelerants, dyes, or emulsions to speed up the process. Architecture is important for its role as shelter from the elements. Both elements advance the theme of permanence and impermanence. Light also allowed him to remove his own hand from the work. He eventually settled for a ratio of about 20 percent of his own input on the outcome by folding and wrapping the fabric in certain ways and leaving the rest to “the cycle of what was happening every day.”

When his plane landed on the East Coast, he was told that his aunt, someone who had had as much responsibility for raising him as his own mother, had died suddenly. “It was a hard blow, and then to do this project felt insignificant.” He realized he needed to do something with his feelings of loss, however, and the de Kooning house project gave him a focus.

At the house, he found “all this energy floating around the space and structure. It was so interesting, all of the art historical connections.” Hearing stories about the female artist who commanded respect at a time when women were not, on the whole, considered equals of men in terms of talent, drive, and intellect, led him to conflate the two women dominating his thoughts: the artist who transformed the space into a studio and the aunt who had meant so much to him.

He was allotted four months to install black fabric panels in the long, thin solarium-style windows that bracketed both ends of the house and wait for the light to interact with the material. But the time was short and the winter light was not the strong natural light of California, where he had mounted most of his other projects. By the time he had to remove the panels for another resident to move in, the project was a bust. He was ready to abandon it, but Ms. Schaffner and Mr. Wallace were determined that he finish, even if it had to be somewhere else. “They said, ‘Yes, it was here for a time. Now what do you do with that energy: let it dissipate or harness it somewhere else?’ ”

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They built wooden frames to replicate the windowpanes and tacked the fabric to them. Mr. Wallace put one of the pieces on the roof of his Brooklyn studio building, and Mr. Duncan took the other back with him to mount it in California. With full exposure to the elements, the panels took on the light while retaining the shape of the windows back in East Hampton. They are now installed back at the house — the studio window panels under the studio windows and the atrium windows in the cellar under the studio. The piece may be seen by appointment through April 11 by calling the gallery.

The contrast between Mr. Duncan's egoless minimalism in a house where "action painting" and the utmost involvement of the creator in the work was more the norm, gives the works a palpable tension that comes from questions first posed by the Conceptual Minimalism of the '60s and '70s, something he said he finds compelling. "It's a funny time to be alive, to have access to all of that history . . . to be removed from the moment and make work of that moment."



Chris Duncan installed black fabric over the windows of the de Kooning house in January 2014.

Walter Weissman