How Can the Representation of Domestic Spaces in Art be Linked to Memory and Influences the Interpretation of the Viewer?

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Abstract:

Being a Fine Art student, my practice explores themes of memory, remembrance, emotions and familiarity. As I am drawn to understanding how and why people react to my work and how it influences their vision, I will investigate through my thesis these notions using a range of written and artistic examples to get a better understanding of their consequences on the public. I will touch on notions of topophilia, the phenomenology of spaces and the reasoning behind emotions in reaction to the depiction of familiar elements.

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Introduction

In this thesis we will determine the links between artworks and memory, going back from the Nabis paintings and their desire to associate art and décor, to more contemporary productions of art installation. We will also define through philosophical approaches notions of memory, feeling, poetics of spaces and the human point of view on those concepts.

In order to demonstrate how the representation of domestic spaces are linked to memory and influence the interpretation of the observer, I will explore through a variety of artistic processes and writings the way the house is portrayed and seen.

The organisation and design of spaces play an essential role in the way we perceive and inhabit them. And the experiences, the memories and the history of places shape the very soul of that location.

Artists have always been illustrators of our world and help us better understand it. Via the representation of spaces, they manage to capture and enhance the weight they carry with all its beauty and essence. The emotions artists put into their creations produce a more intense and greater piece as the feelings and passion are felt through the materials and their approach. It can sometimes bring us back to familiar moments and memories.

The honesty artists have by being exposed in that way lets the public relate to them and their artworks, and in a way to get lost in their own translation of the significance of the piece. The intimacy of the environment in which they create (studio, bedroom, living room, …) also impacts the form of their work and becomes part of the memory within the process of that piece even if it is invisible to the viewer.

In literature authors manage to make the readers travel through space and time by describing details as simple as the colour of the walls of a room, the placement of objects, the sun light

shining through, the discomforting shadows and the overall atmosphere. These elements form our memory and are sometimes details that we hang on to as they make us feel a certain way. Souvenirs are experienced by all human beings and can be associated to nostalgia, remembrance, emotions, childhood, objects and places.

Topophilia is defined as the “affective bond with one’s environment, - a person’s mental, emotional, and cognitive ties to a place” (National Institutes of Health).

Chapter one introduces, through a variety of books, different ideas and notions interpreted by various authors. Chapter two focuses on understanding the impact of the house on the self and untraditional ways of depicting the house. And chapter three includes a comparison of a range of artworks and their way of representing spaces and their influence on the viewer.

Chapter 1:

Introduction of Notions Through Diverse Practices

From methods to concepts are elements that shape the way we approach and view artworks. Each person can forge their own and fair opinion after being given the same information about the context, the purpose, the form and the materials of an art piece.

The book *Memory* (Ian Farr, 2012) from the Whitechapel Gallery's Documents of Contemporary Art touches upon the representation of memory in art. It looks at various artists and their way of working with elements such as remembrance, forgetfulness, mnemotechnics and common memory as a means of aesthetic. It focuses on how these artists deal with those ideas through process, research and materials, and it also takes as example a few authors who write about the feeling of space in relation to memory. For instance, in an article written in 1925, Maurice Halbwachs explores our attachment to objects, where he concludes that it comes from their familiar characteristics. He explains that human beings when looking at objects are naturally disposed to wonder who they belong to and what is their history. Besides, objects are a reminder of past periods with different cultures and a testimony of our evolution. In that regard, he writes:

"The family as a group may change size […], or it may change location […]. From then on, neither the group or the collective memory remains the same, but neither have the physical surroundings."

This shows how memory has a different influence for each individual and how it is impacted by the space it is kept in. We can therefore argue that when looking at a painting of a space,

the observer can feel at peace when recognising familiar objects and maybe even bring them back to certain memories associated to those objects within a distinct space. Similarly, if they don't feel such things, they may wonder who they belonged to, what they were used for and how important they were.

While the aesthetics of a painting play a big role in the reaction of the observer, its connotation is also essential to its understanding. Our mind is programmed to be more attracted to items that we find appealing and pleasing. However, it is also shaped to look at things with judgment and therefore, being aware of the meaning behind an artwork is necessary to forge an educated opinion of it.

In *The Sublime in Art* (2015) written by Bart Vandenabeele, the author reshapes Kant's theory of the sublime by giving it accuracy in modern and contemporary art. He explains that Kant's theory provides an important point of view of the history of aesthetics, that is required for the "basis of aesthetic creativity and appreciation". Clarifying the Kantian approach does not touch upon the context of art, it nonetheless mentions aesthetic values as a natural, primary human cognitive engagement with the world. This foundation helps understand the reason we enjoy attractive things and Vandenabeele later place it into a contemporary setting where the content and meaning of an artwork is often what make its value.

He splits the theory into two ideas: the *mannerist* sublime and the *matterist* sublime. A *mannerist* painting is characterised by the distortion of the human figure in an artificial, elegant and sensuous way (Tate, n.d.) whereas a *matterist* painting is where the material qualities of the paint are emphasised by heavy brush marks, almost as if the paint was applied in thick touches (Tate, n.d.). The author considers the *mannerist* sublime – in painting — as an excessive representation of forms and distortions that leave no room for the imagination to

create a “purposive whole”. These paintings are found in Baroque and Renaissance depictions as well as in cubism and abstract expressionism. The disturbance these artworks can cause is explained by the rupture of the harmony between form and content, originally provoked by beauty though the exaggeration of expression, style and arrangement.

In contrast, the *matterist* sublime is brought in works composed of raw, unsettling, or an excessive use of untraditional materials. And from which we are either not able to recognise any formal unity, making it disturbing, or it peaks our curiosity and attracts our attention. These two categories simply represent the way we respond when first looking at an artwork. This is brought out and becomes clearer when having the knowledge of the meaning behind the piece.

Art movements and styles have further influenced our perception of compositions. For example, in the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Nabis, a group of post-impressionist French artists whose paintings are characterised by overly decorated spaces and a particular focus on patterns, have changed the style of paintings interiors. They thought of painting as primarily decorative and created artworks that would complement the interiors for which they were commissioned. The founder of the movement Paul Sérusier named it after the Hebrew word meaning “prophets” (Auricchio, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004). Following a visit to Paul Gauguin in Britany, he looked to:

“Free form and colour from their traditional descriptive functions in order to express personal emotions and spiritual truth” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004).

He was joined by students from the Académie Julian including Pierre Bonnard and Maurice Denis; and later, other students from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts such as Edouard Vuillard and artists from other European countries. Painting on canvas, panels, cardboard, velvet and screens, the group was keen on producing bold patterns, thick outlines with textured surfaces created by brush marks and pure colours. The Nabis used a variety of materials that they put on the same level and collaborated with a range of other disciplinarians including publishers, dealers, patrons and designers on projects going from the development of wallpaper, textiles, ceramics, posters and stained-glass decorations.

Fig. 1: Pierre Bonnard, *The Checkered Tablecloth,* 1916

This (fig. 2) painting by Pierre Bonnard (1916) is part of a series of paintings the artists did of the same ordinary dining table scene, always with the red and white tablecloth in the background. Out of the numerous representations *The Checkered Tablecloth* is the only one where the table takes almost the whole composition and is tilted towards the top of the

canvas. No figures are represented, making the objects – the bowl of fruit, the knifes, the spoon, the glasses and the small plates – be the focus of the image. The generic aspect of this dining scene makes it relatable to anyone and can bring out memories of the viewer.

Chapter 2:

Contemporary Context from a Range of Creations

In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) explores the way our imagination is liberated in spaces and how within those spaces, memory, curiosity and emotion feed our imagination and daydreaming.

He writes about the corners, drawers and little nooks full of memories that fill the house, and their connection to growth during childhood. These elements are essential as they generate creativity and forge the mind to liberate and express itself by fabricating its own world and stories to get lost into. As an adult we sometimes seek comfort in the remembrance of these moments from childhood, a time of pure bliss and make us forget the hard times and the reality attached to adulthood. According to the writer, these memories are best kept in those spaces rather than in our own mind as it can suppress some to protect us from the pain or discomfort of others. Also, as we naturally can forget things. Consequently, our remembrance of moments can be unreliable and untruthful as we might modify them unconsciously.

Bachelard refers to the construction of the house as being a sort of allegory or metaphor of our conscious and of our unconscious the more attached we are to the structure. The main living space being the secure area is connected to our conscious, the attic where people usually store boxes of souvenirs and random objects is linked to the subconscious and the cellar where we generally don't dare to go is associated to the unconscious.

He however believes that the house cannot be viewed with a scientific approach but only with feeling. In subsequent chapters, he links the way we look at animal nests with a feeling of protection, security, loneliness and how we take inspiration from their intricacy for our own architecture and designs. Thereby we can consider that all living and conscious beings deal with their own form of home, and we are all equal in our need and search of this safe space. Furthermore, bird nests and bee hives are also acts of making, of building by another life form. There is a natural, animal longing for us humans to want the security of the house.

In another chapter, Bachelard explains that the house is constructed in relation to its exterior and the outside world. The comfort and warmth of the house is better appreciated when exposed to the troubles and undesirable features of the outdoors.

Bachelard separates approaches that form and link material spaces in four categories: formal logic consisting of mathematics, geometry and, nowadays 3D software; psycho-perceptive logic made up of (in art) perspective, plans; allegoric logic formed of spaces that sensitise, carry significance and illustrate a narration or values and ideas; aesthetico-oneiric logic including spaces that create psychological impacts and bring an imagery to the viewer (Wunenburger, 2017). All these categories can be taken into consideration in the creation of

contemporary artworks, especially in installations or large-scale sculptural pieces. On the other hand, allegoric and aesthetico-oneiric logic can be found in 2D works such as paintings and drawings.

This influence of the house on the imagination and the creative spirit can be found in literature as well. In her novel *Paper Houses: A Memoir of the '70s and Beyond* (2007) Michèle Roberts records all the places she has lived in and the challenges she has faced on her journey of becoming a writer. She goes back to her time studying English Literature in Oxford university and the two next years she spent studying to become a librarian. These were the years where she realised, she wanted to be a writer. She had many part-time jobs over the years and spent the evenings writing. In this book she recounts the influence different events, people, places she travelled to and lived in had on her writing and her life as well as her mindset in those times.

The truth and honesty with which she writes pushes us to better understand her intentions through her stories and sometimes makes us connect to the different moments she faced. This integral manner of writing a memoir instead of being as accurate as possible will touch the reader's soul in such a way that it will impact them. Humans are not machines and react with feelings rather than logic. Besides, memory not being perfectly reliable, it is harder for someone to believe the writer if they remember every specific details of their life.

Fig. 2: *Hotel Room*

To place the subject back in the context of art, we will take as example the painting *Hotel Room* [fig. 1 (circa 1951)] by Tamara de Lempicka. The yellow tulips, the open book and the turquoise lamp on the dresser, the Louis XVI style chair next to it and the green cushion with the pink ribbon on the floor. These items are components people might look at and remind them about certain memories.

Fig. 3: Hayao Miyazaki, film stills from *Kiki's Delivery Service*, 1989; *My Neighbour Totoro*, 1988; *Ponyo*, 2008

Another form of rendition of the home is through animated film.

Hayao Miyazaki is well known for his films displaying stories of evolving friendships between characters who help each other to overcome events. The producer has brought in the story lines his interest that he always had in philosophy from a young age, often dealing with underlying subjects such as the development of Japanese society, the environment, urbanism and nature. Because some of the first films came out between the 80s and 90s, we could argue that he is part of the precursors of eco animation, with the rise of protest for climate change and the environment. Miyazaki is an advocate of these themes. His narratives always involve young but brave characters who are facing various occurrences sometimes including malicious people and overcoming these episodes with the help of other characters. The protagonists frequently start their journeys by leaving their house or town and are consistently brought back to the starting point of their home.

The theme of the house is omnipresent, and represent a space of rest, peace, happiness and comfort. The perception of the five senses is put forward within those spaces with the mouth-watering food, the softness of the bed linen, the many plants and flowers, and the consistent beauty of the places. Imagining these elements found inside the homes can bring us back to memories of childhood where with our innocence and ignorance at their peak we fabricate a perfect world of joy in a house that serves as sanctuary for the younger self. This point relates, in a way, to Bachelard's ideas of the house being a safe place for daydreaming and for children to freely grow.

Seen from the exterior (fig. 3), the houses regularly surrounded by a garden appear lived in, with a soul, and are colourful and inviting. In the evening warm lights shine out of the windows creating a charming, homely atmosphere.

Miyazaki additionally takes inspiration from his travels and other authors for the scenery and the narrative of the films (INA (Institut National Audiovisuel [National Audio-visual Institute], 2003).

Fig. 4: Hayao Miyazaki, film stills from *Castle in the Sky*, 1986

For instance, in *Castle in the Sky* (1986) the filmmaker recounts the story of Sheeta, a little girl who is held prisoner by government agents to help them find a mythical, disserted flying island. This island called Laputa was taken from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1721): in book three of his travels Gulliver visits the floating island Laputa (Douglas Atkins, 2014). In the film, there is an ongoing war between the army looking for the island to steal, understand and reproduce their advanced technologies and a group of pirates wanting to find their treasures. When Sheeta discovers that she is the last heir of this lost fortress she tries with the help of fellow orphan and friend Pazu to hold back the pirates and army wanting to invade the island. This film holds notions of self-rediscovery, loss and retrieval of home. It also makes people connect to it through their own personal history and associate it to the sense of belonging that the house provides.

Chapter 3:

Artistic Practices and Processes

Artistic practices such as photography and video have been able to provide a direct visualisation of instants and memories with their immediacy and easily accessed content to wider audiences. In contrast, other processes like painting, sculpture, installation and performance sometimes convey a hidden meaning that leads to look at the work from another angle or from a metaphorical point of view.

Gwen John (1876-1939) was a Welsh artist who worked in France for most of her life. She left wales in 1898 to study drawing and painting in Paris and focusing more specifically on tone and colour. Her main themes include female portraits, interiors and still lives (National Museum of Women in the Arts, n.d.).

Having a quiet quality, her paintings, especially the ones of interiors, manage to catch the intensity of the sunlight coming in through the window, reflecting on the walls and on the objects sitting on the table. These paintings enable us travel through the spaces and have a familiar peculiarity that makes us associate them to our own experiences with the objects represented. From the doll on the living room table to the open book in the beaming sunlight of a mid-afternoon and the tepid teapot after spending time at your grandmother's house.

Fig. 5: Gwen John, *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris,* 1907-1909

In a letter addressed to her lover and artist Auguste Rodin, she wrote:

"My room is so delicious after a whole day outside, it seems to me that I am not myself except in my room." (Hubbard, 2008)

Following her words, we could almost consider these compositions as being self-portraits. With the objects placed in an uncontrolled, unconscious way and appearing as repeated actions, it is almost as if John lives through them. This simple composition makes it seem as if the objects are conversating with each other and makes us, viewers imagine the narrative of this honest moment. In this painting (fig. 5) the jacket and umbrella are placed on the chair as if she just came back from outside and the fresh flowers in the small glass might have been picked on the way, in a garden or a parc. The chair not being fitted under the desk and pulled

at an angle, open towards the room makes the observer feel invited and welcomed into this intimate space.

The quality and the veracity of the depiction of a moment, is essential when wishing to induce reactions and emotions from the audience.

A more recent artist whose artworks represent scenes with a similar effectiveness is Andrew Cranston (1969-…). He is a Scottish painter who represents different atmospheres using a variety of materials such as paint, varnish and collage. He depicts scenes from his personal experiences, literature, anecdotes and often questions the accuracy of memory. Some of his paintings are made on hardback book covers, sometimes leaving the spine and title visible, making the picture part of the novel. This process gives the images a poetic form. His use of bright, varied colour palette and his technique being a mix of pointillism and impressionism create strange ambiances with dreamlike characteristics and gives a sense of looking at a blurred memory. The viewer gets disorientated in Cranston's paintings as they seem to be lost in time.

Fig. 6: G. John, *The Brown Tea Pot*, 1915 / Fig. 7: A. Cranston, *All the World is Green,* 2023

I chose to oppose these two paintings (fig. 6: *The Brown Tea Pot* (1915) by Gwen John and fig. 7: *All the World is Green* (2023) by Andrew Cranston) as they both appear very much alike with their similar setting and their matching colour pallet. John's painting is of a corner of her Parisian apartment with, in the foreground, a book on a stool; in the centre, a table holding a newspaper, a brown tea pot and white porcelain cups; in the background, a chimney with on its top what seems to be paint brushes in a glass looking goblet. The composition of Cranston's painting focuses on another angle of a room, looking at the window giving on to the foliage of the trees. We can observe on the table two vases: one carrying a singular yellow flower and the other a bouquet of violet flowers. The shape of a cat can just about be discerned under the table, and on the right side a chair. In both these images we can observe harmonious almost red browns, beiges, greys and darker browns that complement each. However, Cranston's has a few brighter colours such as yellow, green and purple, making them a sort of

focal point in the space. This attracts the eye towards the centre of the piece and creates a depth to the image that makes us want to enter further and go beyond the room. Each of these representations invite the viewer to feel the stillness and intimacy of the room and the objects and induce a peaceful tranquillity through their secluded aspect.

Fig. 8: Vincent Van Gogh, *The Bedroom*, 1889

In contrast to these calm, natural looking artworks, I decided to put forward this painting (fig. 8) by Vincent Van Gogh. Created in 1889, this piece is of his bedroom in Arles, France. Using bright colours, the artist wanted to "express absolute 'repose' or 'sleep'" (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 2019). The surreal and dream-like aspect of the painting is emphasised with the distorted perspective and the vibrant, nearly primary colours including the yellow bed frame, the red sheets and the blue walls and door.

Van Gogh wrote a letter to his brother Theo, stating that he intentionally flattened the interior and left out the shadows to echo Japanese prints (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 2019).

When looking at this painting, we objectify it as being just a painting made by the artist and we forget about his presence in the intimate space. However, just like Gwen John's painting (fig. 5) we can think of it as being a sort of self-portrait and a reflection of his mindset. From the paintings on the walls to the clothes hung up behind the bed and the objects on the table, they are all personal elements evoking Van Gogh and making it his own space rather than a generic room. Furthermore, the different shades take the room away from reality making it difficult for the spectators to project themselves into but increasing the individuality of the space and preserving its intimacy for the painter.

Fig. 9: Do Ho Suh, *348 West 22nd Street*, 2015

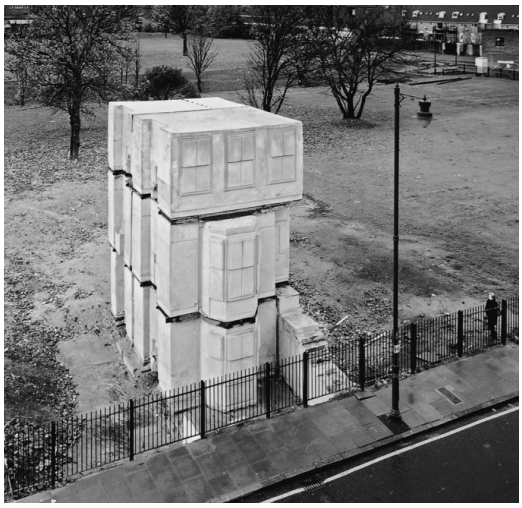

Fig. 10: Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993

Installation art is defined as "large-scale constructions, often designed for a specific place or for a temporary period of time" (Tate, 2017). It is an artistic approach that brings the viewer to engage with the work by walking around it to see its entirety or in some cases walk through it. Compared to painting or other 2D artworks, the main objective of these kinds of productions is to interact with the public and to induce a powerful experience.

The artwork on the left [fig. 9 (*348 West 22nd Street*)] was made between 2011 and 2015 by South Korean artist Do Ho Suh. Born in Seoul, the artist moved to the USA in his late 20s for his studies. Having this bi-cultural integrity, his work explores the retrieval of the intimacy of the home and questions the concept of borders and the ability to move in and out freely. Capturing the small details of parts of his life in the homes he lived in with his installations, he brings the memories back from them. Made from a stainless-steel armature and translucent polyester, the delicacy of the materials creates ghost-like structures, whilst the vibrant colours brighten up the recreated spaces and the rooms in which they are exposed.

Furthermore, the transparency of the structure lead to a constant exchange between exterior/ interior, private/ public. With this artwork (fig.9), Do Ho Suh replicated his New York apartment. The visitors are solicited to walk through it as if they were exploring the different coloured rooms and by making them consider their own spaces through all the small details, from the switches on the walls to the kitchen appliances. Do Ho Suh works with a poetic way of thinking and process and by keeping the spirit of the houses he represents. He has the power to transport the audience through spaces where the time seem to have stopped.

House is a concrete cast made by Rachel Whiteread in 1993 (fig. 10). Being a UK based artist, Whiteread works mainly by casting the space objects and buildings occupy. Throughout her career she moulded a lot of interior spaces and household objects– houses, garden sheds, objects such as mattresses, baths, shelfs of books –, representing the absence of the subject and dealing with ideas of loss and recollection. This cast of a three-storey house (fig. 10) is a site-specific piece as it was planted at the exact place where it was originally located (East London) before its destruction. The artist preserved the memories of the lives lived in that

home with no psychological or actual way to access it. The intimacy, with all the objects and furniture, is removed from the house, making it generic and that could belong to anyone but still having a certain familiarity.

These art installations both represent the concept of duplication and disappearance of the objects. Sometimes we can feel the absence of things even in the most secure and comfortable places. The two artists capture this feeling using quite opposite but nonetheless impactful techniques.

Conclusion

In summary, the components discussed in this essay have demonstrated how spaces are felt and seen by our society, and how memory travels within concepts and renditions. With a range of illustrations of these ideas we have determined that the home cannot be perceived scientifically but affectively. And is a concept that even though common, changes for each person.

In the first chapter, we have defined ways in which artists use different techniques and processes to make the audience feel strong emotions and experiences through their work. We have looked at the work of the Nabis for whom art was a means of decoration and whose commissions fitted the space for which they were created. They gave insight on art as part of the aesthetics of a space and on the representation being blended with the room. This has shown the impact a space has on the person inhabiting it and the influence of art on the recollection of that space.

In the second chapter, in *the Poetics of Space* (1957), Gaston Bachelard explains how the domestic space is an area where human beings can grow and dream freely, without any judgment or constraint from the outside world. It can only be considered with feelings rather than science. Because we live in them having so many emotions and going through various significant moments it is only normal to perceive a space with sensations. Memory is kept within the house, objects and our minds, so when noticing these elements elsewhere or through representations we naturally connect it to what we know.

Within the bounds of memories of childhood and animation, Hayao Miyazaki has the capacity to render feelings of warmth, stability, comfort and safety that accompanies the intimacy of the home in his films. Even with occasional disturbances in the stories, we still find relief and optimism in those spaces.

Through different artistic practices in the third chapter, the home is illustrated as a relaxed, peaceful and secure environment for daydreaming, growth and creativity. By its representation it becomes a long-lasting memory that travels across space and time and that affects individuals. The objects presented and the atmosphere in which that space was portrayed bring back the viewers to their own memories by linking the similarities between their own experiences and what they are looking at.

Finally, by clarifying the rendition of ideas and images we have determined ways in which memory and space are connected through art and how retrospection influences our reaction and interaction with artworks.

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