



Materialities, installation view. Ebony Patterson—reach.... Image courtesy of the Richard H. Driehaus Museum. Photo credit: Bob.

## Review: Driehaus Museum's *Materialities* Exhibit Uses Art to Reevaluate the Priorities of the Past

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*Review written by Mitchell Oldham.*

Zoë Schlanger's 2024 bestselling book, *The Light Eaters*, reveals a world few of us can fathom: One where lifeforms we dismiss as primitive or rudimentary are being found to be highly evolved and perhaps may even possess their own facsimile of consciousness and intelligence. Schlanger's subjects are plants, but her quest to understand our world by viewing it through a more open and receptive lens has quite a bit in common with the Driehaus Museum's current exhibition, *A Tale of Today: Materialities*.

The museum is housed in the 1883 Nickerson mansion, former home of banking magnate Samuel Nickerson and his wife Matilda. Curated by author and educator Dr. Giovanni Aloï, the exhibition focuses on the resources, natural materials and even the

wild game hunted to turn a dwelling into an opulent showplace. Its distinction is that the show views them from a 21st century perspective, tempered by ecological sensitivity, cultural awareness and time's priceless wisdom.



*Materialities*, Installation View. Jonas N. T. Becker: 1810, 1833, 1880. Image courtesy of the Richard H. Driehaus Museum. Photo credit: Bob.

Fourteen artists were asked to present their own visions of how objects used in the mansion's construction and ornamentation could be reframed to reflect more contemporary sensibilities. The artists, including acclaimed sculptor Richard Hunt, made contributions, many of them commissioned solely for this project. Throughout rooms on all three of the museum's floors, their reinterpretations and innovative outlooks jolt the imagination. They cause one to reconsider how to look at not only the trappings of wealth, but also the residual cost of civilized existence.

The works are broad, conceptually fascinating and sometimes provocative; they cover a wide spectrum of viewpoints and formats. They range from Beth Lipman's delicately intricate glass sculpture immortalizing ancient flora, to Jonas N. T. Becker's sober 1810, 1833, 1880 that reinforces how critical forest clearing

and coal mining were to industrial and cultural development. *Materialities* bolts the bounty of nature to the way life was lived at the highest strata of the Gilded Age.



*Materialities*, Installation View. Olivia Block: *Lowlands*. Image courtesy of the Richard H. Driehaus Museum. Photo credit: Bob.

One of the more viscerally impactful contributions is Olivia Block's video projection entitled *Lowlands*, which acts as a more dynamic link between the two by showing how mammals occupying the natural world were used to augment status. They are located in what's now the Sculpture Room (the wild game trophy room when the museum was a residence).

The silhouettes of elk stroll leisurely across stately textured walls. A subtly gripping simulation, Block's juxtaposing of wildness and elegance underscores the stark division between two worlds.

*Palimpsest* by Industry of the Ordinary (Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson), points to the divide between people rather than between wildlife and humankind to talk about "the entwined histories of materiality and labor" in their work. A plain unadorned door lies flat on the floor, an exact replica of the door separating the servants' quarters from the family's spaces when the museum was a home. The clay used to make its

doorknob was extracted from the bed of the Chicago River. The clay doorknob is the identical material in the bricks used in the construction of the home after the Great Chicago Fire; it shows how the same clay used to build and protect can be used to enforce class division.



*Materialities*, Installation View. Laleh Montlagh working on *Threaded Memories*. Image courtesy of the Richard H. Driehaus Museum. Photo credit: Bob.

Understated beauty is the first thing you notice about Laleh Motlagh's *Threaded Memories* in what was a small bedroom on the second floor. Turkish tiles used in the room's fireplace drew the artist to the space. A native of Iran, Motlagh immediately recognized the tiles as a part of home where 40 percent of Iran's population are of Turkish ancestry. In keeping with the exotic materials used to furnish the mansion, a Persian rug once adorned the room's floor. *Threaded Memories* pays homage to that rug, its origins and the artist's heritage by arranging dried leaves taken from her father's garden in Iran and similar materials gathered from the grounds of the Nickerson mansion to create a "natural" rug, patterned and designed like a conventional Persian rug, and placing it between acrylic sheets. *Threaded Memories* is a delightful conceit that achieves a stunning result and captures the intent of the exhibition.



*Materialities*, Installation View. Bobbi Meier: *Decorum*. Image courtesy of the Richard H. Driehaus Museum. Photo credit: Bob.

On the other side of the floor, in what was Matilda Nickerson's sitting room, Bobbi Meier explores more personal territory. she confronts and "challenges boundaries" with her abstract sculptures, Meier sees the sitting room as both a reflection and an expression of the person who inhabited it. In her three works, she uses fabric and other materials to look at different aspects of a doyenne, a woman of prominence and power, from a gender-constrictive past. The most imposing piece, *Decorum*, imagines what it might feel and look like to be completely free of the physical and psychological strictures of her day, from corsets to the expectations concerning one's personal carriage. The others touch on outdated virtues prized during the period or the petty indulgences of wealth. These concepts skew only slightly from the original brief, but highlight how much fresh perspectives and time can even impact how we see ourselves.

**The Driehaus Museum** was once known as "The Marble Palace" because of its extravagant use of precious materials, including marble, imported to complete its construction. Twenty-two types of marble decorate the foyer alone plus 15 types of wood. *A Tale of Today: Materialities*, is on view there through April 27. The museum, located at 50 E. Erie St., is open Wednesday-Sunday. See the [website](#) for tickets and more information about your visit.

*Mitchell Oldham, a self-acknowledged culture vulture, has been enjoying writing about Chicago's dynamic arts scene for over a decade.*