

Fabric of the House: A Review of “A Tale of Today—Materialities” at the Driehaus Museum

BY TEDDY SANDLER | MARCH 26, 2025



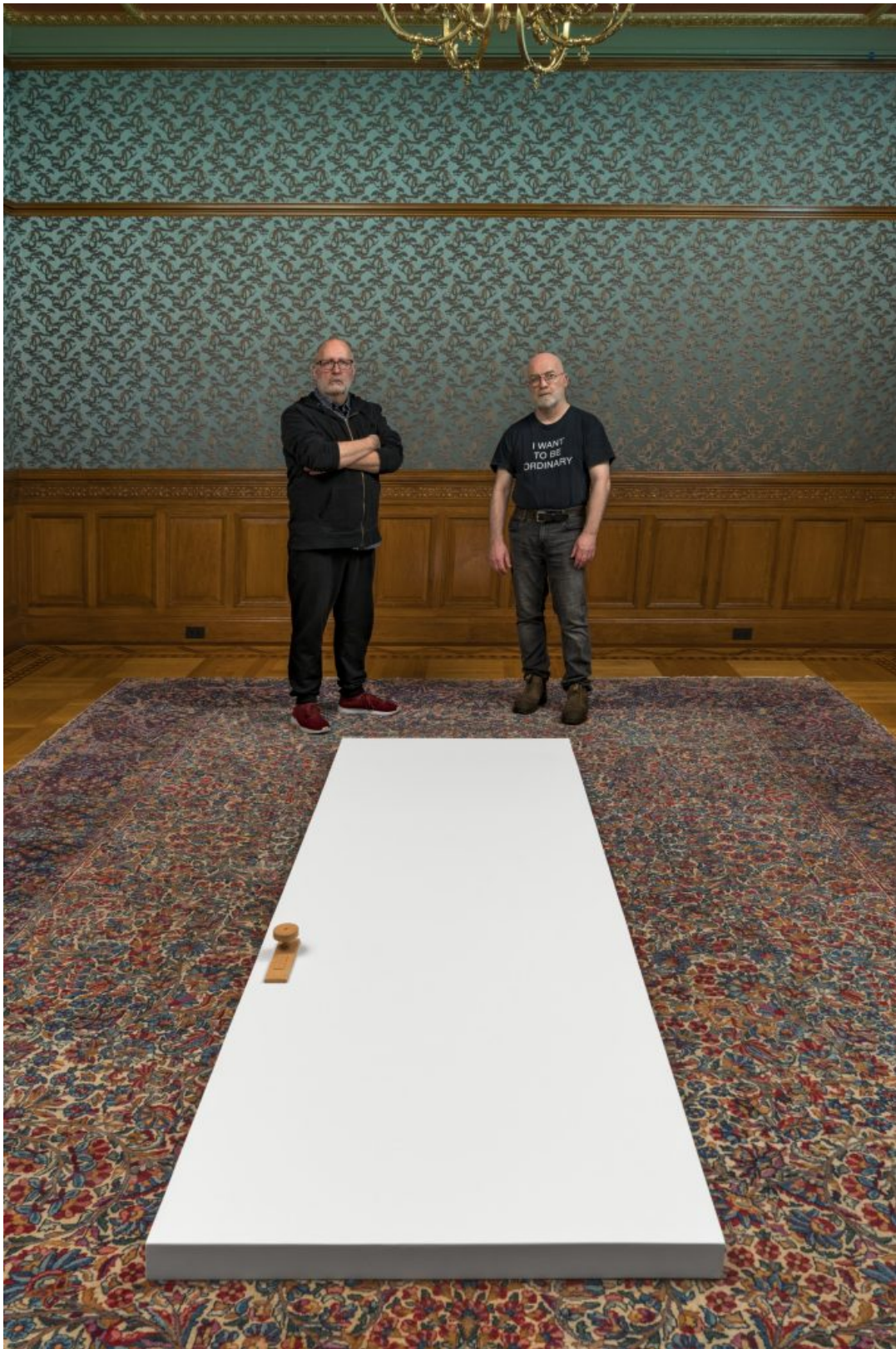
Bobbi Meier, “Decorum,” at Driehaus Museum/Photo: Bob

The gilded-era Samuel Nickerson Mansion sprawls, in the heart of downtown Chicago, offering set-back Beaux-Arts architectural relief to the towering skyscrapers of reflective glass and stone grays. The house converted to the Driehaus Museum is a welcoming hearth room amidst the modernist monotony, but also an opulent reminder of wealth inequality across the ages. Its current exhibition, “A Tale of Today: Materialities,” curated by Dr. Giovanni Aloï, invites contemporary artists to respond to the meticulously preserved rooms, exploding the troublesome histories built into the foundation. On view through April 27, the site-specific artworks awaken the historic structure with insightful dialogue that uses aesthetic re-contextualization to give homage to hegemony’s forgotten narratives.



Laleh Motlagh, "Threaded Memories," at Driehaus Museum/Photo: Bob.

At a time when interiority proliferates through physical space and algorithms, "Materialities" propels the Driehaus Museum's archival collection into a breathing social creature. The exhibition's works, nestled into the existing collection, provide a delightfully trippy encounter with time in the historic house. Aesthetically congruent, the exhibition builds up from the regal decorative arts design while adding a speculative flair. Made entirely of glass, Beth Lipman's still life of plants and vases in "Sphenophyllum and Chains" blends seamlessly in the front parlor, where only upon pause do the translucent dangling chains pop to convey the underlying tension of the ecosystem that forms its fragile beauty. In "Palimpsest," Industry of the Ordinary molded clay from the Chicago River into a door handle and painted wood. "Threaded Memories," by Laleh Motlagh, made of dried plants pressed between acrylic sheets reminiscent of a Persian rug, lie on the floor, commanding attention to a modernist reinterpretation of elements from the original mansion. Intertwining literally with the museum, the pieces of "Decorum" by Bobbi Meier, made of pantyhose and spandex stuffed in lumpy patterns with fiberfill, wrap around stands with ornate vases, the spotlights creating an organic patchwork of light and shadow. Winding through the tucked-away comfortable corners of the exhibition, pieces offer tokens of modern life, the veil from large bay windows looking out to the street help reduce the historic rooms from opera boxes to informative dioramas.



Industry of the Ordinary, "Palimpsest," at Driehaus Museum/Photo: Bob.

Innovation is baked into the Nickerson Mansion, originally designed with fire retardant technology in response to the Great Chicago Fire. "Materialities" expands upon the concept of preservation. Amidst a progressive society that seems to forget formative stories, some pieces center memory and deep time. From the sounds of the first recorded Black man to a national park field recording, the sensorial additions to the museum establish a world of deep time before vinyl when hordes of bison roamed the Midwest. Through light, memories of animals stomp and prance projected on the library walls while Edison bulbs pulsate in slow rhythmic waves and electronic lights seemingly smolder next to coal and copper, birthing a fantastical reconnection between humanity and the cosmos. "Materialities" adds a new layer of wonderment atop the Driehaus Museum's permanent collection and ushers in a new generation to discover Chicago's troubled and formidable legacies. Ascend the storied steps downtown to meditate on the past and get swept away by the tumultuous winds of the present.

"A Tale of Today: Materialities" is on view at the Driehaus Museum, 50 East Erie, through April 27.