



VISUAL ART

Sandra Meigs

by Josée Drouin-Brisebois

When I first walked into the Carleton University Art Gallery, I was struck by the feeling of entering a dark enchanted place. This eerie atmosphere set the stage for viewing the paintings by Canadian artist Sandra Meigs, brought together in an exhibition entitled "Strange Loop." In these recent works Meigs depicts interiors that are at once inviting and slightly disturbing. Through an economy of means, she has rendered these almost monochromatic, elaborate spaces using a labyrinth of light grey and white lines painted on a grey background. What is most surprising is that the spaces are inhabited by unusual and whimsical characters—from clowns, rats and birds to simplified Comedy and Tragedy masks and other such ghostly figures—all rendered in a loose graphic style. These faces adorn the stairs, banisters, wallpaper, carpets and other furnishings, emerging from every corner to create a

sense that all these objects, and the house itself, have come to life and are watching our every move. In the painting "I," the carpet on the staircase becomes a tongue and the rectangular shape of the windows the eyes, evoking a comical, although disquieting, haunted house. In *As Though a Human Breath*, a more schematic painting where the space is completely flattened, the doubled fireplaces become the main focus. As the title suggests, the fires that are the only colourful elements of the work could be interpreted as a stand-in for a human presence.

Moving through the exhibition one gets a sense that the works mirror the architectural surroundings, with staircases and ceilings of varying heights, as if the paintings were created specifically for the gallery. Meigs started working on this new body of work a year ago after visiting Shingle-style mansions in Newport Rhode Island. The Shingle style emerged in the 1880s as an authentic American style and precursor to American Modernist architecture. Her interest had been peaked after she visited the Carnegie Mansion (now the Cooper-Hewitt, Natural Design Museum), a Georgian-style home built in 1902 in New York City. She was first attracted to the interior space of the Carnegie Mansion because of the way the grand hall and central staircase, like many mansions built at the time, were used as a transitional space between the outside world and the privacy of one's home. According to the artist, "the grand entrance at the Cooper-Hewitt allowed guests to feel as if their entrances were significant and the architectural structure was a mere vehicle for their movements within it." Similar to official residences, the front foyer in many society houses would be considered a type of stage where public personas could be acted out, while the reality of the private lives of the home's inhabitants could remain hidden. Designed to keep these two worlds at bay, these mansions embody the notion that the public and private self can in fact exist in separation.

While at first view Meigs's paintings may seem simple, their construction is not. The artist plays with positive and negative patterning achieved through the repetition of motifs as well as with the relationship between the figures and ground. When the viewer spends time with the works, the images seem to recede into the canvas, and consequently, the viewer feels herself sinking into the work. Meigs has heightened this effect by incorporating circular movement, especially in *Go Down In* where the bottom of the steep staircase is a vortex. The paintings become perceptual puzzles and as such are reminiscent of Dutch artist M C Escher's (1898–1972) etchings. This optical push-and-pull effect experienced while viewing is echoed in the exhibition's title "Strange Loop," which evokes the idea of entrapment, of being caught in an inescapable cycle. The title is a nod to the writings of Dr. Douglas Hofstadter, Professor of Cognitive Science at Indiana University, who explores a self-referential way of being and becoming where the self is defined as both what we choose to project of ourselves to others and what we keep hidden. Meigs's ornate interiors become the stage where this game between the public and private self is played out, where the viewer is at once drawn into the work, as in a maze, and kept out by its formal qualities and flat surface, effectively becoming caught in a strange loop.

"Sandra Meigs: Strange Loop," curated by Diana Nemiroff, was exhibited at the Carleton University Art Gallery from April 27 to June 14, 2009.

Josée Drouin-Brisebois is Curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada. Some of her recent exhibitions curated for the National Gallery include "De-constructions" (2007), "Caught in the Act: The Viewer as Performer" (2008-09) and "Nomads" (2009).

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