

Shaffner, Ingrid. "Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?",  
INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, April 2008.

## testsite

**testsite 08.2 ~ Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?**

### **Beverly Semmes & Ingrid Schaffner**

04.06.2008 - 05.16.2008



Beverly Semmes, Paradise 8, 1997-2008

This exhibition takes its name from a 1956 collage by the British artist Richard Hamilton. Staged as cross between a domestic interior and showroom, the picture constructs a space crammed with Modernist furniture and an over-abundance of appliances. (Hanging over the TV, a comic book picture framed next to an ancestral portrait stakes this work's historic claim as an icon of Pop art). The title came up, at first humorously in conversation with Beverly Semmes about how we might approach the opportunity testsite presents: for a curator (me) to invite an artist (her) to collaborate on a project with some site specificity inasmuch as it is largely located in a living room. Our subsequent decision to make eponymous Hamilton's Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing? immediately provided a useful set of correspondences upon which to build, and now enter, this installation. Starting with collage.

Semmes is a sculptor, who has long used photography as a means of locating her forms as figures in space. Working with live models—friends and family actually—whom Semmes swathes entirely in the fabric costumes she has created especially for these shoots, so that they appear transformed into the objects of her art's imagery of vessels. The collages in this exhibition are based on photographs edited from several shoots, and set aside in the studio, where she later cut them up and reassembled the parts. The figures are typically posed in a range of interior and outdoor settings. In this group, we encounter figures milling about in a garden, staked out in an abandoned squash court, stopped at a forest road, and crossing a lake in little boats that appear to float under psychic power. Indeed, the spooky to strange mood that always pervades Semmes' photos is only heightened by the weird shifts in scale, odd juxtapositions, and more or less radical intrusions that collage was invented to create. The humor of cut-ups is present too: don't overlook the watchful dogs that turn up enough to turn out to be ready-made plaster Labs. There's

something amusingly grotesque about the costumes as well, whether it's the luridly bright colors or patterns (yes, that's a dog montage print). Or, the bizarre effects of draperies, robes, skirts, hoods, capes, that are so excessive they suggest tails, trails, noodles, drawing, bolters, sculpture, landscape, and other renderings.

The photo-collages are hung in a running sequence, a ribbon that bands the house's three public rooms—an entry, dining and living room—into a box. A box that contains further assemblage interventions: fragments of costumes are plopped and piled on the floor and furniture, which, in turn, appear to have been marshaled by Semmes into the total tableau. Two plaster dogs act as sentries. Whether we as viewers are entering illusory space, or the pictures have leaked into the room, there is a tension between thresholds here—an experience of the uncanny that makes today's testsite so different, so appealing.

Ingrid Schaffner, Senior Curator  
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**Collaborator Biographies**

Beverly Semmes  
Ingrid Schaffner