

★ SHOWCASE



Petra Bachmaier and Sean Gallero — the artist duo known as Luftwerk — install their piece titled “Konstellation” (2024) at the Driehaus Museum for the exhibit “A Tale of Today: Materialities.” PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOB. (ROBERT SALAZAR AND ROBERT HEISHMAN)

BY COURTNEY KUEPPERS
WBEZ

Inside an imposing 19th century mansion along Chicago’s Erie Street, privileged men once gathered in the smoking room to light cigars and chew the fat. These days, that room on the first floor of the Richard H. Driehaus Museum is part of a modern-day rebrand that throws open its doors to attract Chicagoans with contemporary art.

A large bass speaker, clad with rusted tin, pipes in the laughter and chatter of Black and working-class people who once would not have been welcome here. The jarring soundtrack fills a room that is still guarded by a portrait of the home’s second owner, Lucius Fisher.

The soundbox, by Chicago artist Jefferson Pinder, is part of a new exhibit of contemporary art — the largest the Driehaus has ever hosted — called “A Tale of Today: Materiali-

Driehaus Museum’s haunting art show brings contemporary vibes to old mansion

Animal screeches, eerie laughter and works of 14 Midwest artists invite one and all to the River North locale

ties.” The show is part of a broader effort by the Driehaus team to attract younger and more diverse visitors into a space that can still feel intimidating from the street. That strategy also recently included a sold-out live show starring 20-something indie rocker Lucy Dacus.

“This is literally the stuff that keeps me up at night,” said Julie Treumann, the museum’s head of marketing. “How do we keep getting new people in? How do we make it accessible? I think having contemporary art is one way to do it.”

Jefferson Pinder is one of 14 artists, all with Midwest connections, who have brought unexpected and sometimes haunting multimedia elements into this old home turned art museum. Pinder’s 18-minute track, which plays on a loop, includes an unsettling laugh that belongs to one of the first Black artists to be recorded, George Washington Johnson. It’s married with street noise from the Gilded Age.

Pinder’s work — which protrudes from the belly of the fireplace, as if the sound is traveling down the shaft — also brings his own perspective as a contemporary Black artist to this space.

“I do feel like it is a radical position to be placed in a historic home that you know you may not have been able to go through the front door of when it was created,” Pinder, 54, said. “If the architecture could speak, what kind of sounds would it make? What kind of histories are missing?”

Elsewhere in the exhibit, raw hunks of coal and the screeching tones of elks bugling fill rooms, along with reimagined pieces from noted local Jamaican artist Ebony G. Patterson and the late Chicago sculptor Richard Hunt.

The exhibit, which stretches across the mansion’s three levels, is the brainchild of curator Giovanni Aloï. Several years ago, while living in London, Aloï said he developed an “allergy” to standard exhibition spaces (see: white, stale cube) and began looking for new ways to present work at the cross section of art and nature.

He visited the Driehaus shortly after the late Chicago businessman and philanthropist Richard H. Driehaus reopened the space as an art museum in 2008. Aloï was struck by the grandeur of the Magnificent Mile-adjacent property and how it felt both infused with and devoid of nature. The immaculate mansion was built in the early 1880s as a fortress of sorts by the once-prominent Nickerson family, whose previous home had burned in the Great Chicago Fire.

“I like to think about the forest within the house. All the wood that appears around the walls, in the wainscoting and the fireplace mantel pieces, the chairs, the tables ... that wood was, once upon a time, trees,” Aloï said. “So, there’s like a ghost forest everywhere.”



Olivia Block installs her work at the Driehaus Museum. The piece brings ghostly animals projections to what was once the home's library, filled with taxidermy.



Voices of Black and working-class people are piped into the Driehaus Museum's onetime smoking lounge via artist Jefferson Pinder's large bass speaker.

'A TALE OF TODAY: MATERIALITIES'

When: Through April 27

Where: The Richard H. Driehaus Museum, 50 E. Erie St.

Tickets: \$15-\$20; free for children 12 and younger. (Free admission for all from 4-7 p.m. Wednesdays)

Info: driehausmuseum.org

In 2023, Aloï and the museum put out an open call to artists, inviting them to create work that engaged with the materials in the house. More than 50 submissions rolled in, and the result is "Materialities," which is on view until April 27.

As you leave the smoking room, where Pinder's audio plays, you head toward the grand staircase. As you pass by the dining room, you see giant slabs of half-processed, timbered walnut placed on the table by art-

ist Jonas N.T. Becker, who has also strategically positioned bits of raw coal throughout the room, in spots where Tiffany vases typically sit.

Keep walking and you'll hear an otherworldly noise. The howl is clearly animal in nature but a bit unfamiliar, especially in this pristine setting. Follow that sound into what was once a library, where the walls were covered in taxidermy, to find the work of Chicago artist and composer Olivia Block.

On the green walls, beneath an ornate stained-glass dome, Block has projected ghostly images of animals: deer, bison, bears and more, while the sound of elk screams rolls.

"They're kind of coming back and haunting the space, where the taxidermy mounts used to be, but in this new form of representation," Block said.

The audio and visuals are a combination of Block's own field recordings and materials from the National Park Service.

Pieces like Block's manage to both stand out and blend in with the permanent architecture and design of the home, like the 17 kinds of marble in the entry hall and the carefully carved cherubs that decorate the dining room walls — natural elements that were also once molded by artisans.

It's so site-specific that Aloï, Pinder and Block all agree: The exhibition couldn't travel to another location in its current form. The mansion is an essential part of the story. But by pushing the bounds of what there is to see inside, Pinder hopes some new visitors find their way into the museum.

"I hope that the Driehaus has so many Black and Brown people come through this space, they don't know what to do," Pinder said. "That's what I want."

HOROSCOPES: MARCH 2, 2025

Star ratings: ★★★★★ Dynamic | ★★★★★ Positive | ★★★ Average | ★★ So-so | ★ Difficult



GEORGIA NICOLS

MOON ALERT: Caution! Avoid shopping or making important decisions after 7:30 a.m. for the rest of the day. The moon is in Aries.

IF TODAY IS YOUR BIRTHDAY: Actress Rebel Wilson (1980) shares your birthday. You're intuitive and gentle. You're passionate about social issues and want peaceful resolutions. This year will bring you exciting changes and increased personal freedom. Let go of whatever impedes your progress and growth.



Aries (March 21-April 19): ★★★★★

This is a great day for creative activities and socializing with others. It's also a wonderful day to kick back and relax. However, due to the limitations of the moon alert, it's a poor day for important decisions or spending money on anything besides food and gas.



Taurus (April 20-May 20): ★★★

Discussions with friends will be idealistic today. You might explore far-out ideas and discuss unusual events. You might also want to help someone. You'll listen to anyone who needs your ear and sympathy. Restrict your spending to food and gas because of the moon alert.



Gemini (May 21-June 20): ★★★

You might make an appeal for help or sympathy to a boss or someone in a position of authority today. Or you might appeal to a friend or a charitable group. Be aware of the restrictions of the moon alert.



Cancer (June 21-July 22): ★★★★★

This is a relaxed, easy-going day; however, communications are a bit hazy and could be easily misunderstood. Therefore, avoid important decisions. Restrict spending money to food and gas. Check the moon alert. Be smart.



Leo (July 23-Aug. 22): ★★★★★

This is great day to travel and schmooze with others! Furthermore, your creative talents are enhanced. It's a wonderful day to get creative projects off the ground. However, it's a poor day for important decisions or spending money (except for food and gas).



Virgo (Aug. 23-Sept. 22): ★★★

Conversations with partners and close friends might be confused today. On the upside, people want to help each other because they feel mutually sympathetic. On the downside, discussions might be vague or unclear. Tread carefully.



Libra (Sept. 23-Oct. 22): ★★★

Be accommodating and easy-going with others today because the moon is opposite your sign, which means you have to be willing to go more than half-way when dealing with people. Meanwhile, health issues and anything to do with your job or a pet might confuse you. Check the moon alert.



Scorpio (Oct. 23-Nov. 21): ★★★★★

This is a lovely, playful day! In particular, it's a wonderful time to express your creative talents or deal with creative projects because your imagination is in overdrive. Sympathy for children will be strong. Romance will be heady but possibly confusing. Check out the moon alert.



Sagittarius (Nov. 22-Dec. 21):

★★★★ You're ready and willing to help a family member today if they need assistance because you feel sympathetic to others. Likewise, family will feel sympathetic to you, as well. This is also a creative, romantic, fun-loving day. Check the moon alert before spending money.



Capricorn (Dec. 22-Jan. 19): ★★★

Your imagination is heightened today, which is why this is a great day for creative projects or using your creative talents. You'll also enjoy entertaining at home. Writers and artists will be productive. Check the moon alert, especially if you're thinking of making purchases for the home or exploring real estate speculation.



Aquarius (Jan. 20-Feb. 18): ★★★★★

Be aware of the financial restrictions of the moon alert today. You need to know this because you'll be tempted to spend money or go shopping. But you should restrict your spending to food and gas. Nevertheless, it's a wonderful day to schmooze!



Pisces (Feb. 19-March 20): ★★★★★

You're in touch with your muse today, which is why this is a lovely day for all forms of artistic expression. Your imagination is heightened. It's a great day to study mysterious subjects. Check the moon alert and restrict your spending to food and gas. (Don't waste your money.)