

Art in America

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Judy Ledgerwood

CHICAGO,
at Graham Foundation

by Kyle MacMillan



View of Judy Ledgerwood's installation *Chromatic Patterns for the Graham Foundation*, 2014; at the Graham Foundation

Best known for canvases with electric colors and bold patterns, Chicago artist Judy Ledgerwood has increasingly ventured into the realm of installation in recent years, painting directly on gallery walls to create enveloping works. She took her practice further than ever in her latest installation, *Chromatic Patterns for the Graham Foundation* (2014), which filled two first-floor rooms of the 1902 Madlener House, the urban Prairie School landmark where the Graham Foundation—which mounts three exhibitions per year promoting the role of architecture in a larger cultural context—has its headquarters.

Ledgerwood covered the walls of what were originally the residence's music and living rooms, overlaying piercingly bright orange, red or fuchsia backgrounds with a simple quatrefoil pattern in metallic gray tempera.

Though this all-over painting functioned somewhat like wallpaper, Ledgerwood avoided the strict structure of manufactured wallpaper designs by rendering her pattern free-form, with little concern about paint drips and drops. The painting, a

little distorted in places, seemed to breathe with the architecture.

The installation both engulfed and accosted the viewer, confusing perceptions of space and scale; the unexpected sight of such an incandescent, assertive pattern on the walls of period rooms was truly jarring. Indeed, the juxtaposition of old and new was clearly one of the points of this exhibition, which challenged the boundaries between fine art and decoration, and explored how the seemingly incompatible worlds of the contemporary and historical feed each other.

The Graham Foundation's director, Sarah Herda, conceived the idea for this installation after seeing an image of Ledgerwood's 2007 solo exhibition at Tracy Williams, Ltd., a New York gallery, in which canvases were hung on walls that the artist painted. Here, however, Ledgerwood had to deal with two rooms that were not meant to be art spaces. They have a distinctive architectural style, complete with ornate fireplaces, wide baseboards and crown moldings, as well as large windows that allow natural light to pour into the room. This caused our perception of the colors to subtly change as the sun shifted, and created a glare at times on certain surfaces that only enhanced the installation's eye-popping quality. At night, if the lights were left on, the colorful glow spilled outside for a bonus visual effect that was particularly striking when snow was on the ground.

Jumping across historical periods and registering time in the form of its passing effects, Ledgerwood conjured an alluringly immersive, sensorial experience, and took a giant step away from her more typical engagement with the white-box gallery.