

# Subversive interventions

## Freud's domestic life, reinvented and restaged

Rod Mengham

*Housekeeper*

An Exhibition by Cathie Pilkington  
Freud Museum London, until March 1

If you had stepped inside Sigmund Freud's consulting room at Berggasse 19 at any point before 1938 when he made the move from Vienna to London, you might well have thought: this man is an obsessive compulsive. Every surface of the room was crowded with votive objects connected to belief systems from around the globe. Phalanx upon phalanx of figurines covered the desk, mantelpiece, occasional tables, bookshelves and cupboards. And all were lined up strictly in ranks and files, each object in its own place. When the Freud family hurriedly left Vienna following the annexation by Nazi Germany, however, it was not Freud who stored in his memory the relative positions of all these objects, but his housekeeper Paula Fichtl. And it is Fichtl's memory theatre we see today in the Freud Museum at 20, Maresfield Gardens, Hampstead, where the contents of Bergasse 19 have been restaged.

Fichtl joined the Freud household when she was twenty-seven years old, and remained with the family for fifty-three years. In Vienna, she had no bedroom of her own and slept in a corridor. The irony in this situation is that she must have had very few keepsakes of her own - and nowhere to keep them. This changed when the household moved to London; and when Anna Freud died in 1982, her will allowed for Fichtl to remain in the house for as long as she wished. Throughout the five intervening decades it was Fichtl who maintained the domestic scenario in which the century's most influential theories of familial dynamics were worked out. The sculptor Cathie Pilkington, who has devised the current installation in the Freud Museum, has imagined an alternative role for Fichtl: that of the housekeeper who secretly wished to subvert the taxonomies.

On one wall of the museum there's a copy of the etching that Max Pollak made in 1914 portraying Freud at his desk in Vienna. It registers the crowd of statuettes on the desk but shows him staring straight past them, clearly possessed by a sudden insight. It is a portrait of Freud the visionary

rather than of Freud the scientific neurologist. There had been a surge of public interest in the collecting of large numbers of figurines during the interwar period - especially in Austria and Germany - owing to the rise in popularity of toy soldiers. Freud's collection is not military but anthropological, yet its presentation is strictly regimented. It is precisely this fetish for order and control that the current installation in the Freud Museum seeks to challenge. Pilkington's interventions range from the subtle, discreet and understated to the brashly disruptive and sometimes downright mischievous.

For example, what strikes you at first as a stereotypical representation of the Athenian owl (representing the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom - a suitable ornament for the consulting room of a psychoanalyst) turns out to be mildly pornographic, with its budding human breasts and female human face wearing a pale mask of make-up. Several doll-like figures are blatantly sexualized, with breasts exposed, and dark stockings torn, faces either blank or mutilated. There is also an abundance of childhood paraphernalia.

One of Pilkington's works located in the dining room at 20, Maresfield Gardens,

shows a seated doll-like figure contemplating herself in a dressing table mirror. This is surely intended as an allusion to Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage - the moment between six and eighteen months old when the child connects its sense of identity to the image that others see, and is henceforth separated from the autonomous experiences of infancy. A host of small figures crowding the horizontal surfaces of this asymmetrical furniture unit suggests that Pilkington is marshalling the forces of resistance to self-alienation.

In the Museum's Exhibition Room, which Pilkington has renamed the Store-room, there is an unmanageable excess of forms and materials, including a host of anatomical part-objects and multiple layers of textiles: rolls of cloth, or perhaps bedspreads, and folded blankets, all stacked from the floor almost to the ceiling. Given that Paula Fichtl had no bedroom of her own in Vienna - or even a proper bed, come to that - Pilkington's choice of bedding material as a medium of expression feels strongly reactive. The sheer quantity of these materials, filling most of one long wall, is almost overwhelming. The layering itself is deliberately irregular, producing an effect like a geological cross-section, in

which successive horizontal strata are dislocated and buckled by vertical pressure. Various objects have been inserted here and there between the folds, at different levels, giving them the character of archaeological artefacts deposited at different moments during the history of a landscape.

What we are seeing here is the cross-section of a psychological formation, echoing Freud's own methodology but challenging its occlusion of working-class experience. This wall of bedding layered with keepsakes proclaims the value of Paula Fichtl not just to the Freud household but also perhaps to the Freudian project: it was left to Anna Freud to signal (and to sign into probate law) the significance of Paula Fichtl's contribution to the psychopathology of everyday life as the caretaker of 20, Maresfield Gardens. Cathie Pilkington has made legible one version of the many unwritten and therefore unread texts of working class lives that maintain the conditions in which employers could focus on curating their own desires, aversions, compulsions and inhibitions. While the biographical museum is a genre whose typical focus is almost invariably on one strand of experience, *Housekeeper* at the Freud Museum provides a particularly telling instance of the difference it makes to follow both weft and warp to arrive at the true social fabric of any life.

Rod Mengham's most recent book is *Midnight in the Kant Hotel: Art in present times*, 2021.



A detail from "Strata" by Cathie Pilkington from *Housekeeper* at Freud Museum London, 2025. Installation view.