

Slow down, sit down, look again Gitta Gschwendtner brings new design perspectives to the National Trust

Please Sit

Fenton House, Hampstead
12 September 2019 to Spring 2020



Nina Tolstrup. Photo credit: Oskar Proctor.

Fenton House, a 17th-century merchant home in Hampstead, offers people a fascinating insight into history and heritage, but it's probably not the first place you'd have looked for cutting-edge contemporary design.

That changes on 12 September, when Please Sit arrives at Fenton House. The National Trust, who care for the house, commissioned designer Gitta Gschwendtner as guest host to engage with Fenton's rich and characterful heritage and create a series of installations within the house.

Gitta, alongside five other participating designers, will select and respond to a particular detail of their chosen room – whether a feature of its interior, its existing furniture or the artefacts it contains – and offer their interpretation by creating new seating. These interventions create a unique collision of past and present to

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encourage people to slow down their journey through the house, take time to sit, and consider the various aspects of the home and its contents from a fresh perspective.



Frith Kerr. Photo credit: Oskar Proctor.

Gitta has invited five fellow designers to participate: Michael Marriott, Nina Tolstrup, Carl Clerkin, Frith Kerr and Maisie Broadhead – the latter two, a graphic designer and jewellery artist respectively, are new to the discipline of furniture design. Varied in background and outlook, but united by a curiosity for the multiple narratives of Fenton House, the designers will each find a unique and personal way to interrupt the space, offering new perspectives on Fenton’s own collections and the lives of its former residents.

- Inspired by the embroidery collection in Fenton’s Rockingham Room – particularly, a silk piece titled Jacob’s Dream – Gitta Gschwendtner has translated the idea of Jacob’s ladder from heaven to earth into the form of a chair with a surreally high back, stretching upwards to the unknown. In addition to the brass-plated version in the house, Gitta is also creating a series of Ladder Chairs in a dark grey powder coating to feature in the gardens and orchard.
- Responding to the house’s collection of harpsichords, the ‘furnitureness’ of the instrument, and the hints they suggest about their collector, Carl Clerkin is creating a wingback chair that incorporates speakers and typical speaker

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materials (such as ash, valchromat, foam and mesh), immersing the visitor in a fictional audio tale about imaginary past inhabitants.

- Maisie Broadhead delves into the story of Fenton House's last private owner, Lady Binning, a reclusive widow who remained in mourning for her husband long after convention would demand. Completely consumed by the carpet around it, Maisie's chair plays upon the idea of being 'trapped' by the house – part of the furniture, as it were.
- For Fenton's Oriental Room, which contains a former occupant's extensive collection of 43 snuff boxes and perfume bottles, Michael Marriott is creating a geometric, oversized plywood chair, large enough to enable two sitters to view the collection in privacy.
- Responding to the Shudi Broadwood harpsichord in the Dining Room (one of only 10 that were made and the most sophisticated of its time), Nina Tolstrup is creating a sculptural bench in solid wood, its form inspired by the structure of the harpsichord, giving people a place to sit and listen to recitals.
- Frith Kerr is creating a piece for the Blue Porcelain Room, once the bedroom of Lady Binning. Comprising a bed installation and wall hanging, her piece considers notions of good and bad taste. With poodles.



Gitta Gschwendtner. Photo credit: Oskar Proctor.



Maisie Broadhead. Photo credit: Oskar Proctor.

This mix of personalities and approaches brings a range of different perspectives to the interpretation of Fenton House, elevating the exhibition from a showcase of modern seating to a considered examination of conceptual responses to history, place and context.

"Asking the visitor to sit, makes them more than just a spectator; they become a guest, invited to participate in the setting. I am interested in how the six designers will interpret the house differently, look at different aspects of the house and create very different seats, which become objects in the room. This creates a much richer narrative."

– Gitta Gschwendtner, designer and curator

The history behind Fenton House itself is unusual among National Trust properties, which are defined by singular families across the centuries. Fenton, by contrast, has passed from owner to owner and family to family over the years, accumulating an unusually diverse array of stories in the process. These rich narratives survive today in the house's collections – harpsichords, snuff boxes, embroidery and more – all evidence of the obsessions and private passions of the individuals who made and collected them.

The project is part of the National Trust's wider goal of transforming the property from a place of static presentation to a dynamic setting through a contemporary

creative conversation – somewhere that modern-day artists, designers and other practitioners are free to engage with a heritage setting.



Michael Marriott. Photo credit: Oskar Proctor.

By inviting people to sit, reflect and physically engage with their surroundings, these unexpected eruptions of contemporary design challenge the typical notion of visiting a National Trust property, where physical interaction with pictures and furniture can often be restricted.

The newly designed seating invites the visitor to pause and ponder the origins of some of these artefacts, to speculate about the people who brought them here and to understand what makes this house so special.

Notes to editors

For more information and high-res images, please contact Jodi Moss at jodi@zetteler.co.uk or on + 44 (0)20 3735 5855, or Chris Hayes at chris@zetteler.co.uk.

Please Sit runs from 12 September to Spring 2020, at Fenton House, Hampstead Grove, Hampstead, London NW3 6SP.

Normal admission applies.

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See nationaltrust.org.uk/fenton-house-and-garden for the latest opening time information.

About the National Trust

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Entirely independent of Government, the National Trust looks after more than 250,000 hectares of countryside, 780 miles of coastline and hundreds of special places across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

More than 26 million people visit every year, and together with 5.2 million members and over 61,000 volunteers, they help to support the charity in its work to care for special places forever, for everyone. www.nationaltrust.org.uk

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Carl Clerkin. Photo credit: Oskar Proctor.