

# WOMEN HOUSE





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**FOREWORD**

In the early 1980s, the newly founded National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) acquired a building in downtown Washington, D.C., just two blocks from the White House. Constructed in 1908, the structure was built as the Washington headquarters of the Freemasons, a fraternal order open to men only. NMWA occupies a space that women previously had been unlikely to enter. This conversion mirrors the leading roles assumed by women artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, after a long period during which their contributions were neglected or even prevented. Open to the public since 1987, NMWA is the only museum in the world dedicated to exhibiting, collecting and preserving art by women.

Our museum celebrates women's cultural accomplishments over the last five hundred years, unearthing past triumphs and providing a forum for current and future achievements. NMWA's collection spans the sixteenth century to today and features more than 5,000 works by artists from six continents. The museum's exhibition programming similarly features art across all time periods and mediums, from oil painting to video installations. In October 2015, we launched the public program initiative Women, Arts, and Social Change. Through lively lectures, panel discussions and active community engagement, NMWA's programming highlights women artists as catalysts for change in the areas of gender equity, the environment, identity, education, health and social and economic opportunities.

*Women House* demonstrates that women are thought leaders on the still highly gendered topic of the domestic sphere. Questions about a woman's "place" resonate in our culture, alongside persistent ideas about the house as a feminine space. Artists in *Women House* powerfully recast conventional notions about the home. The exhibition's global focus and plurality of viewpoints reflect our museum's values as well as our increasing engagement with international audiences. NMWA's network of outreach committees – including the Paris-based Les Amis du NMWA – helps bring the museum's message to a worldwide community. In its thirtieth-anniversary year, the National Museum of Women in the Arts is honored to partner with La Monnaie de Paris to present *Women House*, a revelatory exhibition that embodies our institutions' mutual commitment to creativity, inclusion and artistic excellence.

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# A DOLL'S HOUSE



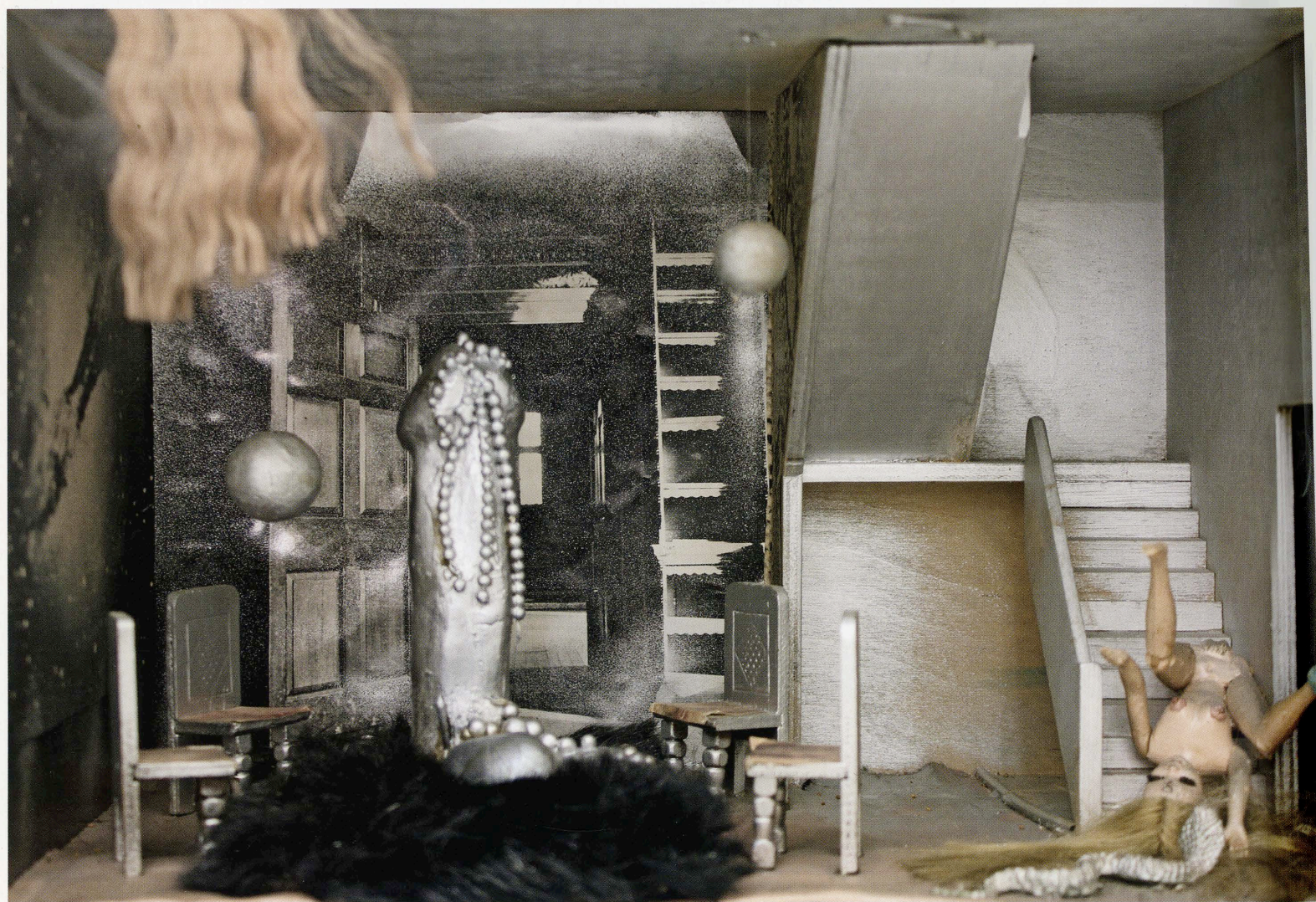
"But our house has been nothing but a play-room. Here I have been your doll wife, just as at home I used to be papa's doll child," says Nora, the main character in Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*. Written in 1879, this play had an unprecedented influence on early women's liberation movements towards the end of the nineteenth century. Ibsen makes a child's toy into a prison in which an objectified woman moves from room to room, trapped in fantasies and representations of womanhood. A century on, several artists used miniaturized depictions of the domestic sphere as reflected in doll houses. Laurie Simmons photographed one in which she placed a figurine of a housewife standing, sitting or kneeling in rooms where tasks are assigned to her. Rachel Whiteread designed a *Modern Chess Set* based on reproductions of objects from a doll house belonging to her. Instead of a king and queen, an ironing board and a stove are placed on a chessboard made of mismatched pieces of carpet: the artist replaces chess pieces with day-to-day objects used by a housewife. Penny Slinger's *Exorcism House* is a nightmare vision of scenes of abuse and violence. On a completely different scale, Joana Vasconcelos' *Teapot* recalls children's stories, taking its inspiration from the Mad Hatter's Tea Party in *Alice in Wonderland*.





PENNY SLINGER, *Exorcism House*, 1977.  
Wooden doll house, various objects  
and materials. 2'2" x 1'11" x 1'2".





PENNY SLINGER, *Exorcism House*, 1977.  
Wooden doll house, various objects  
and materials. 2'2" x 1'11" x 1'2".



Two notions intersect in the *Women House* exhibition: a gender (female) and a space (the domestic sphere). Architecture and public space have traditionally been male preserves, whereas domestic space has been that of women; this historic fact is not, however, inevitable, as the exhibition demonstrates. Is the "woman-house" a refuge or a prison, or can it become a space for creativity?

The exhibition and accompanying catalogue reflect the complexity of possible points of view on the subject, which are not only feminist but also poetic and nostalgic. Women artists turn the house inside out: a symbol of isolation becomes a symbol of the construction of identity, the intimate becomes political, private space becomes public space, and the body turns into a piece of architecture. According to different cultural contexts and generations of artists, the house becomes a body-house, a homeland-house, or even a world-house.

