

ART & PHILANTHROPY / AR

# Contemporary artists bring Fenton House to life

80 artists and designers are selling their work in an immersive exhibition

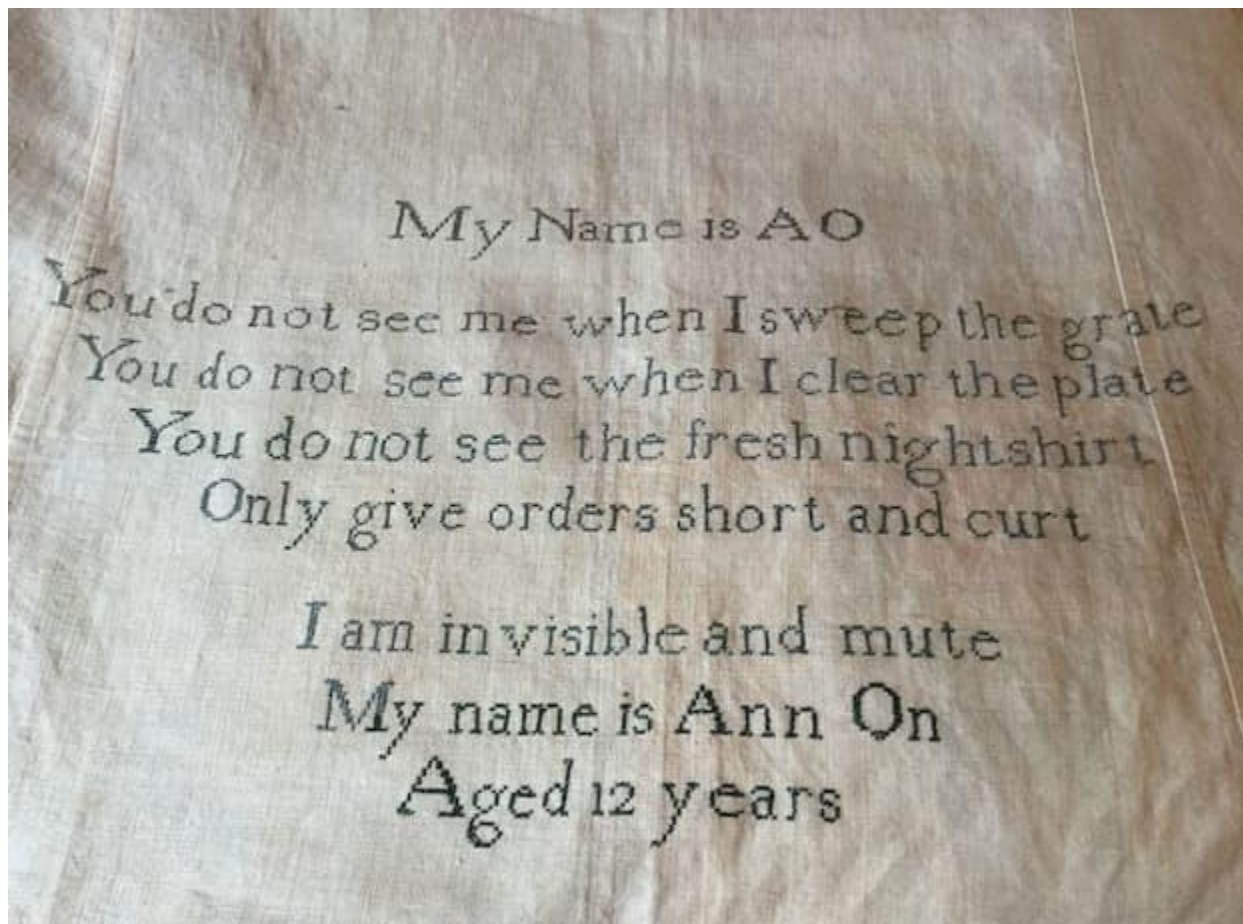
DECEMBER 03 2016 / NICOLE SWENGLEY



Leadbetter chairs by Polly Granville

## WHERE TO FIND

Imagine stepping into the furnished rooms of a merchant's house in Georgian London the moment the family that lives there steps out. That's just what the theatrical experience company Traces hopes visitors will do when it breathes life into Fenton House (December 3 to 23) with the work of 80 contemporary artists and designers, all of which is available to buy.



Annie's Apron by Diana Bliss

Fenton House is a National Trust property that sits in a winding lane in the oldest part of Hampstead, north London. It's filled with fine furniture, art and porcelain, and is home to the Benton Fletcher collection of early keyboard instruments. Now the house is being imaginatively brought to life by contemporary artists whose works convey the story of the Gee family, silk and linen merchants, who lived here in 1730.

The artists have taken a specific moment in the lives of the Gees, and visitors join them following unexpected tragedies that evoke a mysterious atmosphere in the house. "We have curated the work of more than 60 artists and designers, and commissioned 14 new works to reimagine the objects, stories and people here in the 1730s," says Donna Walker, creative director of Traces. "The result is a multisensory experience that traces the building's history through sights, sounds, smells, textures and tastes."



Vase from the Tresor Decouvert series by Amy Hughes. Image: Ester Segarra

Enter the still room and there hangs Annie's Apron – a silk-on-antique-linen design hand-stitched by Diana Bliss to resemble a Quaker sampler, which she envisions as an homage to the nameless young maids of the house. The dining room becomes a backdrop for an impressive earthstone lidded vase by **Amy Hughes** that references 17th- and 18th-century porcelain, along with her decorated, thumb-pressed High Table plates and platters. Also on show are **Polly Granville's** restored and reworked Leadbetter chairs upholstered in a Sonia Rykiel weave, whose velvet backs are digitally printed with tropical bird prints from the 1800s.



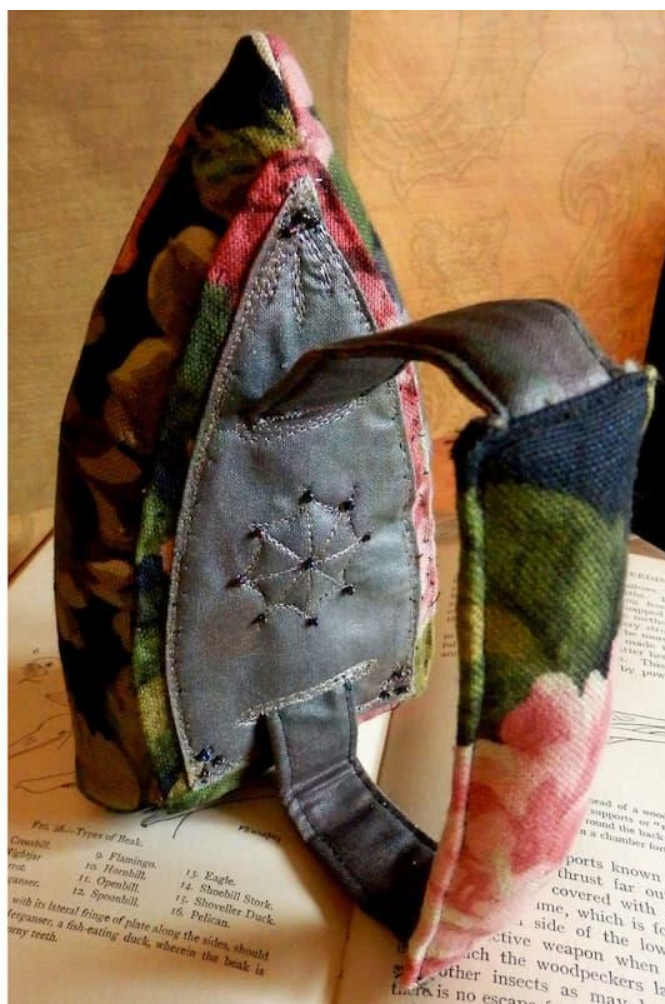
Blue Moon by Loraine Rutt

Many of the artists appear to move easily between past and present. Lithophanes – illuminated ceramics – were a 19th-century passion that Beth Lewis-Williams updates as porcelain lighting printed with romanticised landscapes such as a bygone view of Hampstead Heath. And Loraine Rutt’s porcelain globes in hand-turned wooden cases are based on 18th-century pocket globes but are mapped using contemporary satellite survey data. Furniture designer **Gareth Neal**, known for reappropriating traditional forms, has created the Block vessel, inspired by antique glass in the Wellcome Collection. And Thomas Swainston, who likes to reimagine past furniture styles and employ reused materials, has made the birch ply and brass Joshua desk, on show in the study.



Block vessels by Gareth Neal

**Textiles** play a key part in this exhibition. Augusta Akerman's specially commissioned, hand-painted silk scarves celebrate Fenton House and its furnishings; Modern Folk Embroidery imagines what a 1723 Quaker embroidered sampler, based on the character of Elizabeth Gee, might look like. Textile artist Corinne Young's hand-embroidered auricula pot plants, stitched tea set, flat iron and inkwell with quill pen joyously celebrate her craft, and Thomas von Nordheim's quilted silk house-coat is a historical tour de force.



Flat iron by Corinne Young

A well-curated, quietly thought-provoking display that's a creative antidote to the commercial Christmas high street.