



"July 6, 4:45 a.m.," from the series "Shinnecock" and part of the study "spacetime" by Hope Sandrow, was taken on the old Parrish property, subsequently the Cohu estate, or Gissa Bu, which is slated to become the Manors of Southampton.

Opinion

Recalling an American Dream

BY JESS FRÖST

Hope Sandrow's art installation "Recollecting an American Dream," currently on view at the Southampton Historical Museum on Meeting House Lane, is a great example of the ways in which artists can articulate social and political issues, creating an environment for both edification and beauty.

Throughout her impressive career, a reoccurring theme in Ms. Sandrow's work seems to be the investigation of endangered landscapes, both social and natural. The artist has been working in this vein for nearly 20 years, often using a museum as a place to display her "collections," be they images or objects. In this exhibit — composed of photographs, found objects, and artifacts — Ms. Sandrow has chosen to focus her keen sense of happenstance, time, and transience on an estate in the Shinnecock Hills called Gissa Bu ("mystery house," approximately, in Norwegian).

The initial event that set Ms. Sandrow on this path was a predawn chance encounter with a cockerel back in March of last year. This curious white rooster led Ms. Sandrow across Montauk Highway to her subsequent obsession, Gissa Bu, a 1930s Nordic-style lodge under threat of demolition. The house seemed to speak to Ms. Sandrow almost literally, with its unique Norwegian wood-carved architectural details, some, strangely enough, in the fowl form that led her there.

The discovery of this strange and beautiful structure incited the artist to research its history. The term "research" itself has a particularly academic tone, but in the hands of a visual artist, this process becomes a much more expressive exploration. Ms. Sandrow, who lives

in Manhattan and Southampton, has used her unique talent for visual association to call attention to the potential loss of a structure rich in local history. The eloquently ordered materials in the exhibit display the mysterious relationships she has uncovered for our consideration.

The history of the property begins with the Shinnecock Indian Nation's claim that the 13-acre estate on which Gissa Bu stands was the site of sacred Indian burials. The property's current owner, Robert Romeo, and the Shinnecock nation have spent the last six years seeking ways to preserve the estate, and although Southampton Town has managed to purchase some of the property, the parcel on which Gissa Bu stands is still under threat.

When the land was opened up for development after 1859, it fell into the hands of Samuel Parrish (who, coincidentally, at the time also owned the house in Southampton Village where the installation is now presented). Parrish sold the land to a World War I fighter pilot and aviator named LaMotte T. Cohu, who hired the Norwegian architect and artist Thorbjorn Basso to design the exceptional Gissa Bu in the style of a Norwegian mountain lodge.

The house itself is decorated throughout with animal-themed murals and carvings, and these curious embellishments are reproduced in several of Ms. Sandrow's images, as well as those of Mattie Edwards Hewitt. Ms. Hewitt, a renowned landscape photographer, was hired by the owners shortly after the building's completion in the 1930s.

The juxtaposition of Ms. Sandrow and Ms. Hewitt's images is not the before-

ter you might expect, though: Ms. Hewitt's lovely black-and-white images document the house's remarkable design, while Ms. Sandrow's large-scale photographs focus on specific details that draw parallels between past and present and articulate the mythology she has created around her discovery of the estate. One particularly striking image is a vertical panorama of the house's interior featuring Ms. Sandrow's cockerel muse at the window. The brilliantly moonlit sky outside is reflected in the half-moon pattern painted on the interior ceiling.

Equally invested in the property's preservation is Tom Edmonds, the director of the Southampton Historical Museum and Research Center. He urged Ms. Sandrow to produce this installation, in light of the imminent threat of the property's destruction. Ms. Sandrow carefully incorporates her contemporary works into the two galleries inside the Albert Rogers Mansion, an 1843 whaling captain's home that is the headquarters of the museum's complex of historic buildings.

The parlor gallery contains two black-and-white photographs, both unframed, but printed to fit the existing white molding so that the works could be better integrated into the parlor's architecture. The larger panoramic image features the white cockerel set in the acres of land that had been clear-cut just days before the artist discovered the property. This photo also captures an altar left by the Shinnecock nation, in which the moon is reflected in a clamshell filled with rainwater. Ms. Sandrow complements these images with the artifacts from the museum's collection — historical portraits of Native Americans and several groups of arrowheads — that signify the Shinnecocks' attachment to the property.

In the main gallery, where Ms. Sandrow presents both her own and Ms. Hewitt's images, furniture and objects taken from the museum's collection are used to present Ms. Sandrow's findings. Three vitrines are placed in a row, each displaying materials the artist has collected in her exploration of Gissa Bu. One case contains clods of earth containing bones found on the property — a particularly important gesture, in that the discovery of bones on a property is often cause for land preservation. Another contains a deflated plastic ball and a hat, as well as some roadside detritus. Perhaps the most poignant of these three is the vitrine containing wood chips that remained after the property was clear-cut. This case shows some condensation under the glass, conveying a sense of immediacy in the artist's efforts to preserve the estate.

To the same effect, the artist has filled the gallery's fireplace with interior panels from Gissa Bu, gathered just days before the show opened. This symbolism



"June 14, 5:18 a.m." by Hope Sandrow shows the main window in the living room of Gissa Bu, looking south toward Shinnecock Bay.

brought about a thought-provoking moment during a talk the artist gave at the opening on Jan. 20, when Ms. Sandrow impressed upon the audience that the building's artful interiors, which have remained mostly intact since the 1930s, are now in the early stages of demolition.

Ms. Sandrow has also included much printed matter for visitors to sift through. Among these is an announcement detailing an exhibit of artworks by Gissa Bu's architect, as well as several articles celebrating the Cohu's many cultural and social activities. Having since adopted the cockerel she met back in March (now named Shinnecock), Ms. Sandrow also presents a small pillow she stuffed with his molted feathers and those of the hens that keep him company.

One of the most exciting aspects of "Recollecting an American Dream" is being exposed to the artist's process and the strange signs that brought the work to fruition. Although it seems full of coincidental connections, Ms. Sandrow's careful decisions are what stand out.

Hope Sandrow may have been led here by a curious white bird, but she has gone to great lengths to take us on the journey with her.

Jess Frost lives in Springs. She has worked for Matthew Barney and Barbara Gladstone. Last spring she curated a show at the Silas Marder Gallery in Bridgehampton.



"April 18, 5:40 a.m." shows cars in rush-hour traffic on the northern boundary of what was the Gissa Bu property, at the intersection of Montauk Highway and Peconic Road in Southampton.