

## Encantamiento Inútil/Useless Infatuation Paloma Ayala and Genevieve Waller

*'One day I was walking, I heard a complaining  
And saw an old woman the picture of gloom  
She gazed at the mud on her doorstep ('twas raining)  
And this was her song as she wielded her broom*

*Oh, life is a toil and love is a trouble  
Beauty will fade and riches will flee  
Pleasures they dwindle and prices they double  
And nothing is as I would wish it to be.'*

(from "The Housewife's Lament," a traditional song)

We have heard about the plight of the housewife from books, music, and films and most of us have experienced the drudgery of housework ourselves. Dishes and laundry pile up, dust accumulates on furniture, floors get strewn with dirt and crumbs, and papers and possessions collect on tables and counters. Housekeeping is never ending—as soon as one job is done, another one appears or lies in wait; if we clean everything today, by tomorrow our daily routines of living will undo the tidiness we previously achieved. These everyday cycles of accumulation and ordering are what Paloma Ayala and Genevieve Waller draw on in their series of installations for *Encantamiento Inútil/Useless Infatuation*. Using objects like dishes, pillows, ironing boards, and sponges, Ayala and Waller create works that reference activities in the home like eating, sleeping, and housework. But they transpose these repetitive domestic tasks into obsessive arranging,

amassing, and remodeling—transformations that often hinder the usual purposes of the props of the home. Sponges are no longer available for scrubbing because they have been turned into a chandelier or a rug; dishes are stacked into rainbow towers and cannot be used for serving food; and pillows are made uncomfortable and absurd because they have been pierced with holes. Ayala and Waller address the satisfaction and frustration of household chores and implements by taking the vocabulary of housework—hanging laundry out to dry, setting up the ironing board, putting out platters for a meal—and remaking it or overdoing it. Instead of one ironing board they use five, and they position them at all angles such that ironing would be impossible. And rather than filling platters with food, they stack them into candy-colored towers. The materials are right but the placement and combinations of them are wrong for domestic work. They are rendered useless while simultaneously useful in new ways as building blocks for a mountain, a miniature monument, or an invented other.

Although Ayala and Waller’s attitudes toward the figure of the housewife were formed in very different environments—northern Mexico and the Midwestern U.S. respectively—they are both drawn to the cynicism and sympathy with which she is treated. Growing up in Monterrey with a mother who worked full-time outside the home, Ayala’s notion of the housewife was decidedly not the American, post-war stereotype. Since

moving to the U.S. in 2005, however, she has encountered and had to contend with myths of the American housewife, particularly in her life as a mother and wife. Waller's experience also falls outside the cultural construction, for her mother likewise was employed away from home and actually earned more than her husband, reversing the traditional gendered wage disparity. The role of the housewife and the power and gender dynamics, aesthetic significance, and identity-formation dimensions of labor in the home are now concerns for Ayala and Waller as adults and artists. By setting up their own domestic tableaux, they engage with the housekeeper's gratification in putting things in order. They also commiserate with and investigate her despair at the unceasing and often mindless labor required, and the possibilities she has for taking control of her environment in order to fashion it into an illogical, dissenting, and arresting vision.