

# IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK

**GINGER HENRY  
GEYER AND  
JENNIFER ROUSSEAU  
CUMBERBATCH**

Assembled in response to a bold invitation by the venerable Neill-Cochran House Museum in Austin, Texas, a contemporary art collaboration titled *If These Walls Could Talk* is in the works. The exhibition will feature a full-house installation of *trompe-l'oeil* sculptures highlighted by targeted live performances, which will run from January through April 2020. During this same time, UT Austin students will, for the first time, be researching the House's dependency (that's museum-speak for an out-building upon which the big house is dependent), built by slaves in 1856. What follows is a conversation between Ginger Geyer and Jennifer Cumberbatch. Both seminary graduates, Ginger is a sculptor, and Jennifer is an actor and pastor.



**GG:** The concept of a full-house immersion with my quixotic porcelain pieces surreptitiously placed among the room furnishings has long been a dream of mine. I've attempted this with studio open houses at my home and always hoped to do it in a bungalow as a fundraiser for a community desiring an art house. I'd never thought a historical southern mansion was even a possibility, but when NCHM Director Rowena Dasch gave me a tour one day and offered me an exhibition in the back room, before long we envisioned some seventy sculptures hidden in plain sight throughout the house. Then she mentioned the back structure, a small, two-story, rock house where there had once been a carriage house, a kitchen, a latrine, and a barn nearby. This inconspicuous rock house turns out to be the only extant slave dwelling in Austin and, along with the big house, they are the ninth and tenth oldest structures in the city.

**JC:** I grew up in a couple of houses of this vintage. When I was in elementary school, we lived in a two-story antebellum house in North

Carolina. It had massive white columns, a big porch, pedestal sinks, lots of built-in bookcases, and a coal-fueled furnace in the basement. There was also a crystal chandelier that I almost shattered while practicing my jumps for cheerleading! We moved to Cincinnati into a three-story Victorian home with oak floors, a fireplace in every room, and a mahogany banister that curved into a marble floor foyer. There was a Romeo and Juliet balcony off my bedroom, and the bathroom had an ornate claw-foot tub. In short, I have always been drawn to the grandeur of older homes.

The Neill-Cochran House reminds me of these homes. So, my entry point into the inception of *If These Walls Could Talk* was inverted per the usual, focused on the dependency and its inner life, rather than the *big house*.

**GG:** Well, my childhood home was a small mid-century modern American Dream House; then we too moved into a colonial house. I've just learned that my beloved hometown in Arkansas was probably a sundown town. Growing up in such a homogenous place, I've taken a shamefully slow path to "wokeness." I may start a club for Guilty White Ladies.

LEFT Neill-Cochran House Museum, Austin Texas, front porch

ABOVE Ginger Henry Geyer, *Topsy-Turvy*, 2019, glazed porcelain, 4.5 x 14 x 9 inches. Adaptations from Harriet Powers's two *Bible Quilts*, key images of *Cain Killing Abel*, and *Moses with the Serpent*.

**JC:** Ha! Your spiritual and artistic honing, alongside a big dose of curiosity and humility, has led you to explore the impact of white privilege and the dynamics inherent to the experience of historically marginalized people of color. So, your long-time dream of wanting to house your art in a home setting became infused with ideas about house and home and the *oikos* thereof—the curious intersection of the two.

**GG:** Explain the concept of *oikos*?

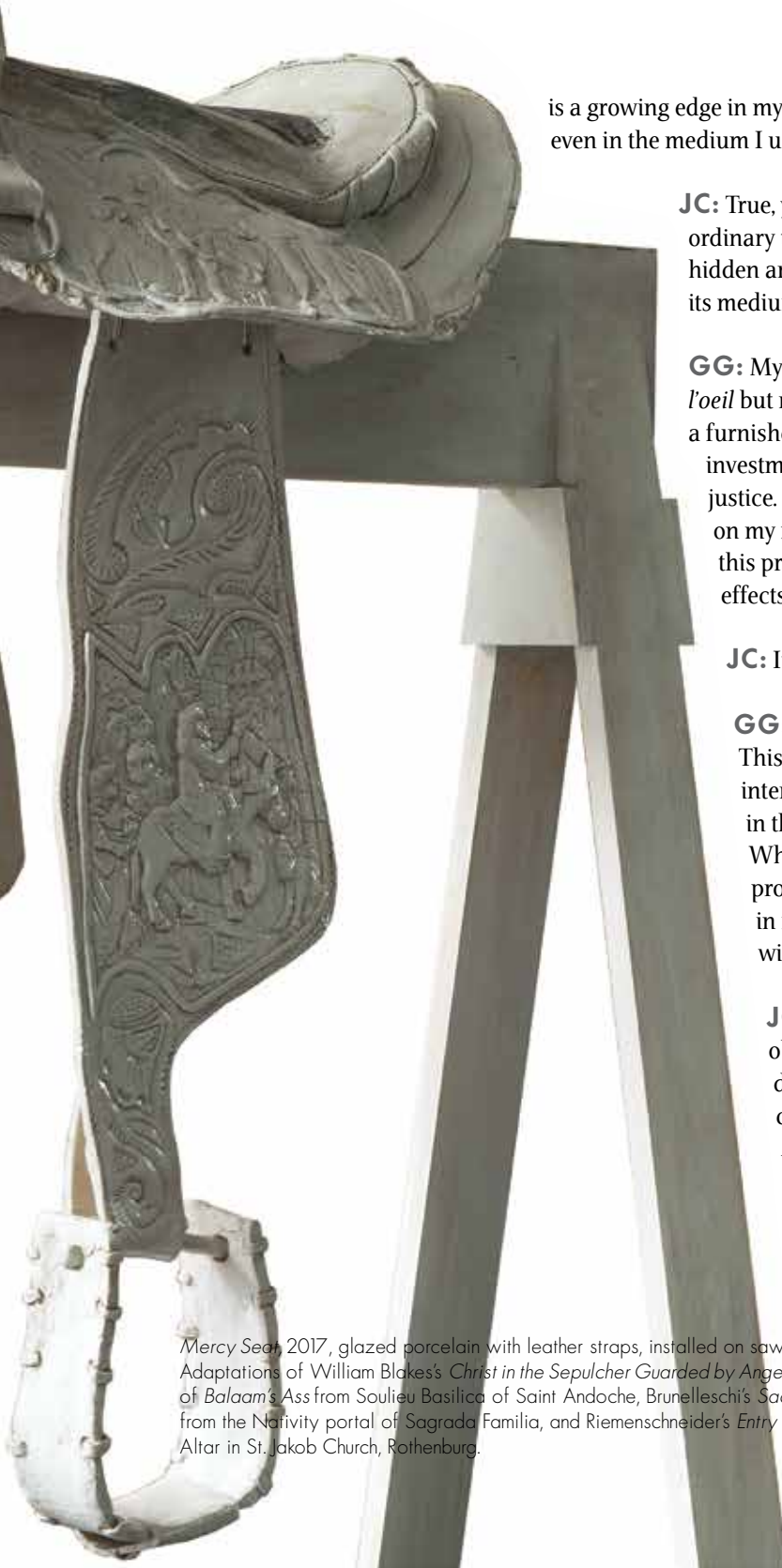
**JC:** It's the Greek term for a set of rules governing the household in ancient times—the rules that dictated the interactions of masters, mistresses, and slaves. *Oikos* refers to three related but distinct concepts: the family, the family's property, and the house. This encompassed the head of the *oikos*, along with his immediate family and his slaves. From the beginning, my imagination swelled with stories about the inner life of the slaves, servants, and white occupants and their intimate intersections among the rooms of the house.

**GG:** This project keeps evolving—the more history we uncover, the more we sharpen each other's perspective. It seems so incompatible to have my quirky art in this stately home, a monument to privilege, and predicated on the sale of five enslaved human beings. As Gaston Bachelard said in *The Poetics of Space*, “everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate.”

**JC:** Yes, incongruities and paradoxes abound—for instance, me a black woman doing a show in a house owned by the Texas chapter of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America. Really?

**GG:** The concept of white fragility—the defensiveness of white people when challenged to engage in cross-racial dialogue—





is a growing edge in my work. And fragility has resonance even in the medium I use, this persnickety porcelain.

**JC:** True, your exploration of domesticity, ordinary time, real and fake, the seen and hidden are embodied both in your art *and* its medium.

**GG:** My sculptures are not quite *trompe l'oeil* but realistic enough to be disguised in a furnished room. Below the surface is an investment of art history, theology, and justice. Clay's fragility provides a check on my need to control results. Much like this project, we never know the ultimate effects of what we send out there.

**JC:** It's a faith venture.

**GG:** Yes, and a bit of foolhardiness. This exhibition is a celebration of the intersection of the sacred and secular in the heart of this house and home. What is at first glance trivial becomes profound. The majority of the pieces in my *Chlora's Dream House* book will be in this show.

**JC:** I know Chlora, your 11-year-old alter ego. And I've had fun developing her equally precocious running buddy, an African American 11-year-old, Ruby Virginia. Ruby is the fictional niece of Eddie Mae, the real housekeeper of the Neill Cochran House for 32 years.

*Mercy Seat*, 2017, glazed porcelain with leather straps, installed on sawhorse: 43 x 29 x 21 inches. Adaptations of William Blake's *Christ in the Sepulcher Guarded by Angels*, French Romanesque capital carving of *Balaam's Ass* from Soulieu Basilica of Saint Andoche, Brunelleschi's *Sacrifice of Isaac*, Gaudi's *Flight into Egypt* from the Nativity portal of Sagrada Familia, and Riemenschneider's *Entry into Jerusalem* from the Holy Blood Altar in St. Jakob Church, Rothenburg.



Eddie Mae showed up in our research of the house, and it turns out she lived on the same street where my daughter now lives.

**GG:** Eddie Mae wagged a heavy vacuum cleaner up and down the staircase. I've created a porcelain vacuum cleaner that will sit on an Oriental rug in the parlor, as if Eddie Mae just stepped away for a minute.

**JC:** *If These Walls Could Talk* and its focus on the hidden and the seen, main characters and supporting cast, is all about the God who sees and God's redemptive work that is inclusive; there are no bit

players, and everyone in the *oikos* is favored—grace-filled and seen.

**GG:** It is kind of an upstairs/downstairs tale, but with a twist. What you first see when you walk into the entryway is the curving stairway. And beside it stands a hat rack.

**JC:** . . . holding Aretha Franklin's grandly bowed hat that she wore to President Obama's inauguration. That porcelain hat of yours evokes widespread love for The Queen of Soul. I love that the undercarriage of the bow contains your rendition of Faith Ringgold's *Mama*

*Can Sing*. And that her *Daddy Can Blow* is hidden inside. This porcelain hat nestled in the bosom of the antebellum house reminds us of the Negro spiritual songs nestled in the bosom of the enslaved, laden with the hope of freedom and of Aretha belting out her soulful rendition of *My Country, 'Tis of Thee* on the front steps of the United States Capitol Building, when Barack Hussien Obama, a Black man, was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States.

**GG:** I titled that hat *Make America Sing Again*.



**JC:** It evokes Paul Laurence Dunbar's *When Malindy Sings*.

**GG:** Which you plan to perform right there in the entryway. There's a long velvet antique couch for visitors right beside the hat rack. I'm going to put four cushions on it, my *Couch Potatoes, Not . . .* all of potato-associated people who were anything but slouches: children of the Irish, hard-working harvesters, Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*, and George Washington Carver, the black botanist renowned for his experiments with peanuts and sweet-potatoes.

**JC:** Yes, he was credited with saving the Southern agricultural economy by suggesting crop rotation, using peanuts to replenish the soil depleted by cotton. Oh, and, by the way, I do make a mean sweet-potato torte!

**GG:** Yes, you have elevated that humble pie to a fine art. We hope to have a big pie party at the house with a group called "Peace Through Pie." And coffee to go with a coffee pot I'm making for Martin Luther King, Jr. It'll have Moses' burning bush on it . . .

**JC:** . . . to exemplify MLK's midnight call from God to press on with the Civil Rights movement. We will put that coffee pot on an old kitchen table where stories can be collected. I hope diverse people will sit down and talk about their own experiences with race and wrestle with the current resurgence of nationalism and the misguided sense of supremacy of one group of people over another.

**GG:** My black and white *Polarities* piece, two paint cans with a colorful Jackson Pollock splashed in between, is a fitting springboard

LEFT *Make America Sing Again*, 2018, glazed porcelain with mother of pearl and white gold, 9 x 11 x 9.5 inches. Adaptation of Faith Ringgold's *Mama Can Sing & Papa Can Blow*.

ABOVE *Second Amendment Meets Second Commandment*, 2019, glazed porcelain with gold, installed on wooden stand: 14 x 19 x 14 inches. Adaptation of Gustave Dore's *Moses Breaking the Tables of the Law*.



GEYER: IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK

for this discussion. I hope to install these paint cans in the dependency, where the enslaved construction workers probably took a break, where we imagine slaves lived and domestic servants took respite too. My big old scarecrow may be re-appropriated into a Jim Crow omen there. Other items used by servants will be in that room, which contains a set kettle—a large built-in vessel heated by fire. The hot water was used daily for laundry and bathing so that room must have been a sweat box. But today it'd also be a great place for discussion groups to meet.

**JC:** That rock house in particular harbors specters of America's divided past, forcing the the audience to see the hidden life of this antebellum setting. It is a past that challenges the high ideals of American democracy which have been taken for granted. *If These Walls Could Talk* addresses such a time as this, when ideas once thought buried or eradicated, have been exhumed.

I am feverishly researching the bill of sales of slaves, archives, census, etc. to find the names of at least one of the slaves in this drama. I want to honor each one by calling out their names and adding their story to the stories of the other named occupants of the house.

**GG:** In one upstairs room, they've peeled back the wall to show the construction techniques used by those slaves. Oh, if *those* walls could talk. This place is much more than a backdrop for my sculpture and your sketches. Adjacent to that room are three bedrooms—in the master's, I'll place a room service tray with breakfast and a newspaper. And a shoe-shine kit called *Rise and Shine*. That's where you'll perform your historic-fiction monologue *The Shoeshine Man*—or maybe upstairs in the dependency bedroom. I call it the upper room—fitting because *Rise and Shine* also holds my rendition of the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop. Lesser quality materials received the same quality of craftsmanship in the upper room as

in the big house. I imagine the artistry of quilt-making and braiding was on display there, so in the upper room my old *Patchwork Hospitality* quilt will be on the bed and there may be a rag rug of porcelain, with red-lining woven into it. And toys—including the Topsy-Turvy doll I just finished.

**JC:** That's an interesting piece. I wondered whether these dolls originated with the story of the slave girl, Topsy in abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These are the rag dolls with one body and two heads, one black and one white?

**GG:** Doll historians speculate that the two heads were a ruse, to allow enslaved little black girls to play with Black dolls that resembled themselves, all the while training them to grow up and take care of White babies. Forbidden to play with black dolls, if the mistress interrupted, they could flip the skirt to hide the black doll and show the white head.





**JR:** Talk about the seen and the hidden in the house and home! My family narrative indicates the possible presence of a story similar to Hagar's, wherein our African ancestral gene pool was forced to accommodate some European influx. The preacher/pastor in me sees the connection between the Egyptian slave Hagar and those little girls with their dolls, who grew up to bear or take care of their master's children. Hagar's story is one where the ostensible main characters imposed their will on that of the extras, the props, the slaves in their grand narrative, to manifest the master's and mistress's own

desire. The tricky thing about this perspective is that one could stray to the assumption that God is complicit in this human abuse of power and influence. But God reveals God's self to Hagar, a slave girl, as *The God Who Sees*. God's response to Hagar's dilemma is the assurance that she and her son Ishmael, along with Abraham and Sarah, are woven into God's great purpose for redemption. That's fascinating and gratifying to me, the descendant of slaves. The slave girl, property of the favored, and pawn in their misguided attempts to move the hand of God on their behalf, gets a personal revelation of who God is. God

sees her powerless situation and then opens her eyes to see God's provision—a well full of water. Being seen and heard is a basic human need. We must uncover the hidden, make it seen, because in doing so we more clearly see who we are and who we can become.

**GG:** I've been thinking about making a Lincoln Log cabin, a porcelain dollhouse. Maybe it'll be a house for Hagar.

**JC:** A Lincoln Log cabin for a slave girl? Nice double entendre. Ultimately, the incarnation as revealed in Jesus is the climax of God's promise to both the master and the slave,



as in Jesus all nations and tribes are seen and provided for by a loving inclusive God. Yes, truly the Church universal is the household—house and home—of the living God... now I'm tempted to preach.

**GG:** Go ahead! Maybe I'll also add a water bucket for Hagar. God showing Hagar the well connects us to Jesus and the woman at the well. There had to be a well out back of the Neill-Cochran house, but it is long gone.

**JC:** Actually, there were two cisterns, one still in residence underneath the house.

**GG:** I'll put Hagar's bucket next to the set kettle in the dependency. It is fun how your prep for preaching inspires me to connect my art with the house. Back in the big house, we'll install the family Bible on a fine desk in the French parlor. The Presbyterian pastor, Rev. Rose, who once lived there might get a sermon out of that.

**JC:** In my mind's eye, I can see both Rev. Rose and Rev. Jacob Fontaine preaching. Fontaine lived only two blocks away. He left the all-white Baptist congregation, as Black folks were relegated to the balcony, and formed three Black congregations plus the St. John Regular Baptist Association of Texas, which just celebrated its 152nd year!

**GG:** Inclusion and redemption, at the heart of the gospel, woven into my art and your performances. My

LEFT *Bodegon for Frito Pie*, 2017, glazed porcelain with white gold, installed 8 x 30 x 30 inches. Adaptations of *Virgin of Guadalupe* by Miguel Cabrera, *Dance of Resurrection—the Mayan god of Maize*, and *Montezuma* attributed to Antonio Rodriguez.  
 ABOVE *Polarities*, 2016, glazed porcelain, installed 9.75 x 17 x 36 inches. Adaptations of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*, Piero della Francesca's *Victory of Constantine over Maxentius*, and 14th c. manuscript *History of the Tatars, The Battle of Homs*.

Chlora character has always addressed the care for the least among us, and how we entitled folks so often garble that up with our good intentions—or, worse yet, ignore it altogether.

**GG:** Maybe it's time we expose some stereotypes and clichés and allow people to see them for what they are, reconsider, and repent. What about my ensemble of Frito pie on the antebellum dining table, replete with the Virgin of Guadalupe and a fondue pot melt-down of a Velveeta Statue of Liberty?

**JC:** That's an incredible piece and a poignant commentary on xenophobia. I think it shows the exuberant abundance of Latinx or Hispanic influence, but it doesn't pound you over the head with it. Brain science confirms that the human brain doesn't like to be challenged head on.

**GG:** I have a fear monger on a box of Alphabits, spooning in his hate, word by word. But in the accompanying cereal bowl, letters floating in the milk spell "Fear Not."

52



**JC:** “Fear Not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy.”

**GG:** For sure. *Beats All I Ever Saw*.

**JC:** Appropriate title for your mixer and its hot pink red velvet cake batter. The makers of Adam’s extract and food coloring started their business right across the street from Neill-Cochran House. Fascinating neighborhood, just a line of peach trees separated it from Wheatville, a neighborhood founded and named after James Wheat, a former slave. It was one of the first freedmen communities west of the Mississippi.

**GG:** If we find an underwriter, we’ll have a bus tour of the area, pointing out what remains of the freedmen communities, and ending up at the NC house. We’ll have shoebox lunches on the bus.

**JC:** The shoeboxes are designed to be a souvenir of the exhibit and evoke the memory of how Black folks, forbidden to eat in restaurants during the Jim Crow era, packed sumptuous meals for their travel below the Mason Dixon Line.

We may dine on my Cumberbatch’s sweet tater torte at the end, during my culminating performance on the front porch. It’ll be right there between those imposing twenty-six-foot Grecian columns. I am working up *The Ghost of Robert E. Lee*, a play based on Mary Cochran Bohls’s admission that Black people claimed to have seen the ghost of the general

on the balcony of the house at night. The ghost would ride his white horse up the stairs and right out there.

**GG:** And my white porcelain saddle would represent this—although the museum staff vehemently insists this is a myth. It is a fact that the house was a hospital for Union soldiers, at the time called federal soldiers, escorted into town by General Custer. Some of their bodies have been found buried on the property. I’m working on a new piece that’ll evoke General Custer—the most famous visitor to the house. I’m pretending he left a proper calling card.

**JC:** Custer received the white flag of surrender from the emissary of Lee at Appomattox and was promptly assigned to Austin to keep the peace. Texas history embodies so much of America’s original sins: Indian/Native American genocide, Black slavery, Mexican discrimination. Your family Bible with a hollowed-out space for a gun will be a good conversation starter around this dubious legacy.

**GG:** It is titled *Second Amendment Meets the Second Commandment*. The misuse of Scriptures through the ages to justify atrocities and racism has always bugged me. But Scripture rightly used is transformational. Jesus’ words in Lincoln’s speech, resonate today, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

**JC:** I imagine the NC house faced that dilemma. Its architecture and homelife represents the themes that accompany the American narrative. The crafted glass door and European classically appointed parlors and dining rooms are reflective of nineteenth-century bourgeoisie and their social status. On this Greek Revivalist stage, the American themes of Texas independence, individualism,

capitalism, democracy, the ascendance of the middle class, the pioneer spirit, the ideas of the confederacy, reconstruction, the industrial revolution, and modernity all play out.

**GG:** This house echoes so many stories illustrated in my art. Its first occupants were blind students, and it was the original Texas School for the Blind. I have porcelain binoculars for that. And its hospital legacy fits the narrative of my Good Samaritan Dr. Kit—Yankees and Rebels in the same house. Love your enemy, and pass the Band-Aids.

The house metaphor is so rich. Lots of contemporary artists have dealt with it, most notably Rachael Whiteread, Du Ho Suh, Louise Bourgeois, Andrea Zittel, Mike Kelly, and Theaster Gates. And all the classics we studied in seminary, especially





St. Teresa of Ávila's *Interior Castle*, used houses and rooms to symbolize spiritual development, the growth of the soul.

**JC:** "Wisdom has built her house." "In my father's house there are many mansions," our bodies being the temple of the Holy Spirit, a dwelling place, a home where God and Jesus share fellowship with us around the supper table. We become Bethel—the House of God.

**GG:** I like the concept of house as a memory palace—that is a mnemonic trick used since ancient times. Memories one wishes to recall are transformed into objects and placed in a sequence of rooms, with an imaginative walk-through, commenting on what is encountered.

**JC:** A memory palace is not unlike what we are creating here, but how many people go to the trouble of outfitting an entire house with porcelain replicas?

**GG:** Well, my white privilege has allowed me to do that.

**JC:** White fragility, beware! Yep, the human spirit is fragile as porcelain.

**GG:** Well, if something breaks, we can always have Chlora and Ruby Virginia make shard mosaics. They're very redemptive, you know.

NOTE: *If These Walls Could Talk* is a labor of love, hosted by the Neill-Cochran House Museum and underwritten by the artists. Anybody inclined to support this effort can make a tax-deductible donation through the artists' umbrella sponsor, *Women and Their Work*, a non-profit art gallery. Go to [GingerGeyer.com](http://GingerGeyer.com) for a link.

LEFT *Leap Frogging out of the Melting Pot*, 2017, glazed porcelain with white gold, installed 12 x 17 x 17 inches. Adaptations of Jasper Johns's *Ventriloquist*, the *Statue of Liberty*, *Crouching Frogs*, *Mixtec*.  
 ABOVE *Presence is Fire*, 2011, glazed porcelain, installed 17 x 27 x 19 inches. Inspired by Rene Magritte's *Time Transfixed*, with adaptations of two cantors from tomb sculptures of *Mourners from the Court of Burgundy*, and *Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace*, from the Catacombs of Priscilla.