

Eileen Gray's Haunted House

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Paulette Phillips' Touché

Is there anybody there, asks a traveller, passing through the E.1027 door... The odd name belongs to a key Modernist house at Cap Martin, France, designed by Eileen Gray, and the traveller is the Canadian artist Paulette Phillips. In her current show *Shaky Legs* at Danielle Arnaud's gallery, she explores not just the house, but a strange drama that played out there with three of Modernism's greatest minds – Gray, her lover Jean Badovici, and Le Corbusier. She feels the house is haunted, and she is searching for ghosts.

Phillips is an associate professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design and her art has explored architecture elsewhere – *Shaky Legs*, for example, includes an animated CGI of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International with a soundtrack of Toronto street voices and stirring Soviet-style music. But the show is really about E.1027, and to understand her interest in it, it is better to know its history.

Irish-born aristocratic Eileen Gray was a Modernist furniture designer who lived and worked in Paris from 1912. In 1925, she and her lover Badovici, influential editor of the *avante-garde l'Architecture Vivante*, found the spot near Monte Carlo to build their summer house. She laughed at his suggestion that she design it, but she took up the challenge. The result was a rectilinear Modernist masterpiece shaped by the sea below it. A spacious living room with full-height windows and a long balcony hung above the sea like a boat deck, supported by piloti. Innovations included an internal spiral staircase and an external one to the balcony. Gray designed every aspect of the furniture and décor, including the iconic ocean-liner-inspired Transat chair, and created inscriptions like 'Entrez Lentement' and 'Défense d'rrire' which suggest the spirit of retreat within, if not more. The name E.1027 encodes her and Badovici's initials.

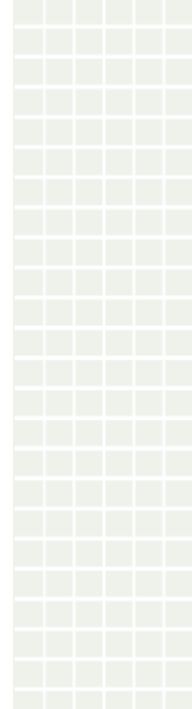
Le Corbusier stayed, but his matey rapport with Badovici seemed to have sidelined Gray. She abandoned E.1027 to Badovici in 1932 to design her own house and return to intimate female friends in Paris (where she died in 1976). But Le Corbusier could not stay away, and created murals around the house in 1938–40. There are seven colourful abstractions and a Picasso-esque drawing he called *Graffiti at Cap Martin*. Gray considered these acts of vandalism and urged their removal, but they remained. Long after Badovici's death in 1956, a new owner, Peter Kägi, flogged off her furniture, and in 1986, was murdered there, by the gardener. The house was abandoned, and squatters left their mark.



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The Rubber House: Phillips' silicone cast of the Eileen Gray house

Her extraordinary half-hour film, *Shell*, made in 2008, explores forensically the abandonment and decay of E.1027. Here is a real *Life After People* but with something else. Cracks in the walls and the rust in the pipes and ironwork take on meaning – Phillips suggests that the house is ‘crumbling as a result of two discordant energies’. And perhaps the ghost of Le Corbusier is out there, in the crashing of the waves directly below, where he died swimming in 1965. Perhaps even Kāgi’s spirit drifts in the limbo of lush plants growing around the house.

Phillips represents the key discord in *Touché*, a work mounted on a plinth in which a book on Le Corbusier floats above one on Gray by magnetic repulsion, both constrained in a cage. But she also captures something of happier days in three prints, which montage elements from the house, and this year, she has modelled E.1027 in silicone. *The Rubber House* seems almost like a small Rachel Whiteread cast, but it’s a positive exterior rather than a negative interior. Whiteread, she says, is ‘working with scale and monumentality, I’m working with materiality’. Her model is soft, so that the exterior staircase bends, like a ‘shaky leg’. Phillips expands on this: ‘Materials have agency and this wiggly sculpture suggests performativity... I am suggesting through the pliability of the material I used that this house is flexible, malleable and not a rigid form.’

Did Phillips find her ghosts? Le Corbusier’s may linger in the social control of sink estates across the globe, but *Shaky Legs* exposes another dark side to his architectural genius- jealousy. No matter that Gray opposed Le Corbusier’s idea of a house as a machine for living, he was so obsessed by E.1027 that he seemed to be trying to appropriate it. His murals defied her and stole the visitor’s attention from the purity of her design. He trumpeted them as ‘an immense transformation, a spiritual value introduced throughout’ and he wanted to have the house so that they remained as part of his protected legacy. He built his celebrated Cabanon shed nearby in 1952, and even designed a two-storey hostel, built later above it, as if to dominate it.

France has since undertaken E.1027’s restoration, preserving Gray’s and Le Corbusier’s legacy there. Phillips reminds us that architecture should be more than form, function and style – it is a play of mind to create space for life, exactly Gray’s ethos. And as an artist, she expresses something a historian could not – that sometimes, drama can make design a repository for lost spirits.

Shaky Legs is viewable by appointment 2-6pm Friday-Sunday until 25th April at Danielle Arnaud, 123 Kennington Road, London SE11 6SF

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	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
8	9	10	11	12	13	14		
15	16	17	18	19	20	21		
22	23	24	25	26	27	28		
29	30	31	1	2	3	4		

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