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Erika DeFreitas, like a conjuring (bringing water back to Bradley), The Anchorage, Bradley Museums, Mississauga

The Anchorage, Bradley Museums

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Exhibition view, *like a conjuring (bringing water back to Bradley)*, 2017. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid

**Erika DeFreitas, *like a conjuring (bringing water back to Bradley)*
The Anchorage, Bradley Museums, Mississauga
May 3 to August 20, 2017**

Historic houses are not without flaw. Staging history as static and told from the perspective of a privileged few seems an antiquated approach, to say the very least, in 2017. Promisingly, several house museums in Canada and internationally have been working toward more critically expanding their programming by incorporating contemporary-art projects into their historic sites. Among these is the Mississauga-based Bradley Museum. As part of its broader strategy of redress, the museum has invited several artists to interrupt the interpretive space over the next few years. The complex that is the Bradley Museum comprises four buildings, including The Anchorage, a cottage from the early

nineteenth century, and the Bradley House, a 1830s farmhouse named after the early Loyalist settlers who built and lived in it. Toronto-based Erika DeFreitas's latest project, *like a conjuring (bringing water back to Bradley)*, occupies two formal galleries in The Anchorage and aptly placed objects, audio, and images in the Bradley House.

DeFreitas's exhibition, as the title suggests, focuses on returning water to the Bradley House, which was originally located on a cliff with a view to Lake Ontario. (The house was moved to its current location in 1967.) Mismatched glasses filled with water and placed on a period-appropriate table take a central position in one of two formal gallery spaces in The Anchorage. Sharing this small space are images that intimate the artist's process of researching the area and the house itself. Here, we see DeFreitas's hands pointing at a map, mending fabric, and attending to what appear to be stones smoothed over by water. These very same objects are re-presented in the Bradley House. Planted in corners, on desktops, and in other stealthy spots, various maps, books, images, water glasses, rock collections, and plaster hands hide from us in plain sight.

The most compelling part of the project, arguably, is a billowing installation of a magnified photograph of one of the cobalt blankets in the museum's collection. Paired with a video of plaster casts of the artist's hands being dipped into blue dye, this gesture points to the Bradley family's history of owning indigo and tobacco plantations in Savannah, Georgia. DeFreitas's reference to water also very much links the house to its colonial roots. Water is, as we know, the vast and networked transporter of enslaved bodies. Bringing water back to the Bradley House runs much deeper than disclosing the house's relocation and the construction of history that takes place within house museums. This water is also made to speak for the silenced. The same might be said for the blue dye, which allows for a more critical entry into the lives of the former residents of the house, rather than the purely celebratory tone extolled by many historic spaces.

like a conjuring emphasizes that historic spaces are often materially filled with a single narrative – one that outwardly disregards colonialism. I do wonder, though, if this project is too indirect an acknowledgement of this issue to truly unsettle the historic house. But maybe avoiding being loud and overt is entirely the point. Set adrift somewhere between past and present, DeFreitas's installation whispers of histories excluded from the larger heritage project. The installation is so subtle that it is perhaps less of an intervention and more of a haunting. DeFreitas lets loose the imperialist spectres and colonial ghosts that linger in our places of history. For some visitors it might be disquieting – even uncomfortable – to walk among the dead and the damaging legacies that they leave behind, especially within a neatly packaged house museum. For this reason exactly, I hope that more house museums will invoke DeFreitas's form of conjuring and grant that this kind of discomfort is productive, necessary, and overdue.

Captions

Images 1 to 6: Erika DeFreitas, *like a conjuring (bringing water back to Bradley)*, exhibition view, The Anchorage, Bradley Museums, Mississauga, 2017. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

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