

## EXHIBIT REVIEW

**“House of Eternal Return,” Meow Wolf Art Center, Santa Fe**PETER LINETT 

How perfect a name is Meow Wolf? It’s fun in the mouth but immediately off-kilter, unexpected: not Meow *Woof*; noises cats and dogs make, but a leap from the domestic to the wild, the childlike to the sublime. It has, implicitly, teeth. It might be the name of an indie rock band or, as it turns out, an artist collective that works with technology to create immersive, interactive installations that resist categorization. The last thing it sounds like is the name of a museum.

And it isn’t a museum, though it has a great deal to say about museums if we’re willing to listen. Meow Wolf was formed in 2008 in Santa Fe, where its first permanent installation, *House of Eternal Return*, opened in early 2016 in a former bowling alley with support from *Game of Thrones* author and local celebrity George R.R. Martin. Meow Wolf has become so popular and such a nexus of interdisciplinary creative practice, arts entrepreneurship, the maker movement, musical performance, hanging out with friends, economic development and placemaking, and yes, even education programs, that the parallels with what museums say they’re trying to achieve (but mostly aren’t) are unavoidable.

For the first few months, part of the fun for Santa Feans was trying to describe Meow Wolf to people who hadn’t yet experienced it themselves. (There appear to be few such people left.) That challenge was soon taken up by writers from around the U.S. and abroad, writing in travel sections, art-world publications, technology

and culture sites, and general outlets like NPR, the *New York Times*, and the *Telegraph* (UK). They reach for mash-up analogies that sound like a Hollywood pitch meeting gone haywire: “It’s something like *Sleep No More* meets the Winchester Mystery House meets *Welcome to Night Vale*, with a dash of Disney World and a bit of Burning Man thrown in there,” wrote Ben Davis on Artnet (2016), alluding to categories as varied as immersive theater, historic house tours, fictional podcasts, and counterculture arts festivals. Yet all of those comparisons are apt, and indeed a towering, retro sheet-metal robot from Burning Man stands in the Meow Wolf parking lot, a mascot for the aesthetic inside. One could also mention the locked-room social gaming trend; social-practice and site-specific arts experiences; and especially the museum field’s own longstanding exceptions-that-prove-the-rule, the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles and the City Museum in St. Louis. (In late 2015, when I took a hardhat tour of the then-unfinished space with Meow Wolf founder Vince Kadlubek, he cited both Punchdrunk Theatre Company, which produced *Sleep No More*, and the City Museum as conceptual progenitors of *House of Eternal Return*.)

The category confusions are intentional, of course; *House of Eternal Return* is the product of, and in some ways is thematically *about*, rummaging among the found objects of culture and banging together something destabilizingly,

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**Figure 1.** Visitors on the catwalk near the central atrium of the installation. Photo: Courtesy of the author. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

grin-inducingly new. It models for us the art of synthesis, of adaptive reuse, a key component of all creativity (something at which the City Museum also excels). Yet one gets the sense that the artists and technologists involved aren't much interested in cultural categories in the first place. They're "post-" all that, doing their thing and letting the rest of us struggle out of those rigid, twentieth-century frames and catch up.

After waiting outdoors in a line that often extends the length of the building, then paying in a drab lobby and walking down a narrow hallway, you enter *House of Eternal Return* through a door that deposits you in front of a two-story, hyper-realistic Victorian house. The house's porchlight glows warmly in the (fictional) night and your fellow visitors are visible

through the windows on both stories, exploring the rooms. You enter and join them, struck first by the normalcy and specificity of it all: the knick-knacks and framed photos, throw blankets, clutter of papers, and televisions left on tell you this is a house you've been in before, inhabited by people like you. But the familiarity rapidly gives way to oddity and absence (and after all, you've entered knowing that there's a mystery to be solved): *What happened to the inhabitants, the Selig family?* On one of the televisions, a cheerful Lucius Selig is pitching something called Portals Bermuda and talking about the "power of positive mechanics." Notebooks contain cryptic jottings. Upstairs, in the bedrooms and bathroom, the familiarity and the estrangement



**Figure 2.** In the bedroom, visitors reading a diary for clues. Photo: Courtesy of the author. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

(the meow and the wolf) only deepen—literally so in the case of the Selig’s toilet, where if you peer down into the bowl you’ll see a boy floating in blackness far below. In one of the kids’ bedrooms, a perfectly real clock-radio runs manic, nonsensical numbers. It’s oddly intimate to watch your fellow visitors pulling back the children’s sheets and blankets, rummaging through their dresser drawers, and flopping on one of their beds to read a diary—all in a search for understanding, for the story behind the mystery.

But the house is only the beginning, and the mystery turns out to be merely the hook on which Meow Wolf has hung a much more intuitive, hugely creative sensory-participatory

experience. Open the refrigerator in the kitchen, crawl into the living room fireplace (shades of Harry Potter), or squeeze into one of the bedroom closets and you find yourself passing into another world—or rather, worlds plural that loop unpredictably and mazelike into one another. In these worlds, the tools of spatial design, installation art, interactivity, media, color and light, sound and music are used to create what I can only call a psychedelic, steam-punk *Gesamtkunstwerk* for all ages. (See, I’ve reached for mashups myself.) In one set of chambers, you walk into the arched skeleton of some beast’s ribcage and join others playing tunes on them with large percussion mallets; the “bones” of plaster and plastic respond with



**Figure 3.** Entering a passageway in the fireplace. Photo: Courtesy of the author. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

deep-toned sounds and colors, like some mammalian xylophone. Elsewhere, you make your way through a black-and-white, geometric kitchen of extreme angles, half M.C. Escher and half *Phantom Tollbooth*. You pass posters and billboards advertising things you can't identify, with prices in some futuristic or alien currency. A neon sign has melted to the point where the letters are unreadable, but somehow it's still shining brightly, advertising without a referent. A full-size, hollowed-out school bus stands on end, its lights still on and people resting in its belly, visible on the level below you through its cloudy windshield. In what feels like the center of the labyrinth, an atrium of sorts offers hillocks of strange, shaggy, and spongy materials. Is it inviting you to lounge, or would

you be trespassing if you stepped on those biomorphic forms? (You wouldn't be.)

In my favorite installation, pitch blackness is pierced by intermittent whirls of light that illuminate theatrical fog, in the middle of which you gradually perceive a two-story "harp" made of thin red laser beams. Pluck the beams with your fingers and throaty notes sound. Both times I've visited, some people were playing this harp inventively and intently, almost dancing with their arms and bodies in the flickering light. Others sat on black wall-ledges nearby, nearly invisible, listening and watching.

Throughout *House of Eternal Return*, in fact, sound and music play a crucial role, though that role may be mostly subliminal for first-time visitors. In one sequence of rooms, cryptic but



**Figure 4.** Exploring the black and white kitchen. Photo: Courtesy of the author. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

passionate pronouncements (“This is the moment. I just want to be reunited”) and children’s voices (“Can we just play?”) float atop long, new-age synthesizer tones and metallic percussion. Everywhere, layers of near and distant sounds mix in the ear, including the visitor-made music from that ribcage-xylophone and other interactives. It’s a cacophony, but an artful one; like a good film soundtrack, it adds emotional depth to the experience and helps unify what could have felt like one thing after another.

It was on my second visit that I noticed another type of coherence and layering: *House of Eternal Return* succeeds in part as a gentle but insistent parody. The estrangement I

mentioned works in the service of a kind of Brechtian alienation, forcing you to step back and see the familiar anew. This is very different from the irony that saturates postmodern culture (think late night talk-show hosts or snarky podcasts). Parody is friendlier, more inclusive, and trickier. It presumes our familiarity with the values or conventions being parodied and doesn’t require that we reject or disdain them in order to have a good time. It appropriates the fun as well as the underlying ethos, subjecting the latter to critique through warping and re- or de-contextualization. Meow Wolf’s targets here, I began to realize, include the Disney aesthetic and its naïve faith in closure and comfort; commercialism more broadly (those



**Figure 5.** Playing the skeleton xylophone. Photo: Courtesy of the author. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



**Figure 6.** The laser harp. Photo: Courtesy of the author. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



**Figure 7.** Playing the magical mushrooms. Photo: Courtesy of the author. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

infomercials playing in the house, those cryptic ads and posters); sci-fi tropes of escape and easy return; our fetish for authenticity (hence the intentionally, childishly fake-looking elements in some of the installations, right next to real vegetation or actual artifacts); and the kind of new-age wishfulness one hears all too frequently in Santa Fe—including the title concept of eternal return, which comes from Indian mythology and Buddhism. (One wonders how Meow Wolf's planned expansion to other cities will differ from *House*. I noticed that the stove in the Selig's kitchen bore the label O'Keeffe & Merritt, and it's a tribute to the heightened state of perception that Meow Wolf creates that I read this as an ironic touch; Georgia O'Keeffe is this

town's most famous cultural figure and the namesake of its most-visited museum. I later learned that O'Keeffe & Merritt is merely an actual antique stove brand—which doesn't mean it wasn't also an intentional wink on Meow Wolf's part.)

But *House*'s most enthusiastic and pervasive parodic target—the frame that it bends and melts around us—is museums, or perhaps more accurately *museumness*. Around the installation, we see framed artworks, plans, and mechanical drawings, specimens in jars or pinned behind glass, even tiny dioramas installed in the walls, all a trippy mix of the real-but-radically-dislocated and the apparently-made-up-by-Meow-Wolf. The very form and presentation of these



**Figure 8.** A touch scrim interactive. Photo: Courtesy of the author. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

artifacts makes us wonder, as if by reflex, *Plans for what? Specimens of what?* The critique comes not in the difficulty of differentiating the real or natural from the artificial or fictional, but in the utter defeating of those kinds of questions. *None* of it has meaning in the traditional museum sense. There's nothing to rationalize, categorize, connect, or figure out. It's not just our interpretive tools that fail us here; it's the interpretive impulse itself. This makes possible, indeed requires, a more instinctive, perceptual approach. *House of Eternal Return* borrows the tools of museums to challenge some of their deepest, least-considered principles.

Even the central mystery—*How and why did the Seligs disappear?*—turns out to be

precisely that kind of playful feint. There is reportedly a “correct” solution to the riddle, which a number of dedicated fans (especially younger ones) have come to and which is doubtless available online. Yet, as a staff member told me quietly in the kitchen of the Seligs' house, even the official story of the family is “open to interpretation.” I'd go further and argue that *House* makes interpretation moot: it's not a real puzzle but a quotation of a puzzle. It pokes fun at us for trying to bring that meaning-making imperative—what we might call our aesthetic of understanding—to this particular party. And fun is the crucial concept. We may walk out of Meow Wolf into the bright southwestern



**Figure 9.** Looking up at a creature. Photo: Courtesy of the author. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

light wondering if interpretation itself—what we’ve been trained to do with any artwork, any museum, and many other contexts, and have tried to do here—might be a kind of game, and not necessarily the only one worth playing.

It’s a question that museum leaders, particularly those who aspire to the broad, enthusiastic, and multigenerational engagement, community centrality, and financial success that *House of Eternal Return* has earned may want to ponder. By peeling the idea of *exhibition* away from the idea of *museum*, the Meow Wolf artists have revealed latent, exciting possibilities in the former—possibilities that can now be explored by other creative practitioners, designers, technologists, storytellers, curators, and artists. They would do well to come to Santa Fe to experience *House* for themselves, hang out in the bustling maker-space that Meow Wolf has built on the other side of the lobby, buy lunch from one of the food trucks that have become part of the lively parking-lot scene, or stay for a show by a touring band in the funky club space built into a corner of one of *House*’s myriad worlds—a venue that has become a much-needed shot-in-the-arm for Santa Fe’s nightlife, especially among young people. Visitation has exceeded all expectations, and contrary to last year’s doubters, people are indeed coming back to experience the place more than once (no small matter for an installation called “eternal return”). The collective recently took over a new building to create a production facility for its upcoming installations in other cities. One Meow Wolf team is developing a new virtual-reality platform, and rumors of a film project are circulating. The company—and it is a for-profit entity, though there’s also a nonprofit education initiative—has attracted millions of dollars in investments. Perhaps more importantly, it inspired a child I overheard on a

recent visit to enthuse to his parents and siblings, “I love it here!”

Sure, there have been critical voices. Several local and national observers have pointed out that the fictional family at the heart of *House* is white and obviously upper-middle-class, that Meow Wolf’s founder and almost all of the artists are white, and that the entry price for locals is \$15 for adults and \$10 for kids 12 and under (slightly higher for out-of-state-residents), all of which complicates the company’s often-stated commitment to inclusion and desire to be relevant to the economically challenged, largely Latino residents of the nearby neighborhoods. The success of the facility, perhaps not surprisingly, has led to complaints about gentrification and (so-far just potential) displacement. Will local residents need their own Portals Bermuda to escape? And a few of my highbrow friends have little patience for the crowds and have dismissed the experience as a lineal descendant of haunted houses and other low-culture amusements.

As I’ve argued here, I think that latter objection misses the point. *House of Eternal Return* may or may not be your cup of tea, but if you happen to be a museum professional or some other producer or observer of culture in the 21st century, it’s worth paying attention to how Meow Wolf works and why it has engendered such enthusiasm and such culturally and ethnically diverse participation. The magic here is not unrelated to the magic of any other successful work of art. Artists, curators, and other arts leaders often hope that their installations and experiences will change the way audiences see the world around them. Meow Wolf’s *House* is busy doing exactly that. It may not be a museum, but we can learn a great deal from it.

**END**