

ART & EXHIBITS

Danielle Mourning of San Francisco turns her home into an art installation

Flora Tsapovsky | February 19, 2021



Artist Danielle Mourning reclines in a swing by the feather wall in her “Stay With Me” installation at her San Francisco home.

Photo: Noah Berger, Special to The Chronicle

In the age of COVID-19, visiting someone’s home has become a rare thrill. Imagine, then, walking into a private residence to find an art installation sprawled across six rooms. This is the allure of “Stay With Me,” a stunning new work by San Francisco [Danielle Mourning](#).

Two years in the making, the exhibit opened to the public, by appointment only, at the end of January. Visiting it — as many museums remain closed, ties with loved ones are loose and indoor gatherings are discouraged — is a devastatingly intimate experience; especially as visitors learn that behind the art is a personal story of trauma and resilience.

The path to “Stay With Me” began in 2016, when Mourning moved into the residence: a family-owned, second-floor apartment in Pacific Heights. A couple of years later, she came down with a mysterious condition.

“I just kept throwing up, to be honest,” Mourning told The Chronicle. “I went to five different specialists, had some tests done, and they couldn’t find anything.”



A photo of Danielle Mournung with her mom rests on a table in Mournung's "Stay With Me" installation. Photo: Noah Berger, Special to The Chronicle

The issue, according to Mournung, was rooted in long-term trauma related to her mother's alcohol abuse and frequent relapses, a theme she talks about often on social media along with her own sobriety journey. Working with a healer, Mournung promised herself that, once she got better, she would turn the apartment into art.

"I said, I'll finish all the projects I've never finished, give myself the opportunity to be completely creative, trust my intuition," she said. The name of the installation was inspired by words the healer repeated to the artist in moments of breakthrough.



Mourning, who has an MFA from the Royal College of Art in London, walks through her “Stay With Me” installation.

Photo: Noah Berger, Special to The Chronicle

Mourning, who has an MFA from the Royal College of Art in London, has been a part of the San Francisco art scene since 2007. She describes herself as a multimedia artist and has often appeared in her own photography. Themes of family history and feminine energy are prevalent in her work.

“Stay With Me” is a road map to the artist’s ancestry, childhood and growth. Mourning calls parts of it “a childlike fantasy,” while others are somber and even harrowing. On the porch, visitors can cocoon themselves on a large rope swing, with a wall covered in bird feathers as a backdrop. In the dimly lit canopy room, wooden chairs surround a table, with vintage fur coats thrown on the back of each like a dinner party for ghosts. The bathroom, with a mirror covered in cutout photographs of a child, evokes hope and naivete. A printed guide with explanations about details in every room is provided upon arrival, placed by Mourning at the bottom of the home’s gold-leaf-covered staircase.

The artist herself can be found in the pink room typing on a vintage typewriter, marking the last stop in the picturesque home tour.



Artist Danielle Mourning passes through the canopy room of her Pacific Heights home.
Photo: Noah Berger, Special to The Chronicle

The fact that “Stay With Me” is also where Mourning lives (she has a bedroom upstairs, to retreat from the art) makes for an additional layer of meaning.

“It makes perfect sense for me, to use the space I’m already in, to work with what I have,” she said. “I’m also obsessed with voyeurism and love the idea of walking through people’s homes and seeing how we live.”

While space is limited to visit the installation, word is spreading fast about Mourning’s new work. It is clearly resonating.

“For me, being in the space led to the realization (that) I’m enough, despite this isolation we’re all in. Sometimes having a close relationship with yourself is exactly what you need,” said Charmin Roundtree-Baaqee, an art curator and advocate from Oakland. She learned about the installation from mutual friends but added that seeing images didn’t prepare her for the experience.

“I saw bits and pieces of myself — my own childhood, despite having a much different childhood than Danielle probably,” she said.



A photo of Danielle Mourning's grandmother rests on a shelf as part of the "Stay With Me" installation. Photo: Noah Berger, Special to The Chronicle

At this point in the pandemic, when immersive museums made for social media posts are on hold, and "shelter in place" is a common expression, positioning a private home as the canvas for an art installation feels timely.

"Being surrounded by something so creative in someone's house was like food for my soul," Roundtree-Baaqee said.

Timing, however, did a trick on the artist's original plans. While working on the space before the pandemic, Mourning envisioned "Stay With Me" as a backdrop for conversations and parties. "I've always been intrigued by the idea of the era of salons," she added.



Artist Danielle Mourning stands in the porch section of her installation.
Photo: Noah Berger, Special to The Chronicle

For now, Mourning welcomes visitors for free in one-hour slots, two people per hour. But this might just be the optimal way to experience the artist's work: By taking a one-on-one view of the installation's universal narratives, it's impossible not to think about what you've been through, what's yet to come, and about healing from trauma on levels both national and personal.

"Some people just walk into the pink room at the end of the tour and start to sob," Mourning says. "It's been an incredibly intense experience."

"Stay With Me": Public art installation in S.F. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Sunday by appointment only. Through Dec. 31. Free. Address provided upon registration. Book your appointment at bit.ly/staywithmeSF or email studio@daniellemourning.com for inquiries.

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