

art current: Barbara Sullivan at the Caldbeck Gallery

by [Britta Konau](#)

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Barbara Sullivan, "'Tis a Gift to Be Simple" (detail), 2014, buon fresco, 42 x 72 x 2 in. (Photo by Jay York)

"Barbara Sullivan: Furniture Showroom, Associations of Design, Taste, and Memory" is on view through August 16 at Caldbeck Gallery, 12 Elm Street, Rockland, 594-5935, caldbeck.com.

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In a recent New York Times review Roberta Smith takes note of a new "heterogeneity" in curatorial displays, combining objects made of various media and spanning different time periods and cultures, "with all kinds of surprises." Although the Caldbeck Gallery's current show, "Barbara Sullivan: Furniture Showroom, Associations of Design, Taste, and Memory," is a very different kind of show, Smith's comment still provides an apt context for it.

The show's ambitious title indicates a new development in Sullivan's oeuvre. She continues working in fresco, an ancient medium for decorating walls. In Sullivan's case it involves a wood substrate covered with wire lath, over which first a rough coat of plaster is applied, followed by a finer one, onto which the design is painted while the plaster is still wet. As both plaster and water-based pigment dry, chemical reactions fully integrate them.

Sullivan creates shaped, wall-mounted frescoes in the form of particular objects or assembles several of them into human forms. Earlier pieces wryly, but good-naturedly, comment on domesticity and everyday life. More recent installations combine individual fresco shapes with large line drawings of interiors or woods, supplying contexts for them.

Traditionally, fresco served as decoration on flat, architectural spaces that often involved illusionistic effects. This use of the medium in a cultured, domestic environment is what receives Sullivan's attention in "Furniture Showroom," extending the scope and seriousness of her work significantly. It is less narrative, less whimsical, and more conceptual. Instead of shaping and painting everyday objects in fresco, these new pieces, installed in groupings, embody particular styles and periods in interior decoration and design. Instead of being the backdrop for furniture and art, in Sullivan's hands fresco becomes those very same things.

Among the icons of design included are Shaker-style chairs with tape seats, oval boxes, and a side table (a fortuitous tie-in with the Farnsworth's current show?) titled together "'Tis a Gift to Be Simple," and mid-20th-century pieces like an Isamu Noguchi coffee table, an Eames lounge chair, and a teapot by Marianne Brandt, collectively titled "Bauhaus." Among other groupings, there's also an arrangement of rustic, animal horn furniture in questionable taste.

Going beyond a style of comfort, hominess, and personal experience, this new body of work encompasses a variety of stylistic preferences that reflect a cosmopolitan world of urbanity and refinement. There is only one exception to these un-personalized vignettes of stylish living and that is "Boy's Room." Comprised of a globe, a functioning wall light pierced with constellations of stars, and a chest with clothes hanging out of one of its drawers, it seems specific, observed and familiar.

Most of the individual fresco pieces incorporate curious tensions between painted, perspectival recession or advancement of space and its actual reality. The back legs of a table could have been slightly set back from the front ones, but aren't. The bottom edge of an oval box should have been pronounced but is a smooth curve instead. Perspectival traditions are thus followed selectively, which comes across as a casual but deliberate way of pointing out its artificial construction. Sullivan's work instead engages our actual experience of vision and three-dimensionality in its continued exploration of fresco's possibilities. This spirit of sustained curiosity, seasoned with a good amount of nonchalance, marks the artist's inspiring ability to keep on surprising us with fresh invention.