

HABITATS/Brooklyn Heights

# For a Photographer, Homes Are Where Her Art Is

By PENELOPE GREEN

**T**HAT a renovation can be a metaphor for one's life is ruefully acknowledged by anyone who has ever had the misfortune to unmake his own home. Even the language of renovation can make you wince — dislocated, displaced, demolished, gutted — because the story of taking apart a home is usually a story about coming undone.

That said, however, Romaine Orthwein, a photographer with a new show called "Home," at the 511 Gallery on West 25th Street through March 1, imbues renovation with more playful qualities, making it a fantasy more about becoming than unbecoming.

Last winter, she took photographs of apartments under deconstruction all over the city and then digitally placed herself within them like an impish ghost, more prankish poltergeist than malevolent or mournful spirit. You can just barely see Ms. Orthwein somersaulting like a beach ball down the stairs of a hacked-open apartment, its wires coiled like dangling tendons, or resting motionless as a corpse in "Six Feet Under" beneath a glass table while four ornately carved wooden chairs wait like ushers along a wall.

Despite the sense of dislocation that runs through her work, Ms. Orthwein's own Brooklyn Heights apartment, which she shares with her husband, David Gutterman, a financial analyst, and two feuding dogs, is determinedly, deliberately settled, rife with the personal, anchored with dog beds, dog toys, books, artwork and family photographs.

Her last show, "Presence," two years ago at the gallery, also wrestled with how a home constructs an identity. It was set in a series of lush and expensive habitats layered with family portraits, family silver and details like a needlepoint pillow that read "Speaker of the House." A distorted, sometimes oversized Ms. Orthwein was inserted among the objects, her gaze impassive, even stunned, and clearly not belonging to the stiff, dense environments.

It is difficult to not delegate to Ms. Orthwein — who grew up in St. Louis and in Newport, R.I., and whose great-grandfather, Adolphus Busch, was a founder of Anheuser-Busch — the role of social commentator, or



Romaine Orthwein, courtesy of the 511 Gallery



#### A DELICATE BALANCE

Ms. Orthwein in her garden, above, and, top, an untitled photo in which she has inserted herself digitally in an apartment renovation.

caustic autobiographer. Her use of affluent interiors, with their needlepoint pillows and seaside sun rooms, is as particular a gesture as the dialogue in an A. R. Gurney script or a Rick Moody story. But she'll deflect your probing. She'd like the photographs to pose the questions, not you.

"This work is about being in between," she said of the renovation pictures. "There's a sadness about what you've lost, certainly, but also excitement because it's also on the verge of something new."

Ms. Orthwein was herself on the verge of something new last year. She made her pho-

#### A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

The photographer Romaine Orthwein in her Brooklyn Heights apartment, with her dogs — Zoe, left, and Hazel — resting in the background. Her work deals with how a home constructs an identity.



Photographs by Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

tographs, all shot in Upper Manhattan, while she was planning her wedding to Mr. Gutterman, whom she'd met on a blind date in June 2003 — and whom she married in the Rainbow Room last December.

A contractor was her entrée into many of the apartments. "I made a contract saying I wouldn't sue him if anything happened to me," she said, but a third of the pieces were shot in a half-sister's town house on the Upper East Side.

The sister, Gwennie Chabrier, a writer living in France, had bought a three-family house, converted it back to its original single-family shape and begun to fill it with objects from French flea markets and antiques shops. The objects, ornate and particular, are wrapped in plastic or pushed against walls, awaiting animation by their owner.

An enormous clock, sheathed by a plastic curtain, amplifies the sense in all these photographs that time has quite literally stopped. In the implied space between one moment and the next, Ms. Orthwein seems to dance among the objects, balancing on a banister or perched nude on a plastic-shrouded couch, like a parody of a model in a drawing class.

Ms. Orthwein said she is endlessly captivated by other people's things and the stories they suggest to her. She has been assembling her own stories and making herself feel at home since age 12, her first year of boarding school.

"I am a very good nester," she said. "I imprint myself strongly on my environment, like my mother did. It is what I remember about her. She made rooms in different colors: the blue room, the green room, the red and so on. She was very visually gifted. She had exquisite taste in clothes, art and furni-

ture."

Her mother, Romaine Pierce, a society beauty and former wife of an English marquis, died when Ms. Orthwein was 9, and she has been living fully on her own since she was 18 and a freshman at New York University — in the Gramercy Park Hotel, the Washington Square Hotel and then in her own apartment at One Fifth Avenue.

She spent some of the years after graduation in Los Angeles, working in and around the movie industry, as a line producer, second assistant director and film-stills photographer. She grew increasingly frustrated with the group-think of the business and moved back to New York six years ago, to attend graduate school at the School of Visual Arts.

She bought this two-bedroom apartment, for \$375,000, because Zoe, an anxious, abused Wheaten terrier Ms. Orthwein rescued from a pet store, and Hazel, a Portuguese water dog and Zoe's sometime enemy, needed a yard.

"I just walked in and knew this was the place," she said, "mostly because it didn't need any work done." Ms. Orthwein is not a renovator. "Of course, even when you think something needs no work, it invariably does." Her biggest gesture was a psychic one.

"I got a book on feng shui," she said, "figured out which part of the apartment was the relationship sector and realized there was a painting by someone I used to date hanging there."

Big feng shui faux pas, having an old story hanging around.

"So I replaced it with a picture of a house," she said. Eight months later, she met Mr. Gutterman.

If she is uncomfortable linking her fine-

art narratives with her own biography, Ms. Orthwein will aver that the culture of affluence and its imagery, its sets and props, is something that interests her "the way an old film does."

"I think it's interesting," she said, "but I don't feel like it's a part of me now. I'm not living in that particular picture and I don't think I ever will be. I won't make the choices that will take me there."

As if to underscore the idea that the past is another country, she showed a scrapbook of her mother's newspaper clippings. Beautiful and stylish, her mother was famous the way beautiful women of a certain class always have been.

She was married three times — her second husband was the Marquis of Milford Haven, otherwise known as a great-grandson of Queen Victoria. The scrapbook makes her mother seem like a character in a Nancy Mitford novel. "Romaine's Holiday," reads one headline.

There's a book of her father's paintings here too. Ms. Orthwein's father, James Busch Orthwein, who was chairman of D'Arcy, McManus & Masius, the ad agency, before he retired, and a onetime owner of the New England Patriots, is an amateur portrait and still-life painter.

Ms. Orthwein said she wasn't sure what her father thinks of her work. "I know that to him art is supposed to be something that's beautiful," she said, "so I think he thinks it's strange."

Ms. Orthwein has two Louis end tables that belonged to her mother, a little Louis chair, a chinoiserie screen and that legacy of photographs.

"We are bursting our seams here," she said, "but I'm hesitant to move, because I'm not looking forward to any renovation."