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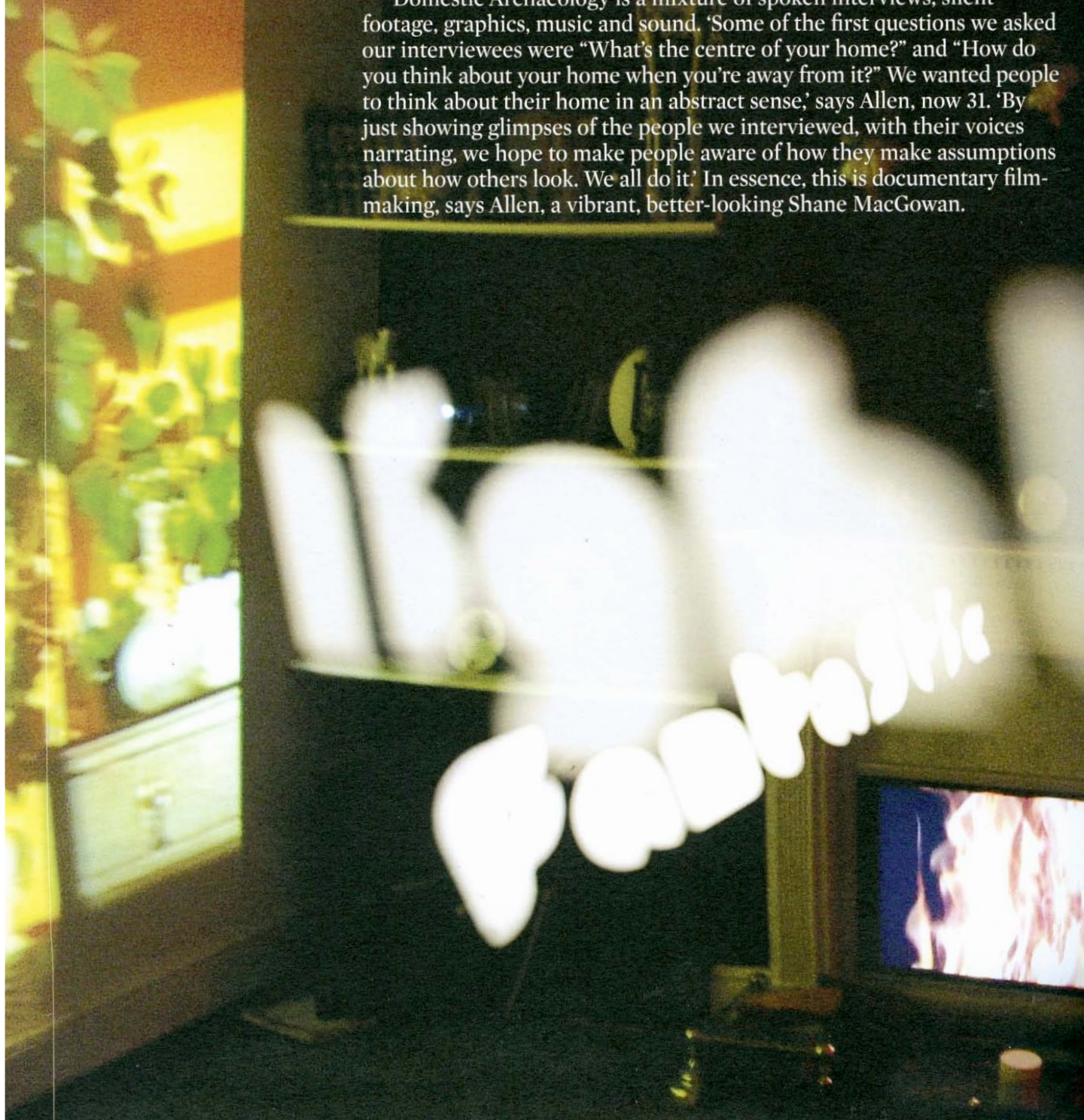
REVIEW OF "DOMESTIC ARCHAEOLOGY"
EXHIBITION AT THE GEFFRYE MUSEUM
AND INTERVIEW

What's the centre of your home? The Light Surgeons collective has just launched its first, intriguing, documentary exhibition. Hannah Booth talks to founder Chris Allen about 'visual journalism'

There's the well-spoken woman in Notting Hill who spent five years designing her own home just how she wanted it, right down to the knife drawer. There's the young man with nothing in his front room except a state-of-the-art stereo and speakers. And there's the giggly woman with an enormous display of soft toys on her mantelpiece.

These diverse characters are part of a new documentary exhibition on the living room. Called Domestic Archaeology, it opened in April at the Geffrye Museum in east London, staged by an intriguing collective of designers, photographers, artists and filmmakers called the Light Surgeons. Founded in 1996 by Chris Allen, who had then recently graduated in design, the Light Surgeons are steadily gaining a reputation for producing thought-provoking, socially-conscious installations and films. The Geffrye Museum exhibition looks set to put them squarely on the map.

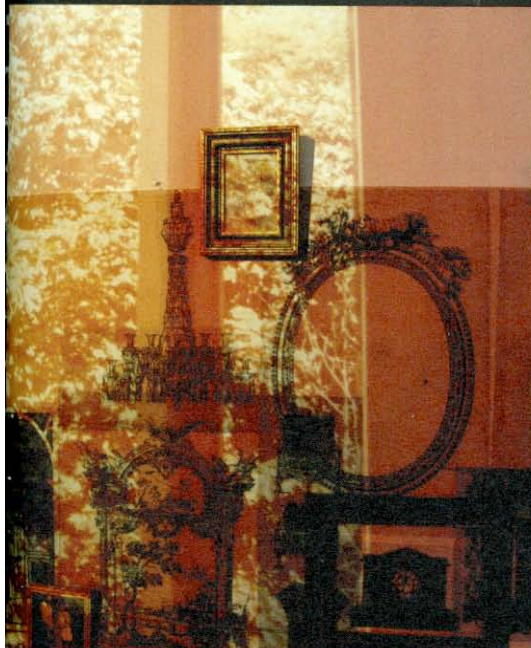
Domestic Archaeology is a mixture of spoken interviews, silent footage, graphics, music and sound. 'Some of the first questions we asked our interviewees were "What's the centre of your home?" and "How do you think about your home when you're away from it?" We wanted people to think about their home in an abstract sense,' says Allen, now 31. 'By just showing glimpses of the people we interviewed, with their voices narrating, we hope to make people aware of how they make assumptions about how others look. We all do it.' In essence, this is documentary filmmaking, says Allen, a vibrant, better-looking Shane MacGowan.



The exhibition marks a turning point in the history of the Light Surgeons. The loose collective, whose core members are currently Allen, Norwegian-born artist and graphic designer Brede Korsmo and multi-media artist Rob Rainbow, made its name providing visuals for clubs and live gigs. It graduated to audio-visual spectacles, showing regularly at onedotzero, the well-established digital film festival. This type of work was the Surgeons' bread and butter for several years, but a conscious move away from their live event and music beginnings led to more varied, stimulating design and architectural projects, says Allen.

One of these was a project with financial news provider Bloomberg five years ago. 'This was the first project in which we used spoken words,' says Allen. 'Bloomberg commissioned us to take a trip to five different cities, from San Francisco to Sao Paulo, and make a series of short films.' These were shown at Bloomberg's London headquarters as an installation curated by Scarlet Projects. Allen describes the project as 'a sort of cross between a documentary and advertising'. Since then, he's never looked back. Unused footage was compiled into a separate documentary that he toured round several galleries.





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Isn't the collective permanently fielding calls from advertising agencies and youth brand managers?

Apparently not. 'We've never really been in that world,' says Allen. 'We always had companies asking if they could put their logos on our club visuals, it became ridiculous. And we occasionally get approached by ad agencies looking to stage a live event. But I'm not interested. Not because I don't want to get into advertising – if someone gave me enough money I'd take it and hopefully make something intelligent and thought-provoking – but because I prefer to make pieces of work that challenge people to think about social issues.'

Next up, however, is the tricky task of creating the Light Surgeons' first website. Allen has enlisted the skills of web design wunderkind Philip O'Dwyer, which is all very well, except that Allen doesn't know how to define the Light Surgeons. 'It's very difficult having to explain what we do, particularly when our background is so diverse,' he says. 'To be honest, it scares the living daylights out of me.'

See Domestic Archaeology at the Geffrye Museum, London until 28 August www.geffrye-museum.org.uk / www.thelightsurgeons.co.uk

A variety of projects followed: an installation with designer Ron Arad; collaborations with designers and architects including Michael Marriott, Nigel Coates and Urban Salon; a music festival in Japan with director Chris Cunningham; visuals and live shows for Manchester band the Long Cut; and a project for The Roundhouse Theatre, among many others. But with the Geffrye project, Allen has completely broken

away from his club and gig beginnings and produced a substantial piece of stand-alone work. 'Our work has never existed in a permanent way in galleries before, it's always been ephemeral. But I like the permanence of producing a documentary. I think Domestic Archaeology suits this type of space. And we're bringing something to the Geffrye that it's not had before: people's voices.' Allen has caught the reportage film bug, even admitting that his work might now be classed as 'visual journalism'. He aims to make the project available on DVD.

The idea for Domestic Archaeology came from a commercial project for Sony that never took off. 'Sony was promoting its first domestic video projector, and we proposed interviewing famous people about their living rooms,' says Allen. 'The idea kicked around for a couple of years before we resurrected it.'

Surely the Light Surgeons must attract huge interest from the commercial world, eager to be associated with its peculiar brand of hip, left-field cool and proven credentials.