

The Culture of Home Ec

Portland is a city of domesticity. Recently, I met one of my favorite new people—an elegant dyke by the name of Julie—at a well-catered barbeque hosted by some Southeast creative types. “This city is all about Home Economics,” she observed with the fresh eyes of a recent transplant. “It’s all about food, interior design, crafts. Say ‘Portland’ and immediately you think of farmers markets and home-brewed beer, potlucks, cute little condos, putting a fucking bird on it.” I was so stunned by her insight that I knocked over my drink without noticing. “At the very least,” she continued, smiling and reaching for a napkin, “Portland would get an ‘A’ in it.”

Unlike my fair city, I’d get a C+ in domesticity. Example: Years ago, I succumbed to the temptations of Adam4Adam and invited a guy over to my house with the intention of, well, getting to know each other. He walked into my apartment and looked anxiously around at the bare walls, as if some sort of camera crew were going to jump out from behind the piles of books next to my couch, *To Catch A Predator*-style.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, assuming he was understandably nervous about being in a stranger’s house to “hang out.”

“Um, no,” he stated, a sneer forming on his face. “The lighting in here is just terrible. I can’t deal with overhead bulbs of this wattage. Do you have a lamp or something you can bring



remember to breathe

BY NICK MATTOS

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into this room? Also,” he said, his hands coming to rest on his hips, “you have a good start in here—I like the pieces you’ve assembled—but your interior design definitely needs some work.” (Needless to say, no “hanging out” of any kind was done that evening.)

It was only much later I realized that it was acute anxiety that moved that overly critical trick to analyze my décor, and fuels much of the culture of Home Ec. I think of the Atomic Age of the 1950s, when the pressure toward a life of domesticity was a natural outcome of many different tensions coming together at once—the rise of the automobile, a post-war economy, the changing role of women in society and nascent Cold War concerns, to touch only a few. Of course, like a soup pot, angst can only be tightly covered for so long before it boils over—in this case, the unease exploding into the upheaval of the 1960s, setting cultural bonfires that scorched everything Americans knew about society.

Here in Portland, 2011, the cultural milieu is different, yet for many the anxiety remains at 1950s levels. In lieu of the bomb, we are concerned by terrorism, war, environmental collapse, economic recession and a frightening political climate. We are forced to stay at home, not because of social gender roles, but because we’re unemployed or underemployed and simply have no place to go. We arrange and rearrange our spaces, assemble ingredients from the farmers market into artisanal meals, carefully pair vintage T-shirts with worn-in skinny jeans because we need to feel like at the very minimum we give off the appearance that everything is under control and we’re doing fine. We garden and can and homebrew and knit because they’re all hip things to do, yes—but beneath this hipness is genuine fear that, when shit gets real, when we get sick and don’t have health insurance, when the unemployment benefits get cut off, we will need to eat these pickles and drink this beer and wear these scarves because they could be the only things we have left.

I’m certainly a participant in Home Ec culture. Years ago, after the Adam4Adam guy left, I sheepishly arranged lamps in my house to

provide more flattering light upon the furniture I had acquired from the sides of various roads. However, no matter how cute my kitchen, the cupboards are still bare far more often than I’d like them to be these days. Checking the mail is still an exercise in anxiety, the key in my hand shaking in the lock as I wonder whether the mailbox holds payment for a freelance job or a notice from my student loan creditor. I can make a meal, artfully arrange it on my Goodwill plates, take a picture on my phone and post it directly to Facebook so my friends can click “like”—but they’re online “liking” things on Facebook because they’re underemployed.

I have to agree with Julie: We are a city all about Home Ec, and there’s nothing intrinsically wrong with this. However, just as the ‘50s exploded into the ‘60s, the fear that the culture of house and garden seeks to assuage doesn’t disappear—it simmers until it boils over to scorch everything. We can’t know at this point what Portland will be like after that scorching. At the very minimum, though, the tension will be out in the open, not hidden beneath a veneer of hip domesticity—so we can share it honestly, and sigh together, until the sighing gives forth to smiling. ☐

NICK MATTOS may just be excusing his tendency to keep a messy apartment. Send helpful household hints to nickmattos@justout.com.

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