



TERENCE DICK

PENELOPE STEWART AT THE KOFFLER GALLERY | BURDEN OF PROOF AT LONSDALE GALLERY

Some exhibitions get metaphorically under my skin, but **Penelope Stewart's** immersive installation at the **Koffler Gallery** literally entered my body. This physical absorption hits you as soon as you step into the gallery and inhale the fragrant air. The rich odour of beeswax draws you closer to her main structure: a cube within the cube panelled with squares of gold, brown, and yellow. The experience of this added sense, one that you have no choice but to subject yourself to, heightens your self-awareness and tunes you in to the material conditions of the work you're about to explore. As with silence and John Cage's *4'33"*, you come to understand that you've been smelling every other exhibition you've ever seen but only now (except for those super-thick Kim Dorland oil paintings) realize that it has an impact on how you see the work – if only in this sense that it is clinically and intentionally absent. Smells, like noise, are traditionally kept out of art galleries.



Penelope Stewart

But Stewart doesn't leave it at that. There is a cornucopia of wax items awaiting you on the other side of the door set in the cube you are so feverishly sniffing. Those objects hang down from the ceiling like vines and spill out from the open end of the room you find yourself in. The interior walls are patterned and mottled with flowers or candlesticks. The floor is piled with buttons, spoons, dishes, goblets, doorknobs, and a collection of antique keys. The accumulation doesn't represent an abundance so much as an obsessive accumulation of the odds and ends a hoarder – or an artist – would gather. On the one hand they all could simply be part of a still life. On the other there must be an underlying logic to justify all this fabrication and repetition. These are the things themselves but replicas and fragile ones at that. In his *Meditations*, Descartes conducts an experiment with wax to demonstrate that the mind's perception takes precedent over the senses. The world is not just something to be seen, smelled, and felt, but something to be understood first. According to Descartes, this knowledge is what connects us to the divine. Can something similar be found here? You'll have to smell for yourself.