

STATION

Yellow Wallpaper draws inspiration from the important early feminist text ‘The Yellow Wall-paper’ by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Published in 1892 in the *New England Magazine*, the text is written as the diary of a woman who, in order to recover from a bout of ‘temporary nervous depression’, has been taken to a rundown colonial mansion for ‘rest cure’. This practice of enforced inactivity and social isolation was a common treatment for women in the nineteenth century – Gilman herself experienced this treatment at the hands of American women’s mental health expert Dr Silas Weir Mitchell, later describing it as a prison sentence.

In ‘The Yellow Wall-paper’, the female protagonist is confined to a room decorated with a wallpaper that she describes repeatedly and in great detail: ‘*The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight... It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw – not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.*’ Without activities to occupy her mind, the woman becomes increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper, which begins to take on a life of its own. At the story’s climax, believing there to be a woman inside the wallpaper that she must set free, she tears the paper off the walls, liberating the woman and thus, herself: “*I’ve got out at last,” said I... “And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!”*”

‘The Yellow Wall-paper’ illustrated nineteenth century attitudes towards women’s physical and mental health, and the oppressive nature of domestic life and traditional gender roles. The enduring image of the wallpaper as a symbol of the societal structures that trap women has provided fertile ground for many artists over the past century. In turn, STATION’s exhibition, *Yellow Wallpaper*, showcases a group of artists whose works continue this conversation in a contemporary context: challenging assumptions about gender identity, binaries and traditional gender roles, exploring thresholds between physical and psychological spaces, and delving into representations of female madness, hysteria, companionship and kinship.

Heather B. Swann’s practice is driven by a primal, emotional response to the world. She works outwards from the poetics of intimate sensation, emotion and thought. It is not out of character for Swann to create a body of work in response to a literary text; she draws widely from history, mythology, psychology, science, anthropology, in an ongoing attempt to understand the human condition. Whether it is public or private, the macro, socio-political world or the micro, intimate world – all exist in her work alongside a more chaotic world of poetry and dreams. For *Yellow Wallpaper*, Swann has created a series of intimate ink and acrylic paintings on wood panels – the back of the panels, which may or may not be seen, painted yellow in quiet reference to the text. Depicting Swann’s recognisable female characters, animal-human hybrids, and ghostly figures, they speak a whispered narrative: ‘*I thought about you three times*’, ‘*Hold me close*’, ‘*Tell me anything*’, ‘*Anything. You can tell me.*’

Narelle Desmond’s works began from a contemplation of liminal spaces. Two ready-made ladders, into which hand-made doors have been carefully inserted. A door can be a point of entry or exit, and are often used symbolically to suggest a transition between place and time, a threshold between two places or states. *Whose a better lifter?* pays homage to Marcel Duchamp’s *Fresh Widow* from 1923 – a scaled-down version of a French window, the glass windowpanes blacked out to obscure the view. The Corinthian door in *The wind and more* is from the Victorian-era, chosen in keeping with the setting of ‘The Yellow Wall-paper’. In reference to the text, Desmond’s doors suggest confinement and imprisonment – painted ‘institutional green’, they draw associations with hospitals, asylums and prisons. The ladder, a symbol of ascension, progress, leant against the wall, suggests the possibility of escape – but to where, and to what?

Installed at the opposite end of the room are a pair of photographs from Eugenia Lim’s *The Australian Ugliness* series. In both images, the Ambassador – a fictional character in gold worker’s suit, performed by Lim – holds a spray bottle of Windex and a cleaning cloth. In *infinite clean* she buffs the mirror of a clinical bathroom while gazing at her reflection, a trick of the mirror repeating her image infinitely, as though she is caught in a kind of limbo space. In the second image, *the Window Cleaner*, the Ambassador cleans a tall window while looking from the exterior into an empty bunker-like domestic space. In both works, the character is both inside and outside, a domestic servant visible yet invisible; windows and mirrors again suggesting spaces of reflection and transition.

Many of the works included in the exhibition reflect on states of transition – of moving between or towards, of looking in or looking out, of becoming, forming and transforming, morphing, shedding, connecting, oozing. A perfect example: Nell’s cast bronze ghost with open wide eyes and open mouthed ‘ooh’. *The ghost who walks will never die (silver)*, continues her use of the ghost as a motif to represent the cycle of life and death, and the threshold between the two states. Nell’s works embody an interest in contemporary manifestations of spiritual traditions and what it means to exist in a body. Regardless of material outcome, her work explores dualities, oppositions and the binaries of human existence, such as the ancient and contemporary, individual and communal, feminine and masculine, sacred and profane, birth and death, sorrow and happiness, light and dark.

STATION

Also playing with the juxtaposition of binaries is Marian Tubbs's digital printed silk, *we say funny things hoping something romantic will happen*. Tubbs is interested in interrogating the contemporary transmission of invisible information, images and currency, and how these forces enact agency or power over the everyday. She often conflates material juxtapositions between body and object, high and low culture, analogue and digital, physical and virtual, hard and soft, natural and artificial. This particular work incorporates digital painting with soft, feminine material. The imagery further explores these binaries, with roses butting up against digitally rendered characters, text and abstract collaged forms. The work is displayed in this exhibition draped over a Queen Anne style chair – a silk in lieu of a body.

Sarah Contos situates her practice within the contexts of femininity, identity and eroticism, expressed through screen-printed textiles, sculptural objects and complex installation. For *Yellow Wallpaper*, Contos has made two new sculptural wall hangings, incorporating aluminium casting with soft tubular fabric appendages or limbs. Unable to tend a garden while confined to her apartment (during a long winter lockdown), Contos has created these stand-in sculptural rosebushes. With references to 1970s craft and twee, BDSM, medieval armour and soft furnishings, Contos pairs conflicting materialities of hard and soft to jar sentimentalities, in a manner she has termed 'heavy femininity'. Equal parts fantastical and recognisable, her works revel in the space between playful and menacing, innocent and fetishistic, anthropomorphic and primordial.

Focusing on identity, gender and queer perspectives, Kate Bohunnis' installations connect material experimentation and its ability to communicate psychological states and behaviours. Her use of stainless steel to create fluid, dropping organic sculptural forms is a deliberate strategy to challenge the assumption of gendered materials and processes. Captured in *with each little death #3* is a conflation of hard metal and soft form, a gentle sculpture slumped in the corner yet quietly taking up space. Bodies are present in many of these works, whether literal and figurative, or metaphoric, suggesting the trace of a body. The artist's body, the subject's body, the audience's body. Perhaps it is in the nature of moving through the world in the female form that one cannot help but be aware of one's body. Although, as Bohunnis has rightly noted, 'patriarchal oppression and subordination does not only undermine a cis woman's body, but extends to many communities across gender and sexuality.'

The politics of the feminine body in space is also central to Julia Trybala's work. Her moody paintings investigate the politics of taking up space: what it means to paint a woman so dominant she must be folded into the canvas, contorted to fit within the frame. Her work *I always lock the door when I creep by daylight* takes as its title a line from Gilman's text. Murky layers of paint reference the wallpaper as described by the woman in the text: '*a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.*' In this carefully composed painting, closely cropped, ambiguous body parts are entangled across the canvas; fleshy female planes contort and push to the edge of the canvas as though trying to escape its confines.

In Jahnne Pasco-White's works, bodies take many forms. She embraces the leakage of bodies: human bodies, bodies of water, bodies of work. As a mothering artist, the division of labour between creative and domestic work is not clearly delineated; it seeps and flows. For *Yellow Wallpaper*, Pasco-White has made two new works – *Rearranging my body (1)* and *Rearranging my body (2)* – both incorporating organic materials as natural handmade dyes, using materials such as beetroot, turmeric and olive, as well as earth pigments collected from around the home. Her materials lists often conjure images of domestic space, the garden, the laundry, the kitchen where food is prepared and consumed; offcuts and remnants saved and resourcefully reworked to create something new.

Michelle Ussher's practice often scrutinises the nature of intimacy, exploring symbolic representations of female identity and sexuality. Her paintings utilise soft abstraction to suggest a body in transit, as in *Two Eyeballs on the Run — Looking for a New Head to House. Part One* – a ghostly apparition seeking a home, or a body to inhabit. Another work by Ussher, *Yellow Eyes Burn and Return (Bitches are Witches)*, speaks to female kinship as a form of madness. We are reminded of the isolation treatment for 'female hysteria' which sought to disconnect a woman from community, and supposedly mentally strenuous activities involving the mind or body. A soundtrack by Ussher sets the scene for the exhibition: the sound of women laughing. Are they cackling with joy or with madness?

STATION is delighted to present this group of ten artists in an exhibition that was originally intended to be staged within the specific Victorian-era context of The Hotel Windsor, for Spring 1883. In lieu of this presentation, a domestic arrangement has been made within the gallery, setting the scene within which the action plays out. Many of the works included in the exhibition explore thresholds – between physical and psychological spaces, life and death, freedom and suppression, madness and sanity. Also shared is a deliberate play with materials and processes – the traditionally female soft fabrics, sewing, patchwork, and the more masculine metals, welding, casting and carpentry. It, therefore, felt important to allow them space within the physical world (as opposed to existing purely in the virtual), to allow audiences (if and when possible) to experience their materiality, their presence, and the relationships and dialogues manifesting between them.