

CYNTHIA DINAN-MITCHELL

Mood Lighting

March 23 – April 21, 2018

Opening Reception
Friday, March 23
6:30-8:30 pm



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THE WOMAN IN THE WALLPAPER:

ART, INTERIOR DESIGN, AND GENDER PERFORMANCE IN THE WORK OF CYNTHIA DINAN-MITCHELL

BY COLE SWANSON

“There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. It is always the same shape, only very numerous. And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern.”¹

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Set in a colonial mansion in the late 19th century, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* tells the tale of a woman kept in solitude among the jaundiced forms and figures on the walls enveloping her in an upper floor nursery. Likely struggling with post-partum depression, Gilman’s protagonist descends into the creative and agonizing world of the wallpaper as a response to the weeks-long solitary care imposed on her by husband and physician, John. It is perhaps ironic that in Gilman’s story, the woman’s descent into madness is also the pathway to freedom from the patriarchal world holding her hostage; she rebukes her care and enters into the yellowed patterns where she can express her rage, clenching fistfuls of ornament, violently shaking the walls and threatening to tear the whole arrangement down.

Over 125 years have passed since the initial publication of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, but the relationships present within—especially between gender, modernity, and aesthetics—continue to provoke critical debate on contemporary issues. More than a century after Gilman’s protagonist crossed the threshold between the nursery and the wallpaper—society and the unknown—artist Cynthia Dinan-Mitchell follows suit by delving deep into the worlds of painting, printmaking, and interior design and their historical antecedents. In her exhibition *Mood Lighting* at Open Studio, Toronto, Dinan-Mitchell’s



reuptake of handmade methods and materials is used to perform gender in the conflation and perversion of modern ideologies. Her practice attempts to dissolve the boundaries between public and private realms, the gallery and domestic space, to reclaim agency where western modern thought has historically governed technology, the sciences, and the arts. The catalyst for such a reclamation of power lies in Dinan-Mitchell's performance of the feminine that both assumes and subverts gender codes to commune with a newly, domesticated public.

Cynthia Dinan-Mitchell has established a creative practice around confounding the boundaries between art and craft through the deconstruction of the gallery space itself. Drawing on the language and history of interior design, Dinan-Mitchell's installations conjure domesticity within the public realm, forgoing the near-sacred masculinity of unfettered, white walls.² Unlike Gilman's antihero, gallery patrons enter into the wallpapered space knowing that at any time, they can leave. Instead of forcibly confining her visitors, the artist lures them in with sickly-sweet images; from a distance, the room bursts with flora and fauna, pretty and pleasurable, and ripe for the picking. But there is an illusion at work that affirms the patron's sense of power, that they alone decide when to enter the space and how to consume it. Conversely, Dinan-Mitchell plays the ruse of passive femininity, and thinly veiled images emerge quickly from the walls like medieval grotesques misbehaving in the margins. Emblems of beauty and death surround intruders, illuminating their foolishness and challenging their subjectivity.

Mood Lighting emerges from a direct engagement with Renaissance *vanitas* paintings, an historical genre that Dinan-Mitchell employs as a platform to explore intersections between colonialism, progress, and art. Hand-painted screenprints are filled with the bounty of a centuries-long story of western development, including well-known existential motifs—skulls hidden among flora and fauna—as well as icons of industrial and technological development—lamps, radios, microphones, and satellites. Time is demarcated by scientific advancements that act as temporal rungs essential to Modernism’s ladder. A carefully arranged menagerie of animals, plants, and objects within the prints simultaneously recall aesthetic modes found in crests and botanical illustrations. The work evokes familial and nationalistic sentiments, with the systematic arrangement of exotic spoils fleshing out a narrative of progress based on the expansion of colonial power. In the form of *vanitas*, the art objects express anxiety around the instability of modern systems in contemporary culture by alluding to their inherent demise. But more importantly, by mounting each still life on the wallpapered gallery, Dinan-Mitchell shifts power inward to the domestic space, and in doing so, participates in a history of homespun activism contemporaneous to the era of Gilman’s text.³

Cynthia Dinan-Mitchell rejoices in the perversion of historic systems by performing and subverting gender through the making and presentation of artwork. Like the conflicted narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the artist traverses the confines of domesticity through an exploration of form and femininity, utilizing the powers of pattern, image, and space to reclaim agency for those lost within the margins of western modern thought. Like a witch in a gingerbread house, Dinan-Mitchell beckons us in to indulge in the beauty and death of it all, to get sick feasting on our follies. She is the creeping woman, hidden in the wallpaper.

¹ Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader: The Yellow Wallpaper, and Other Fiction*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 11.

² Leslie, Deborah, and Suzanne Reimer. “Gender, Modern Design, and Home Consumption.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2003, pp. 293–316. Leslie and Reimer consider the masculine rhetoric embedded in the establishment of Modern design by citing texts by Le Corbusier and curators Hitchcock and Johnson. The authors demonstrate the Modernist rejection of ornament in part due to cultural associations between decoration, femininity, and homosexuality.

³ Blount, Ethel. *Story of a Homespun Web*. London: Dent and Sons. 1913. At the turn of the 20th century, female operated guilds like the Peasant Arts Society embraced homespun crafts as a form of activism against the industrialization of society in Western Europe. An instructional guide and philosophical treatise, *The Story of a Homespun Web* by Ethel Blount embodies a countercultural movement challenging relationships between gender, progress, and art.

Artist Bio

CYNTHIA DINAN-MITCHELL

Cynthia Dinan-Mitchell employs printmaking and installation to examine, deform and pervert notions of interior decoration. She creates excessive and saturated *mise-en-scènes* as a way to transform the gallery space. The whole installations become the context and the art; however, each singular object is created as an autonomous piece. Through this work she can question and/or parody notions such as ornamentation, beauty, taste, gender and hierarchy.

Cynthia Dinan-Mitchell holds a Bachelors degree in Fine Arts from Concordia University (2002) and a Masters in Visual Arts from Laval University, Québec City, (2007). Her work has been presented as part of many solo and group exhibitions in Québec and Canada including the Museum of Fine Arts of Québec and as part of exhibitions held in Thailand, Brazil and the United States.

She lives and works in Québec City and is represented by D'Este Gallery in Montreal.

Author Bio

COLE SWANSON

Cole Swanson is an artist and educator based in Toronto. He has exhibited his works in solo and group exhibitions in international venues including those in Brazil, India, China, Taiwan, and Italy. Swanson is a two-time national fellowship winner through the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute (2007, 2014) for his research on miniature painting, fresco, and hand-made pigments.

Swanson has performed many professional roles within the arts and has held positions in curatorial work, gallery administration, and post-secondary education including his current post as Professor/Program Coordinator of Art Foundation, Humber College. He has lectured at institutions like the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design (India), the University of Rajasthan (India), Chung Li University (Taiwan), the University of Toronto, the University of Guelph, and Sheridan College.

Swanson has received support from public agencies including the Toronto Arts Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Images

Cover: *Pink Petals*, 2017, screenprint, acrylic paint, coloured pencil and varnish on museum board, 63 cm x 84 cm. Photo by: Charles-Frédéric Ouellet.

Interior: *On Air*, 2017, screenprint, acrylic paint, coloured pencil and varnish on museum board, 63 cm x 84 cm. Photo by: Charles-Frédéric Ouellet.

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