

Moritz Scheper: The Yellow Wallpaper, ArtReview, Jan/Feb 2018:110

The Yellow Wallpaper

Ginerva Gambino, Cologne 10 November – 16 December

These days there is no shortage of exhibitions focusing on the body in general and the female body in particular. Yet this is to be expected, since the exploration of this issue is as urgent and topical as ever. Even so, this group show offers a different approach, connecting the works through references (some obvious, some not) to the eponymous 1892 short story by feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman – a tale that obviously hasn't lost importance for female artists since it was first deployed in Feminist Art Program's *Womanhouse* exhibition in Los Angeles in 1972.

In brief, Gilman's story tells of a female character confined to a room to recover from 'nervous exhaustion'. There she discovers a woman imprisoned inside the pattern of the room's wallpaper, which she begins to rip off, eventually hallucinating that the woman is herself, descending into insanity along the way. If the story is dominated by techniques for the pathologising of womanhood, the works here, by the five female artists, focus instead on the leitmotif of the madness-inducing incompatibility between self-image, the image of women and an actual woman. For example, in her sombre all-over paintings *Tar Baby #7* and *Tar Baby #8* (both 2015), Phoebe Collings-James has applied a wildly patterned black colour using the sole of her foot. The extent to which

she uses this Carolee Schneeman-inspired painting technique to create counterimages of female corporality becomes clear when contrasted with *Cunt* (2014). This insult is repeatedly written, in baby blue, on a dirty cleaning rag, summarising a misogynistic view of women as contemptible domestic workers.

A more humorous path is taken by Ebecho Muslimova, whose satirical ink drawings show her alter ego Fatebe, a naked pop-eyed corpulent, who variously uses her body and its orifices for her entertainment, for example as a human curtain clip in *Fatebe window curtain* (2016), wherein the curtain goes into her mouth and emerges again somewhere below her waistline. The raw activism of this cartoon character almost functions as an antithesis to the woman in Gilman's story, who is compelled to lie still as part of a resting cure, because medical science at the time related physical stimuli to female hysteria.

Movements of female flesh are also central to Vanessa Conte's *Polished Out* (2017). Constructed in panels like pages of a graphic novel, the drawing shows how a woman's dead tooth is violently extracted from her mouth. The flapping of cheeks after a slap to the face or the intrusion of fingers into the oral cavity are all exaggerated in the kind of pro-violence

fashion we associate with, say, Quentin Tarantino's films. This really is an orgy of demeaning brutality. Initially the combination of American pulp and sexualised violence seems highly problematic. Yet this concern largely disappears as soon as one flicks through Conte's short-story collection *Cures for Pouting Girls* (2016), also on display. These tales, inspired by the genre of corporal-punishment fiction (well known via *Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2011), also show female caricatures with enormous breasts and watermelon-size bums being sexually humiliated by angry men, as a punishment for... nothing much really. By means of this unrestrained, ultra-graphic amplification of casual sexism, in stories with titles such as 'Going Down' or 'Pamela's Hard Day', Conte forges a clever connection with Gilman's portrayal of a cure that was aimed at women's minds but intended for their bodies.

The dark, at times cynical humour in most works, especially in those by Conte and Muslimova, manages to remove the sour taste of moralism from this bitter topic. Nonetheless, it's a damning indictment of how women are viewed in our times that Gilman's story continues to be a reference point for young female artists – even if, as here, it's wittily mobilised. *Moritz Scheper*

Translated from the German by Kevin Kennedy



Phoebe Collings-James, *Cunt*, 2014, oil on cloth, 50 x 53 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Ginerva Gambino, Cologne