

***Wallflower: An Exploration of Female
Self-Representation***

(Mary Ruth)

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the requirements for the degree of
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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Morag Porteous', written in a cursive style.

Morag Porteous July 1999

Abstract

My project is an investigation, both theoretical and practical, of a mode of self-portraiture and autobiography which represents the self as a process, rather than as a fixed identity. It consists of a written thesis and an installation of drawings. The starting point was a fascination with works by four women - Gwen John, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jean Rhys and Louise Bourgeois. These works all draw on self-portraiture and autobiography. A common motif in the selected works by these women is the use of a room to represent the self. The walls suggest a restrictive version of femininity through which images of repressed experience emerge.

The works embody the inadequacy of traditional modes of representing and speaking the self to represent female experiences; and they also deal with the struggle with repressive versions of 'femininity'. They develop forms which represent a self as a process - not fully in the symbolic order of language and the mirror image, but disrupted by the unconscious, open to dreams and the body. They develop visual and textual strategies which catch the viewer up in this process.

I have drawn on Kristeva's concept of feminism as a signifying space to argue that this representation can be seen as a liberating one. Language and art become possible sites for exploring new ways of representing female subjectivity in which individual experiences of fear, anger and desire can be felt pushing through the symbolic order, and the language and conventions which seek to repress and contain them.

My method has been to make a close comparative textual analysis of the selected works, and to relate their formal strategies to contemporary theories of subjectivity and representation. I have also made a series of drawings

which attempt to illustrate the formal structure of the works, and record my unconscious encounter with them. Part of the intention of the project was to find a way in which these two processes could be unified.

The final result is a 'reading' room . The drawings use imagery drawn from the works, and from the lives of the artists, emerging from beneath a formal pattern symbolic of femininity. The room encloses the viewer and a narrative is suggested, but not stated.

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Introduction

When I was nineteen and living in London, I came across two paintings by Gwen John which had a strange and inexplicable effect on me.

Stirred by Francis Bacon's brutal visions in the Tate, and the industrial-strength noise of bands spewing forth rage against Thatcherism, I could not understand why it was that these two small and refined self portraits should trouble me so much. However, I was haunted by Gwen John. When I later encountered the fiction of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jean Rhys, and the work of Louise Bourgeois, her ghost was no longer alone.

The works of these four women are disturbing in a way that I found difficult to articulate, and which seems to be at odds with the restraint of their style. The intention of this thesis is to explore, in writing and drawing, the connections between these works; and the nature of my response to them.

A common motif running through the work of John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois is that of a woman in a 'room of her own'. Far from being a refuge however, these rooms are haunted by desires and traumas that the world outside the walls offers no way of representing. The project of representing the unsayable and invisible that is implicit in these works resonates with contemporary theories of feminine subjectivity and the problems of its representation.

The fluid logic of dreams structures these works, and uncanny effects trouble the authorial 'I' and distort the mirror image. The conventions of autobiography and self-portraiture are unsettled. Aspects of female experience repressed by particular cultural and socio-historical constructions of femininity return in disguised forms, disrupting the symbolic language that sustains the

social order. The works all represent a woman whose sense of self is fissured by the conflict between her desire and the social law, and are disturbing because they enact this conflict. The destabilisation of the 'I' and the mirror image catch us, the readers or viewers, in the processes of her subjectivity, rather than presenting us with an image of a fixed identity.

These four artists and writers achieve compelling representations of female subjectivity in which fear, anger and desire can be felt; and in which the complexities of their relationships with their mothers, lovers and children are explored. The works address the problem of developing a discourse, written or visual, through which these unsayable or invisible experiences might be heard and envisioned. They trouble the viewer or reader because of a 'repressionist' aesthetic, through which what is *not* seen or not spoken (the invisible, the unsayable) paradoxically becomes a powerful presence in the works.

Julia Kristeva suggests that the third wave of feminism be understood as a 'signifying space', in which the language that sustains the repressive social order might be ruptured by the irrational significations of the unconscious and the body. In this way a more liberating model of subjectivity may emerge, and the field of shared representations be opened up to include those female experiences it has historically repressed. Women, traditionally the signifiers of male fears and desires, begin to appear themselves as desiring subjects.

I find this model of feminist aesthetics compelling because it envisions art practice as *doing* something through formal inventiveness. Intrinsic to my project is a commitment to a model of critical analysis that considers works of art to be capable of embodying ways of thinking and seeing, which operate on the viewer or reader by disrupting conventions of representation. The critical object becomes the way the work affects me, and I have

tried to find a way to represent what these works do: to me, and to conventions of subjectivity and femininity, rather than interpreting them as statements or incorporating them in theoretical propositions.

Ernst van Alphen has provided a recent critical model that foregrounds the experience of the work of art, rather than interpreting it, and considers the subversive effects of works that disrupts conventions of identity and gender. Van Alphen's book on the paintings of Francis Bacon is an extended meditation on the pain that he experiences as a result of viewing these works. From a moment of a profound hurt that renders him speechless before the works, comes an attempt to work through the emotional impact of the works, and to find a critical discourse to represent it. His book, he says, 'is an attempt to deal with the 'affective' quality of Bacon's works in a way that simultaneously demonstrates and explains it.'¹

An aspect of his conception of the object of art criticism, which is very important to this thesis, is his attention to the paintings as neither containing propositions, nor as being susceptible to theoretical interpretation, rather as works which speak 'theoretically' in their own right. 'For', he says, 'the paintings enact, embody, *are* or *do* these propositions.'² Bacon's art is not *about* things, argues van Alphen, it is *doing* things. The 'signs' of which the painting consists may be 'representational elements (body-parts, dress, gazes or hands), but also devices (impasto, distortion, erasure, drawing) and elements (arrows, light bulbs, shadows, holes, structures, landscapes) that mediate between these two categories.'³ His method is to analyse the function of the detail of the pictures, considered as signs.

¹ Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, Reaktion Books, London: 1992 p. 9.

² *ibid.*, p. 12.

³ *ibid.*, p. 17.

Through an interweaving of discourses - the paintings themselves, novels, psychoanalysis, theories of representation - van Alphen explores the ways in which Bacon's paintings counter not only conventions of representation, for instance of the male body, but also the ideologies which sustain those conventions. He advocates a form of art criticism that starts from examining the 'violence' done to the viewer by the works. His approach is a detailed analysis of what the paintings do, of how they produce this *affect*, and of the way in which this 'works against conventions that are so much a part of our way of seeing that attempts to touch them, touch us.'⁴ Thus van Alphen explores the effect on viewers of subversive strategies similar to those outlined by Kristeva. I have followed his method of analysis to argue that the unsettling effects of the work of John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois have a destabilising effect on the viewer. These are not obedient works which offer back an experience of wholeness or completeness to the viewer.

The whole project consists of a written thesis and a room of wall drawings. I wanted to make drawings that reproduced the haunting effects, which the works had on me, and which found visual form for the language of the novels' heroines. A repeated pattern is used to suggest the restricted voice of the narrating 'I', while underneath it emerge dreamlike motifs and figures. These are drawn from incidents in the works and in the artists' biographies, but the narrative must be constructed by the viewer.

Chapter One of the paper discusses the problem of representing female experience and gives a more detailed analysis of Kristeva's discourse on subjectivity and language. It expands the concept of a repressionist aesthetic with reference to Freud's idea of the uncanny, and I then give a detailed overview of the terms of my comparison of works by the four women, which indicates

how they draw on the dynamics of repression to develop feminist forms of signification.

Chapters Two to Five deal with each artist, or writer, in turn. Each chapter gives a short introduction to an artist's engagement with the problem of representing female subjectivity as a central focus in their work. I give a very brief biography in order to contextualise their particular experience of repressive versions of femininity. I consider the extent to which they were able to live a life which defied convention, and to what extent they remained troubled by the lack of language in which to communicate their embodied experience. I examine the ways that their work uses forms and language which draw on the unconscious to undermine the authority of the traditional concept of identity conveyed by the portrait image and the 'I'. I discuss the role of art practice as an ongoing way of resolving the tensions and repressions that 'femininity' required of them. I then consider the ways repressive femininity was linked to rooms for each artist, and I examine in detail works by each artist in which the room becomes a preferred site for exploring the fear and desire of the female subject in process.

Chapter Six deals in detail with the methodology of my drawings, and considers the way they fit into the project. It addresses the desire to find a mode of illustration that will respond to the formal language of the works, connecting this to the model of criticism I outlined in Chapter One, and considering some precedents for this in the work of Odilon Redon and Peter Milton.

Chapter One

A Feminist Signifying Space

As women have gained access to the institutions of power over the course of this century, they have increasingly found that the roles open to them remain limited, and that the sacrifices demanded in exchange are great. John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois were all able to make artistic careers. They had access, albeit somewhat limited, to the institutions of art schools, publishing, and exhibitions. They were also able to some extent to live independent lives, or to combine work and family. These opportunities are of course due to advantages of class and culture, and also to the effects of 'first wave' feminism in changing social structures.¹ A reading of their commentaries on their lives reveals that what they all 'suffered' from as women was not so much limited opportunities, as the fact that an ideology of femininity still operated to render them invisible and to make their experiences unrepresentable. Their works realise the fact that to advance the liberation of (white, middle-class) women any further, the forms of language and representation that sustain the ideology of femininity as passive and domestic, must be attacked in order to render the complexities of individual, embodied female existence visible.

In the work of John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois, the woman who is the implied subject of the work 'tries to be good', to assume the language and conventions of femininity which authority requires of her, but her attempts to do this are ruptured by the passions these discourses repress. In this way, I argue, these works can be seen as disturbing conventions of femininity, and as moving towards a feminist poetic language. In John's work these passions are suggested, rather than embodied. In the work of Gilman and Rhys the repressed is articulated, but its return is catastrophic. It is in the late

¹ Gilman was herself a highly influential campaigner for women's rights, and an analyst of the underlying causes of oppression. Bourgeois was involved in feminist activism in the 1970s.

work of Bourgeois that the subject-in-process most positively emerges.

A psycho-linguistically informed feminist analysis, most persuasively developed by Julia Kristeva, addresses this dilemma through a critique of representation. Her argument is useful in that it provides a way of conceptualising the exclusion of female experience from representation. It also provides a formulation of how this absence might be redressed through artistic practice.

Kristeva suggests that the language of symbolic power is gendered male, and is sustained by the repression of the body, gendered as female. Drawing on Lacan, she argues that the attainment of symbolic functioning is through the repression of the body and the maternal connection, and that this repression constitutes the subject under patriarchy. Symbolic identity is therefore restrictive, especially to women, and symbolic language cannot utter female experience.

Symbolic identity is attained through the repression of what she calls the 'chora' - that is, the maternal space in which the infant has no sense of itself as a separate identity, but is a continuum with the mother's body, pulsed by the rhythms of the body and the drives, and by colours, sounds and shapes it has not yet learned to name or conceive of as independent objects in space. In order to attain symbolic identity and enter the social order, it must learn to see and speak itself as separate - which happens through the recognition of the mirror image, and then the acquisition of language. Symbolic signification, in contrast to the semiotic, works through propositions and judgements, it is a realm of *positions*.²

² Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986 p. 98. Hereafter referred to in the footnotes as 'RPL'.

In psychoanalytic theory, the separation necessary to symbolic functioning is made through the mirror phase, and the discovery of castration. It is the mirror phase that initiates the separation of the subject's body 'agitated by the semiotic motility' from the unified mirror image. In order to recognise itself in the mirror, the child has to 'see' itself as a separate entity, whereas its previous awareness was of a continuum of self and objects. This produces an entirely different kind of spatial awareness, an intuition of which is necessary to symbol formation, because it allows the child to see other objects around it as also separate and discontinuous. 'Positing the imaged ego leads to the positing of the object, which is, likewise, separate and signifiable.'³

It is castration that puts the finishing touches to this process of separation. The mother's body, previously 'the receptacle and guarantor of demands' was the phallus:

The discovery of castration, however, detaches the subject from his dependence on the mother, and the perception of this lack makes the phallic function a symbolic function - *the* symbolic function. This is a decisive moment fraught with consequences: The subject, finding his identity in the symbolic, *separates* from his fusion with the mother, *confines* his *jouissance* to the genital and transfers semiotic motility on to the symbolic order. ⁴

Lacan understands castration as an imaginary construction through which the subject renounces the mother and takes the phallus as the signifier 'so that the introduction of an articulated network of differences, which refers to objects henceforth and only in this way separated from a subject, may constitute meaning.'⁵ Kristeva argues that the analysis of dreams and neurosis reveal that it is the penis 'which, becoming the major referent in this operation of separation, gives full meaning to the lack - or to the desire

³ *ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time' in *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi p. 198. Hereafter referred to in the footnotes as 'WT'.

- which constitutes the subject during his or her insertion into the order of language.'

Thus the social contract is also sustained by, and founded on, a structure of sexual difference: 'Sexual difference ... is translated by and translates a difference in the relationship of subjects to the symbolic contract which is the social contract: a difference, then, in the relationship to power, language and meaning.'⁶

Kristeva's account of the relationship between women and signification has met with a mixed response from feminist critics. She has been criticised for perpetuating a psychoanalytic discourse which constructs femininity as lack, and women as man's other; and for failing to recognise the ways in which women have succeeded in working language to their own ends.⁷ However, I find her work compelling because it offers a way of understanding how women's oppression might be fought through the scene of representation. In other words, Kristeva argues that in order for female experience to emerge as an *equal* presence in culture, conventions of representation which sustain repressive versions of identity and uphold the authority of symbolic language must be contested. She sees the works of women artists and writers as sites where they can begin to undo the mechanisms of their oppression, and so to change the social order. Artistic practice can be seen as a process of making the self in opposition to the curtailed versions of female subjectivity offered by the symbolic.

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ibid., p. 196.

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Feminist response to Kristeva is divided. Some, for instance Elizabeth Grosz, criticise her for not conceptualising femininity as a positive term, and for accepting Lacan's account of symbolisation as always a function of the Law of the Father. Gayatri Spivak argues that Kristeva's writing is flawed by Eurocentric assumptions which perpetuate the universalisation of 'woman' that she is trying to write against. Patricia Yaeger argues that her formulation ignores the extent to which women have succeeded in working language to their own ends. Others, including Toril Moi and Rachel Bowlby, have found that her work does suggest new forms of work and language which are resistant to authority, and through which individual female voices emerge.

In Kristeva's analysis, the increasingly 'scientific' and rationalist discourse that sustains the symbolic order is sacrificial in that it excludes women's bodies, their joys and pain. She says, 'They find no affect there, no more than they find the fluid and infinitesimal significations of their relationships with their own bodies, that of the child, another woman or a man.'⁸ In her earlier work on the rise of the novel, and on avant-garde poetic practice, she identified some of the ways in which the unconscious could reveal itself through language, and also how this developed a different, and more liberating, understanding of subjectivity - what she calls the 'subject-in-process', who does not repress the unconscious, and the processes by which he was formed, in favour of the phallic identity demanded by the symbolic. Kristeva finds such a discourse, and such subjectivity, suggested by or implicit in the 'revolution in poetic language' carried out by (male) writers of the avant-garde - Mallarmé, Kafka, Joyce. As she sees it, women writers have never gone far enough in this attack from within on language.

Her discussion of female writer-suicides leads her to theorise that such a practice is more dangerous for a woman, because of her more precarious relationship to the symbolic order. Gaining access to political and historical affairs of the society demands of a woman that she identify with values considered to be masculine 'mastery, superego, the sanctioning communicative word that institutes stable social exchange.' While change can be achieved from such a position, as it was for instance by the suffragettes, it ultimately leaves unchanged the exclusion of femaleness and of female specificity from the social order. The other extreme (that taken by women more bound to the mother and less repressive of their unconscious drives) is to refuse to play a part in the symbolic order. Instead, they 'refuse this role and

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Julia Kristeva, 'WT', in *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi p. 199.

sullenly hold back, neither speaking nor writing, in a permanent state of expectation, occasionally punctuated by some kind of outburst: a cry, a refusal, “hysterical symptoms.””⁹

Kristeva is of the opinion that women must enter the symbolic, the temporal order of history and politics, but they must not accept the role of masculine woman that it offers them. In other words, they must take the stage in order to negate this representation of the way women can act in public affairs:

let us on the contrary refuse all roles to summon this ‘truth’ situated outside time, a truth that is neither true nor false, that cannot be fitted in to the order of speech and social symbolism, that is an echo of our jouissance, of our mad words, of our pregnancies. But how can we do this? By listening; by recognising the unspoken in all discourse, however Revolutionary, by emphasising at each point whatever remains unsatisfied, repressed, new, eccentric, incomprehensible, that which disturbs the mutual understanding of the established powers.¹⁰

Kristeva recognises that any attempt to formulate or systematise the subversion of this sacrificial contract will itself become ‘frustrating, mutilating, sacrificial’, as that is the nature of formulations. So, she says, ‘another attitude is more lucid from the beginning, more self-analytical which - without refusing or sidestepping this socio-symbolic order - consists in trying to explore the constitution and functioning of this contract, starting less from the knowledge accumulated about it (anthropology, psychoanalysis, linguistics) than from the very personal affect experienced when facing it as a subject and as a woman.’¹¹

She argues that rather than taking a ‘masculine’ position in the social order, or a ‘feminine’ one outside it, women must continually bring the one to bear on the other.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, ‘WT’, p. 200.

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, ‘About Chinese Women’, p. 156. Hereafter referred to in the footnotes as ‘ACW’.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, ‘WT’, p. 200.

Kristeva sees the problem that the third wave of feminists are taking on as being to develop the possibility of reconciling maternal and historical time, emphasising the co-existence of the symbolic and what it represses. The central issue of feminism is to work against the repressive, restrictive representations of women in patriarchal culture, and towards an acceptance of difference, of everyone's full personhood, which also means away from a monolithic 'Woman', and towards an acceptance and expression of each woman's specificity. 'The sharpest and most subtle point of feminist subversion brought about by the new generation will henceforth be situated on the terrain of the inseparable conjunction of the sexual and the symbolic, in order to discover, first, the specificity of the female, and then, in the end, that of each individual woman.' ¹²

She sees the issue of language as central to this understanding, and artistic practice as one of the areas in which such a version of subjectivity can be found. This is because artistic language of a certain kind (verbal or visual) opposes and breaks up within itself the pretensions to inviolability and universality of rational language, and the stable, phallic identity it constructs. 'The unconscious, drive-related and trans-verbal scene' if projected into symbolic identity, rather than being repressed by it, 'is capable of blowing up the whole construct.'¹³ Kristeva speculates that a form of practice addressing the processes of an individual female subject, as she grapples with conventions of representation and repressive constructions of femininity, bears witness to a desire 'to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, the secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex.'¹⁴ The kind of practice she is referring to is the

¹² *ibid.*, p. 196.

¹³ Julia Kristeva, 'ACW', p. 153.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 153.

‘research’ of contemporary women artists, whose work attempts ‘to break the code, to shatter language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnamable repressed by the social contract.’¹⁵

This formulation enlightened the nature of my response to works by John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois, and provided a way of articulating the similarities I had sensed between their concerns and practice. Like ghost stories, their works haunt me. They are filled by a presence that eludes the eye, a voice that the ear does not hear. There is a paradox here in that this presence, this voice, is nevertheless, implacable, unavoidable, confronting. It is this paradox that makes these works so powerful and unsettling. The subject of the works is female experience, and particularly female psychic conflict brought about by the repressive effects of social law. To tell this story, they enact the conflict within the work in a way that shakes the structure of language, allowing the repressed female to be seen and heard.

Such a practice has a two-fold effect. It was a form of resistance for the artists themselves, an ongoing process throughout their lives which allowed them to resist conventions of feminine identity. It also has a wider effect, for in viewing or reading these works, our assumptions about identity and femininity are called into question. Writers like Toril Moi and Roland Barthes help to elucidate the inadequacy of the authoritative model of the self which traditionally appears in self-portraiture and autobiography. Moi writes that this autonomous self ‘banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction and ambiguity.’¹⁶ Roland Barthes, in his meditations on autobiography, and on the self-image given by photography, discusses the failure of the ‘I’ and the image of the body to represent the spectrum of his

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Julia Kristeva, ‘WT’, p. 200.

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Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, London: Methuen, 1985 p. 8.

experience.¹⁷ The conventions of autobiography and self-portraiture rest on a model of the self which, in Kristeva's terms, represents symbolic identity, and not the subject-in-process. Barthes' discussion of the relation between self and representation argues that in writing 'I' or seeing a photographic image of the self, I suffer a translation of my turbulence into the banality of accepted wisdom. These acts confer a boundary on the self, and place it in the very social order that one had wanted to resist. This is doubly problematic for women, whose bodies have so long been used as the signifiers of patriarchal culture's preoccupations.

The practice of the four artists and writers I am discussing draws on self-portraiture and autobiography, but their works upset the conventions of these genres. They reject the image of the body and the authoritative 'I', instead finding ways to represent the dynamics of the 'subject-in-process'. In all these works, the room becomes an important motif, and the convention of the room as a safe haven, and of femininity as passive and domestic, is undone. A restrained style is used to suggest the build-up of pressure of the experiences these conventions repress, and forms are found through which they might be represented.

One of Rhys's heroines says, 'But never tell the truth about rooms, because it would bust the roof off everything and undermine the whole social system. All rooms are the same. All rooms have four walls, a door, a window or two, a bed, a chair and perhaps a bidet. A room is a place where you hide from the wolves outside and that's all any room is. Why should I worry about changing my room?'¹⁸

¹⁷

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London: Vintage, 1982.

¹⁸

Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight*, London: Andre Deutsch 1939.

But all these works do ‘tell the truth about rooms’, and I argue that the way in which they do so provides a setting in which, if not the whole social system, then at least the language that sustains it, might be undermined, and the female experience it represses be let out. This involves the recognition, in all these works, that the wolves are not outside, but inside. Their howls, which these works make audible and visible, are over specifically female experiences of childhood, desire, anger and the maternal relationship, which I will discuss in more detail in relation to each work.

The use of a room to stage the self in the works I discuss is particularly suited to the project of feminist signification because of the multiple associations it sets up. It is associated with the ideology of femininity as domestic, passive, silent and enclosed. It is also, according to Virginia Woolf,¹⁹ in the ‘room of her own’ that women are able to access the space needed to make art, so in feminist thought it carries associations of liberation and independence. The room is thus both the site of repression and of possible liberation.

In imaginary life the room is associated with the self, as revealed in the analysis of dream symbolism by Freud, and in the literary analysis of Bachelard.²⁰ For Bachelard the room in dreams and writing also refers back to childhood. The room is both familiar, homely, protective, but also the site of night fears and terrors. The German word that Freud uses for the uncanny, ‘unheimlich’, literally describes the way in which our most familiar spaces become suddenly charged and changed by the return of the repressed, and are sites in which past traumas recur. Hal Foster explains ‘the uncanny for Freud

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own; Three Guineas*, edited and with an introduction by Morag Shiach, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

²⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated from the French by Maria Jolas; foreword by Etienne Gilson, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

involves the return of a familiar phenomenon (image or object, person or event) made strange by repression. This return of the repressed renders the subject anxious and the phenomenon ambiguous...'²¹ The effects of the uncanny, he says, are to blur distinctions between the real and the imagined, between the animate and inanimate, and he argues that the appearance of the uncanny in surrealist practice is evidence of a psychic ambivalence which is 'a provocative ambiguity in artistic practice and cultural politics alike.'²² The works are provocative because the aesthetics of the uncanny disrupt the repressions on which symbolic identity is constructed.

In the works I discuss, the room becomes a place in which all these differing associations are put into play. As such it becomes animated by the dynamics of repression and return that structure subjectivity, in a way that specifically addresses female experiences. It involves the viewer/reader in these processes. These rooms can be seen as feminist signifying spaces. The works are complete in themselves, beautifully and clearly constructed; yet their elisions and silences work strangely on the mind. They demand response and thought - though not interpretation.

Gwen John produced a series of small drawings and paintings of herself, her friends, her cats and her room. Her self-portraits, and her portraits of other women, suggest the limitations of the representational self-image, associated with projecting identity, in finding form for female experience. In her paintings of her room, a convention of femininity as passive and domestic is at once evoked and resisted by a strange, disquieting atmosphere, and a subjectivity closer to experience is suggested. The restraint of the style of painting, with its muted tones and low contrasts, builds an intensity into the

²¹ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 1993, p. 7.

²² *ibid.*, p. 17.

work which suggests an obsessive gaze, and produces an uncanny stillness. In John's self-portraits, the figure is encroached on by the space around it. In her paintings of her room, her figure is absent and, instead, objects are used to suggest her activity. The largeness of space in the rooms contrasts with the sparseness and slightness of objects - space carries more signifying weight in these works.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's extraordinary story 'The Yellow Wallpaper', the shadowy presence who haunts the edges of John's rooms emerges from beneath the pattern on the walls. The story deals with the nervous breakdown of the narrating character, after the birth of her first child. The clipped, controlled tones of this narrator, the 'I', who internalises the prohibitions on her emotional responses of her husband and doctor, are blown apart when the repressed, literally, returns. The effectiveness of the way this story is told is profound, and it contrasts with Gilman's other fiction in which she adopts a didactic tone. In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', there is an intense compression of the narrative style. Its sudden breaks and deflections, short sentences and clipped tones build a tautness into the text. This contrasts with the way the description of the pattern is conjured up - it is wild, unlimited, uncontrollable, can't be seen whole or comprehended. In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', the story is told by someone who may or may not have killed herself at the end - the outcome of the plot is ambiguous. So we don't know 'where' the voice is speaking from, or what kind of authority it has. It is the wallpaper and the women she discerns behind it, who press in on, and threaten 'I's voice, through which the effects of this work are achieved.

In Jean Rhys's retelling of the story of the first Mrs. Rochester, the mad wife from *Jane Eyre*, she draws on places and traumas from her own experience. Mr. Rochester imprisons Antoinette Cosway in a room, and unable to remember her

past - she has no words for her experience, she has thus no way of understanding her predicament. As her memory comes back to her through hallucinations on her prison wall, she is empowered to escape. As in all of Rhys's fiction, there is a contrast between the limited, flat utterances of the heroine's speaking voice, and the richness of her internal language. In this last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this conflict is resolved, although the ending is profoundly ambiguous. In one sense, we already know that Antoinette Cosway's (Bertha Mason's) story ends in her death, but again, 'where' is she speaking from? Not knowing makes the story and its narrator difficult to objectify and contain.

In Louise Bourgeois's art practice, sculpture, drawing, prints and installation and performance mingle, and her work is remarkable for the heterogeneity of her materials. Her compulsive working through of the recurrence in the present of traumatic events from the past reveals the way in which identity is formed through repression, and finds form for the repressed. In her *Cells*, in particular, a representation of female experiences of childhood emerges. We look into a room in which a traumatic scene is revisited - the stifling of young, feminine power by the repressive structures of the nuclear family. In Louise Bourgeois's *Cell* the expressive gestures of the hands is weighed upon by the intruding, impassive silence of the other components. With whom is the viewer to identify? Who is controlling the story? Her work throws into question symbolising processes which rely on a separation of subject and object.

In these works, symbolic identity, secured through the narrating 'I' and the mirror image, is shown to be inadequate. In the fiction, the deflections of the narrating voice at points of emotional turmoil from a clipped, controlled tone to one in which seething images are conjured up gives the effect of an undercurrent of strong emotion in the narrator;

irrational forces/responses she fears and is unable to articulate in her 'rational' voice. The naturalistic body image is rejected by John and Bourgeois, who use a mixture of representation, abstraction and symbolic objects to suggest the dynamics of subjectivity.

Repetition is another device which runs through all these works. John and Bourgeois produce series, reworking a similar sight or event. In the fiction of Gilman and Rhys, the heroine makes the same climactic discovery several times. These repetitions produce a sense of a pattern being worked out, and of a return to obsessions - fear of something that has already happened.

The works themselves become agents through which the repressed is returned. In addressing the dilemma of the silent girl through these innovative forms, they open up the field of shared representations to the complexities of female experience that representations of femininity have tended to deny or omit. They show the limitations of discourses of femininity, and of an understanding of the self as a fixed identity by invoking these expectations in the viewer and then undermining them.

The subject's relationship to the social order, and experience of its repressive effects, is not a case of an opposition between inner and outer experience. Rather, the censorship is internalised, and the subject herself is the ground of the struggle. What we have in each work then is a subject who is distressed from within by her particular experience of the symbolic order's repression of women as desiring subjects.

In analysing the similarities in concerns and aesthetic of these works, I argue that they are not the expression of an innate, transhistorical, universal female essence. Rather, they are the products of historically positioned subjects who - as women - have experienced the limitations of contemporary

discourses. The works reveal that symbolic female identity does not fit with the desires, fears and joys which animate a woman's body. The images of herself and the discourses on feminine subjectivity offered to her are partial, restrictive, and in conflict with her bodily and unconscious experience. This conflict is painful and traumatic. By drawing on the logic of the unconscious and the uncanny to undermine the symbolic language of her medium, she represents this conflict. The experiments with language and form through which this predicament is expressed have a powerful and subversive effect, and thus the works become scenes of female empowerment. This is because the works are 'repressionist', rather than expressionist. That is, they do not discharge anger at the female predicament through the display of emotion, but rather make an assault from within upon the language and forms that sustain oppressive structures of sexual difference.

My room is so delicious after a whole day outside,
it seems to me that I am not myself except in my room.¹

It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the first day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over.²

Gwen John engaged in a life-long investigation of representing female subjectivity. Her subjects are herself, her women friends and her rooms. She also produced numerous drawings and watercolours of her cats, flowers, local landscapes and studies of figures in church. While the latter include some groups, her subjects are nearly always alone. Her achievement in these works is to suggest the complexity of inner experience, and the difficulty of expressing it through appearance.

Two roughly contemporary early portraits *Self-portrait* 1899-1900 and *Self-portrait in a Red Blouse* 1902 produce such different versions of her image as to seem to be of two different people. Of course this is not unusual in self-portraiture, but what most interests me about the comparison of these two images is the way in which it is the one with less immediate authority that is in fact the most compelling, and in which some characteristics of John's investigation of the representation of female subjectivity emerge.

¹ Gwen John, from a letter to Rodin quoted in Mary Taubman, *Gwen John*, London: Scolar Press, 1985, p. 18.

² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 (originally published 1902), p. 39.



Figure 1.
Gwen John, *Self-portrait* 1899-1900
oil on canvas 61 x 36.5

The immediate effect of *Self-Portrait* is of authority. The figure's hand-on-hip stance, her cool, slightly downward gaze out at the viewer, and the set of her jaw all suggest a woman who is confident and self-assured. She commands both the space of the image and the viewer's gaze.

Self-Portrait in a Red Blouse is a stranger, more ambiguous investigation of the self-image. The slightly theatrical pose which gives the effect of an identity being projected is gone, and the figure occupies much less of the space of the painting. The figure does not suggest 'character' or activity, she is passive and vulnerable, and yet there is also an air of defiance: her eyes meet, but do not acknowledge, the viewer's gaze: she invites us to look, but refuses to be seen.



Figure 2.
Gwen John, *Self-portrait in a Red Blouse* 1902
oil on canvas 45 x 35"

A series of tensions structure the image. There is both vulnerability and defiance about the pose. There is a precarious balance between her figure - modelled, a pulsing red, almost breathing, pushing out of the front of the picture - and the simple outline that tends to render her flat, insubstantial: a 'mere' image or sign like the cameo at her neck. This cameo on its black ribbon literally draws a line between her head and body, heightening the contrast between her impassive face and the warm redness of her dress.

A sense of naturalism achieved by the exquisite modelling of the face is undercut by the blurring of the figure/ground relationship. On the left-hand-side, the tonal contrast suggests recessive space behind the figure, while on the right hand side the sleeve is flat against the wall, and there is a point where the hair almost blends into the wall. While there is little distance implied between the figure and the viewer, she does not dominate the canvas. Space presses in on her, an effect heightened by the exaggerated sloping shoulders and limp arms. The image is balanced at some point in a process of disintegration and re-formation.

This movement between silhouette and solidity -
between woman as sign and desiring female subject
- has the effect of focussing attention not on what the
subject projects, but on that which she feels or experiences
- and because this woman refuses to enact herself for our
gaze, what we look at is her unknowableness, or
unrepresentableness.

Self-Portrait in a Red Blouse moves away from
representing the self through mimicking the mirror
image. It opens up an investigation of subjectivity as
process. Through working within the conventions of
naturalistic representation, and at the same time subtly
undermining them, she suggests subjectivity as a process.
Gwen John grapples with the difficulty of expressing her
inner life. From reading the biography and letters of
Gwen John, I was stuck by the contrast between her fierce
independence and almost pathological shyness. These
tendencies were evident throughout her life.

John was born in 1876, the second of four children. Her
mother was an artistic woman who encouraged the
children to draw, but she became increasingly absent from
the children's lives as ill health took her to spas, seeking a
cure.³ She died when John was eight. Their father, a
solicitor, took the young family to live in Tenby, where
the atmosphere of oppressive silence in the house was
mitigated by the children's freedom to explore the
surrounding country for adventures, which included
swimming far out to sea in unprotected waters.⁴ John and
her brother Augustus drew and painted from a young age,
turning the attic into a studio. After the younger
Augustus went to the Slade, he joined Gwen in persuading
their father that she also be allowed to attend. In 1895 she
moved to London and began her studies there. She won a

³ Chitty, Susan, *Gwen John 1876-1939*. London: Hodder and
Staunton, 1981.

⁴ This is recorded in Augustus John's autobiography, *Chiaroscuro*,
and the second chapter of Chitty's biography of Gwen John, *ibid*.

prize for figure-drawing and developed supportive friendships with other students. She moved to France in 1903, and spent most of the rest of her life living and working in virtual isolation in and around Paris. She died in 1939.⁵

Although through her brother and her Slade friends she had contact with a lively group of artists who admired and encouraged her work, John was notoriously reclusive, loath to meet new people even those as supportive of her work as her collector and patron John Quinn, and suffered tremendous anxiety over exhibiting work. Her shyness is commented on both by herself and by her friends and contemporaries. Chitty refers to the anxiety felt by the John children over speaking to their father, a shy but authoritarian man who seems to have had difficulty in relating to his children. Gwen and her sister thought up and practised conversations with him in advance, and also communicated with each other by sign language. Throughout her life John continued to find face-to-face communication difficult, as she wrote to her friend Michel Salaman:

I don't pretend to know anybody well. People are like shadows to me and I am like a shadow. To me the writing of a letter is a very important event. I try to say what I mean exactly. It is the only chance I have, for in talking, shyness and timidity distort the meaning of my words in people's ears - that I think is one reason why I am such a waif.⁶

And yet, she was a passionate and unconventional woman. She had a five year affair with the sculptor Auguste Rodin, and liaisons with several women. In 1903 Gwen John and Dorelia McNeil (later to become the second woman in Augustus's ménage à trois) had set out to walk to Rome; they got as far as Toulouse, supporting themselves by

⁵ John's physical neglect of herself was a concern to others, including her brother. She lived extremely frugally, often went hungry, and there is some suggestion that this was the cause, or a contributing factor, in her death.

⁶ Gwen John, in a letter to Michel Salaman, quoted in Chitty, op cit. p. 53. It is worth noting in this context that her close friends remember John as an easy and witty presence - it is in the projection of a public identity that she found it impossible to express herself.

modelling and drawing. In Paris Gwen John was able to make a living as an artist's model.

Although the wages were often meagre and the work tiring, sometimes ending in harassment by her employers, it gave her the independence she needed in order to work. John sometimes spent nights camped out alone in the parks and countryside searching for her lost cats, and sometimes for the pleasure of sleeping out.

Janet Wolff has suggested that a number of social conditions in Gwen John's time created new possibilities for young women. The rise of the "new woman", the activism of the Suffragettes - and the bohemian art circles she moved in, in Paris and London - all had an impact on John, in her working and sexual life. 'As an expatriate and an artist, John was clearly liberated from the values and demands of bourgeois life... In many ways, Gwen John's life was radically unfeminine with regard to her sexual relationships and lifestyle.'⁷

This is neither to suggest that these adventures were without real fear and danger, nor that her reclusiveness was not in part due to the real restrictions on her movements that she experienced as a woman. In letters John continually refers to being jeered at in the streets, and harassed by *rodeurs* - 'bad men'. Wolff has argued that the limitation of her subjects is thus partly due to sexual difference, as well as individual sensibility. For Wolff, Gwen John's "interior life" and her choice of subjects has to be understood sociologically. She argues that despite the freedom from conventions referred to above, and the way in which non-domestic spaces such as the department store, park and theatre opened up public access for middle-class women in this period, 'the *ideology* of separate spheres and of women's proper place was dominant, operating to render invisible (or unrespectable) women who were in the street.'⁸ She goes

⁷ Wolff, Janet, *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995 p. 97.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 95.

on to say, 'There is no evidence that in Paris in the 1900s women had the same opportunity to inhabit the public arena on anything like the same terms as men.'⁹

Wolff writes of John's representations of the "feminine" space of the home, '... there is a strange dislocation of the meaning of woman/feminine/domestic in the case of these lone figures who so clearly *refuse* women's mission - the roles of wife and mother ... it is difficult to read Gwen John's images in any straightforward way as participating in the representation and re-production of ideologies of gendered space.'¹⁰ However, her essay is mainly concerned with investigating the ways in which sexual difference structured John's opportunities as an artist, and her analysis of the works themselves is not developed further.

I argue that rather than being seen as results of her limited freedom due to gender, Gwen John's choice of subjects, and her treatment of them, can be seen as an attempt to work through these conventions - many of which were internalised - and to work towards ways in which her 'invisible' experience might be rendered. She works against the grain of the ideology of femininity that restricted her access to public life, and left her a speechless shadow. While she was liberated from the demands of bourgeois life, these values remained ingrained in her, and also conditioned other people's responses to her. 'Femininity' was troublesome to her not just as an ideology that limited her public life, but as an internalised prohibition on her self-representation. By remaining in her room painting, her action is directed at the repressive representations of femininity, which she both invokes and undercuts in her work.

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ibid., p. 107.

¹⁰

ibid., p. 96.

Now I want to consider John's room images within an ideology of middle class femininity as domestic. This ideology of femininity is associated with a refusal of recognition to autonomous female desire in the period. In other words, there is a clear association made between domesticity and a passive, obedient sexuality. This connection is made explicit by John in the way she refers to her room in her letters to Rodin.

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlowe journeys off to face the horror wreaked by man's desire, when released from the restraints of civilisation. To him, it is right that women are to stay at home, meanwhile, as the guardians of civility. 'They - the women I mean - are out of it, should be out of it. We must help them stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse.'¹¹ A similar cosy, domesticated feminine interior space is represented in pictures by the Camden Town Group - particularly those by Harold Gilman. Gwen John's brother Augustus was associated with this group of predominantly male English contemporaries.

The domestic interior is constructed as a beautiful and rarefied feminine space by Conrad and by Gilman; a refuge from the harsh realities of the public, masculine world, as in Gilman's *The Breakfast Table*. In Gilman's nudes, female sexuality is depicted as passive and compliant, awaiting the male lover, an integrated element in the domestic harmony.¹²

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Joseph Conrad, op cit. p. 39.

Richard Thomson has claimed that Gilman depicts female sexuality with 'a mood of unabashed sexual enthusiasm', because in one or two images the model smiles back at the viewer. However, to my mind, the poses emphasise vulnerability and passivity - these nudes await the lover's desire, rather than projecting their own. See, Harold J. W. Gilman, *Harold Gilman, 1876-1919*, catalogue for an exhibition held at City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, Oct. 10-Nov. 14, 1981. Text by Andrew Causey and Richard Thomson, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, c1981.



Figure 3.
Harold Gilman, *The Breakfast Table* 1910
oil on canvas 60.6 x 52.7



Figure 4.
Harold Gilman, *Nude* c1911
oil on canvas 50.2 x 34.9

Conrad's Marlowe suggests that threats to the realisation of this feminine world might come from 'some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the first day of creation'¹³. In fact, during this period it was threatened from within; by the emergence of the suffragettes, laying claim to their equal place in public life, and also by a public discourse on female sexuality. Marie Stopes wrote in 1918, 'By the majority of "nice" people woman is supposed to have no spontaneous sex-impulses ... So widespread is the view that it is only depraved women who have such feelings (especially before marriage) that most women would rather die than own up that they *do* at times feel a physical yearning indescribable, but as profound as hunger for food.'¹⁴

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Joseph Conrad, op cit., p. 39.

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Marie Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties*, London: 1918, quoted by Richard Thompson in *Harold Gilman 1876 - 1919*, op cit.

Even within Gwen John's artistic circle, with its attempts to break free of bourgeois morality, John felt the effects of an ideology which refused to recognise, or which censored the expression of, autonomous female desire. For John, Rodin was sexual fulfilment, and the attraction was powerful. It is interesting that there *is* a representation by John of her experiences on the streets and in the parks of Paris, and of her sexuality. However, it is in her private letters, not her public work. During and after her affair with Rodin, she wrote him over two thousand letters, which reveal both the necessity and the impossibility of giving form to these emotions. In her biography which paraphrases John's letters to Rodin, Chitty remarks on the sexual frankness of the letters, as well as the strength of John's awakened desire. Paraphrasing her letters, Chitty writes 'A week without love and she froze "like a stream in winter" she said. After love she was filled with courage and energy. She drew better, she slept better, she loved everyone, men followed her in the street and her clients said she looked twenty again.'¹⁵ Sex re-embodied John's 'shadow' self, rendering her visible. However, their affair was ruled by Rodin, who chose the times and frequency of their meetings. Although John broke the rules, she waited outside his house and followed him in the street; she was obsessed by him and seems never to have questioned his ultimate authority.

Rodin once said of women, 'Their nature is not ours, we must be circumspect in unveiling their tender and delicate mystery.'¹⁶ His responses to some of John's more passionate outbursts suggest his double standard. Chitty writes that he also 'complained that she fell on him when

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Chitty, op cit., p. 90.

¹⁶

ibid., p. 91. All the evidence suggests that theirs was a one-sided relationship. Rodin had a series of lovers amongst his models (John was one), as well as his long term mistresses. Although he clearly had genuine concern for John's welfare, helping her financially and writing to her on occasion, he was not interested in meeting her emotional needs. Chitty suggests that although he encouraged her drawing he had no idea of her artistic ability and commitment.

he visited her, greedy only for her own pleasure. “Immodesty is not charming in a woman”, he said.¹⁷ Chitty notes that in John’s letters she writes that ‘she was left with a sense of guilt, a feeling that she was in some way dirty or inferior. Love-making was wrong because it incommoded her lover, so were the substitutes for love because he disapproved of them ... No wonder she told Rodin endlessly that she had just visited the baths in rue d’Odessa, that she had spent two hours burnishing her room.. ‘She often woke before dawn, but then she lay naked and thought of Rodin. Soon the intimate part of her body was on fire and, like Sappho, she would turn and “spread her tender limbs” and do “what only Rodin should do”. Afterwards she always wrote and confessed to Rodin. He was invariably angry and ordered her to sleep with her hands crossed on her chest.’¹⁸ For John, this ideology of passive female sexuality functioned both to limit her real opportunities for fulfilment and also, to the extent that she had internalised it, to censor and repress her own desire.

John refers to her room paintings as attempts to represent the beauty and calm of this space:

My room is so lovely. If you knew how charming I find it you would think that I exaggerate its beauty perhaps. But I am going to do some paintings to show you what I find so lovely in it. I am going to do some in the mirror of my wardrobe - with myself as a figure doing something.¹⁹

In letters to Rodin she refers to cleaning and tidying her room in an effort to show him that she was not giving way to obsessive desire, but was endeavouring to behave according to his model of acceptable femininity.

John’s ‘room of her own’ was her refuge, and the work space in which she pursued her serious artistic vision. It was also both the scene of her awakened sexuality, and of her attempts to ‘fit’ her desire to the model of a repressive

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁹ Gwen John, quoted in Taubman p. 18.

convention. It is not surprising then that John's room images explore the equation of femininity and domesticity in a quite different way from the work of her male contemporaries. Her work is distinguished by the simplicity and minimalism of her interiors, the peculiar largeness and emptiness of space, the lack of narrative content and the chilliness of colours. It is these features which make for the strangeness and difference of John's room images, which I will now explore in more detail through references to three works in particular: *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris (with Flowers)* 1907-09, *Interior (Rue Terre Neuve)* 1920-24, and *The Japanese Doll* early to late 1920s,

The 'props' in John's rooms suggest femininity and domesticity - some are protective, umbrellas and shawls, there are also teapots and china, flowers, a doll, papers, books. Their arrangement has a casualness which is belied by the quiet intensity of the images. These small, ephemeral moments become the object of a compulsive stare, and the objects are surrounded by a vastness and emptiness which distinguishes her work from the sense of claustrophobia and clutter that often emerges in Sickert and Gilman. The ambiguity of the delineation of space heightens this effect of a stare. While the scenes are obviously interiors, the walls do not enclose or protect. In these images we look across a narrow expanse of floor, where furniture is placed against one wall, often with a window, which is cropped by the edges of the canvas.

In *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris (with Flowers)*, this unbounded space has the effect of transfixing the viewer, and produces an air of expectation. Pictorial space is enclosed and limited by the fixed stare of the artist from a particular point, defined by the edge of the canvas, rather than by an architectural enclosure.

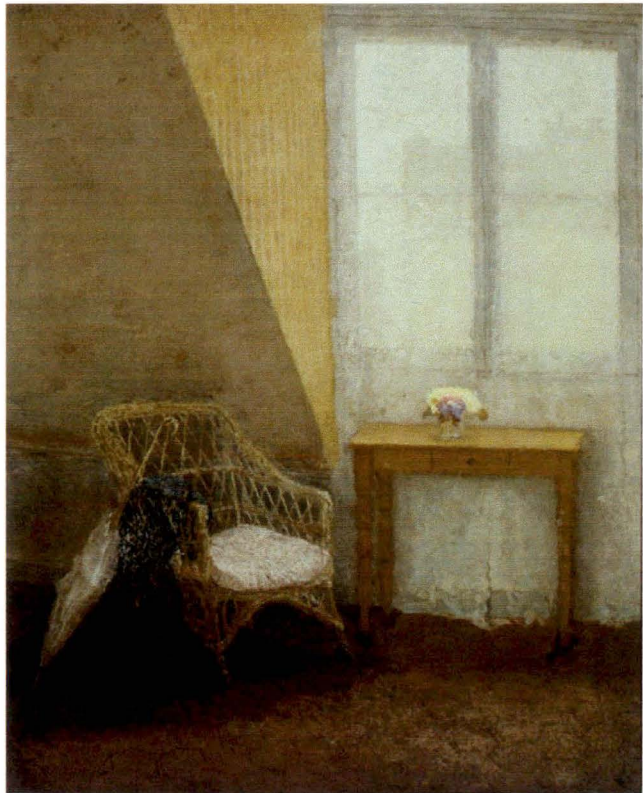


Figure 5.
Gwen John, *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris (with Flowers)* 1907-09
oil on canvas 32 x 26.5

At first glance it is an intimate picture, but the chair and table seem much too small. Dwarfed by the size of the room and window, they occupy space tentatively. This effect of empty space is heightened by the distance between the bottom edge of the painting and the furniture. Beneath the chair, its shadow is a dark pool, and solid ground seems to dissolve beneath its back leg. This room is not quite a home. The feminine objects, the light furniture, the cape, the umbrella (both protective), the flowers on the table, exist in an uneasy relationship to the space. They do not domesticate it.

A lacy curtain gently screens the window, but somehow the image suggests that the threat to this calm and ordered interior comes not from the outside world, but from within. The point of greatest tonal contrast lies at the extreme lower edge of the painting, where the white umbrella and deep purplish shadow meet. The eye is continually drawn here, only to bump up against the edge

of the canvas. I feel I am drawn to look at something, that the image does not show. It is a charged image. The fixity and stillness of the insistent stare at this corner, suggests anxiety that is in tension with a meditative quality. The light entering the room through the window - the outside - is balanced by the creeping, looming shadow on the left-hand side.

This monumental space becomes more acute in some later images, for example *Interior (Rue Terre Neuve)* early to mid 1920s, (22.2 x 27 cm), oil on canvas. Again, the objects in this interior suggest a simple domestic space. In the foreground is a table set with a brown teapot; light enters through the high window on the top right.



Figure 6.
Gwen John, *Interior (Rue Terre Neuve)* 1920-24
oil on canvas 22 x 27

To describe this image in terms of what it represents, however, becomes futile, as the composition and handling of paint lead to the limits of the space being very hard to grasp. There is a chill in this image. Colour is very muted; various tones of a green tinged grey are used quite uniformly. This has the effect of dissolving the boundaries between objects, and the white objects on the table are hard to read, all merging into one another. This room suggests a convent cell. It is extremely pared down and simplified. The comfort implied by the chair, umbrella and flowers in the earlier room is gone. The window frame becomes a cross, silhouetted by light entering from behind.

In *The Japanese Doll* early to late 1920s, (30.5x40.7 cm), oil on canvas, the doll is petrified, once again in a space which recedes, becoming cavernous rather than protective. 'The paintings are beautiful and yet also challenging and uncomfortable',²⁰ writes David Fraser Jenkins. What is challenging and uncomfortable in this image is the way that a domestic space is rendered strange and unfamiliar. John's repeated return to the depiction of these charged spaces increases this uncanny effect.



Figure 7.
Gwen John, *The Japanese Doll* 1924 - 29
oil on canvas 30.5 x 40.5

It seems to me that these images of John's room become images of her own psyche. The room and the things in it do not function allegorically to suggest persona, but by allusion and by the different kinds of forces - movement, scale and time - and the tensions between them, they suggest psychic processes or experiences. These oppositions are between what is external and internal, public and private, admitted and repressed, revealed and concealed.

The contrast between John's passionate life and the 'shadow', as she refers to herself, suggests that her reclusiveness was in part due to her inability to find spoken language to represent herself to others.

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D. F. Jenkins. 'Gwen John: 'An Appreciation'', in David F Jenkins and Cecily Langdale, *Gwen John: An Interior Life*, New York: Rizzoli, 1986, p. 45.

Confronted with strangers and, indeed, by her lover, she felt her 'meaning' distorted and her 'self' reduced to a shadow - she could not give public form to her embodied existence. John's letters are a diaristic process which to some extent work against this problem. They are a way of living through this conflict. John was never satisfied with them as an end in themselves, as is revealed by the sheer number she wrote.²¹

Gwen John was never able to find a public language for the complexity of her embodied experience, but her rooms at least suggest this lack, unsettling the conventions of femininity from within. In this sense, they have a paradoxical power. They threaten the social and psychic structures that made her emotional life 'invisible' and necessarily private. There is evidence that John tried to accept and conform to a repressive norm of femininity, and that her room paintings are part of this process, but they do not quite succeed in this. She unsettles a convention of femininity, paradoxically, by 'trying to be good'. She brings what is repressed to loom around the walls of repression, which begin to dissolve.

²¹

Interestingly, her drawings of cats have an easy sensuality. The dates for the greatest volume of these (as given by Chitty) coincide with the Rodin affair. She gave many of them to him.

Chapter Three

Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Yellow Wallpaper

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, written in 1892, the threat to domesticity and conventional femininity that lurks beyond the edges of John's canvases begins to take shape. In Gilman's work, as with John's, female subjectivity is constructed as split by the repression of experiences that she cannot represent, and which run counter to a contemporary ideology of femininity. The project of the story's narrator is to find a language that allows her embodied experience into her public voice.

A young woman is confined to her room by her husband and doctor, ordered to rest her nerves after the birth of her first child. Like the imagined occupant of John's rooms, she tries to be good but, as she stares at the bedroom walls, strange shapes are seen moving around behind the hideous pattern of the wallpaper. The prescribed remedy of rest is unsuccessful, and the narrator becomes increasingly obsessed with deciphering the pattern of the wallpaper and releasing the shadowy woman only she can see imprisoned behind it. The story is in the form of a journal secretly kept by the woman, who has been a writer. Her husband forbids her to write, as he fears that her overactive imagination will strain her nerves, but she herself feels that writing would in fact help to ease her anxiety.

The story is in part autobiographical, drawing on Gilman's own 'nervous breakdown', following the birth of her first child and her traumatic divorce. It is not clear what 'I' suffers from, nor is it really clear whether she gets better or worse. In fact, labels like disease and madness seem inappropriate in this case. The focus of the story is the dynamics of the heroine's thought processes, conscious and unconscious. The work is a powerful evocation of a particular female subjectivity, rather than the tale of an illness.

Gilman uses a structural device that represents her heroine as split between the speaking self and the feeling self. This disjunction is produced by internalised social prohibitions, which are overthrown when the repressed, literally, returns. More explicitly, the split is between her socially acceptable self who conforms to an ideal of femininity, and the self she must repress in order to do so. It is between her symbolic role and those aspects of herself that she must sacrifice in order to attain it. This sacrifice is shown to be one that is internal, and constitutive of the 'I'.

Gilman was born in 1860 in Connecticut; her father was a librarian who abandoned the family when she was very young. Her devastated mother withdrew all expressions of affection from her daughter, apparently to spare her the inevitable heartbreak of emotional attachment. Charlotte Perkins Gilman married at twenty-four and shortly afterwards began to experience the first of the periods of depression which, after the birth of her daughter, became crippling. It was then that she underwent the 'rest cure', at the time a popular treatment for women's mental illnesses, which is described in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It was not a success, and Gilman only began to recover when she was able to lead an independent life away from her family. She was divorced in 1887 and suffered from bouts of depression for the rest of her life.

She embarked on a career as a radical feminist writer and activist. Unlike Gwen John, Gilman had an enormous and bold public presence, and could see the social dimensions of individual oppression. She toured widely, lecturing and writing on the causes of women's conditions. She was the author of several influential books including *Women and Economics*, 'an analysis of the history, sociology and political economy of the female sex'¹; a contributor to, and editor of, various political journals; and a giver of provocative public lectures on the feminist cause. Gilman remarried in 1900,

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Unattributed foreword, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, London: Virago Modern Classics, 1981.

and this second partnership was much happier. In 1935, suffering from inoperable cancer, she committed suicide.

Although she was a prime mover in 'first wave' feminism, Gilman too was troubled by repressive versions of femininity that she internalised; and, by the lack of any way to represent certain complex experiences - like that of her relationship with her family and child. She believed that women ought to be able to combine work and motherhood, but in her first marriage found this impossible, despite the fact that her husband was sympathetic to her career. She was publicly pilloried for 'abandoning' her daughter, a description that caused her enormous pain. In fact at several periods she tried having her daughter with her, but felt that the stable home-life provided by her ex-husband and his new wife was preferable to her peripatetic and hand-to-mouth lifestyle, living mostly in boarding houses and off the proceeds of lectures and sporadic bouts of teaching,

As well as her non-fiction - which addresses the economic oppression of women - Gilman explores the damaging effects of sex-role stereotypes in stories and novels. These are lively, filled with anger at injustice, and often told with an elegant humour, but none of them have the psychological force of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Many of them are utopian, if eminently practical, solutions to the problems that women face; demonstrating that values such as rationality, education and sisterhood can transform oppressive social structures.

In 'Making a Change'² the real trials and difficulties of motherhood - the fatigue, the possible lack of an immediate, 'natural' bond between mother and child, the fact that mothering is learnt, rather than innate, are addressed, but rapidly solved. A young wife and mother is driven to the point of suicide by the constant crying of her new baby, her

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'Making a Change', in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Harmondsworth, Penguin 1995 (a Penguin 60s Classic).

fatigue, the nagging of her husband and mother-in-law, and her frustration at not being able to practice her profession, which is music. The mother-in-law finds the wife on the point of death, repents of her nagging, and together they devise a plan. The mother-in-law opens a kindergarten, the wife resumes giving music lessons and, with the extra money they hire a housekeeper. This is kept a secret from the husband, who is happy but in the dark about the return to health and happiness of his wife, her harmonious relationship with his mother, and the improved conditions of the household.

What blocks women from taking this practical approach to their problems is explored in other stories. An ideology of femininity, which encourages women to be passive, domestic and preoccupied with their appearance, is shown to limit both women's grasp on their situation, and also the contribution they could make to society. Education and rational thought are shown to be the tools by which they can change their situation.³

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, however, the internalised effects of this ideology of femininity is explored with much more psychological 'truth', and Gilman addresses the way in which the overly rational and repressive character of symbolic language functions to allow female experience to appear only as hysterical. This story, unique in Gilman's work, suggests that in addition to education and economic independence, in order to be truly liberated women must find ways of communicating the complexities of their inner lives that 'femininity' serves to disguise. In this way it looks forward to Kristeva's definition of 'third wave' feminism.

Gwen John's room paintings work within and against the representation of women as domestic, suggesting the emergence into the feminine space of the experiences such a construction represses. *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be seen in

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See for instance 'Turned' in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995.

relation to similar assumptions about women: their bodies and their social role that underpin the understanding of hysteria in this period, and in particular Dr S. Weir Mitchell's 'rest cure', which Gilman herself tried after her breakdown, and a version of which is undergone by the narrator of the story.

Weir Mitchell was the most influential specialist in nervous illness of his day. He believed that women's role was to be 'the source and center of the home.'⁴ Ellen L. Bassuk has convincingly argued that he saw hysteria as a selfish refusal of this duty, and regarded the rest cure as a means to curb the patient's willfulness and return her to her rightful place.⁵ Women's greater susceptibility to nervous conditions was explained through their supposedly inferior and weaker bodies. Normal female functions such as menstruation, menopause and lactation were regarded as diseases. Because women's major role was reproduction and nurturing (a fact that this supposed dominance of her body and mind by her reproductive organs confirmed), and because these processes were considered so demanding, she must avoid all 'unnecessary' stress. For Weir Mitchell and many of his medical contemporaries, this meant that women were unfit for equal education with men, and for work outside the home.

[T]he woman's desire to be on a level of competition with men and to assume his duties, is I am sure, making mischief, for it is my belief that no length of generations of her change in education and modes of activity will ever really alter her characteristics. She is physiologically other than the man. I am concerned with her as she now is, only desiring in my small way to help her to be in wiser and

⁴ Silas Weir Mitchell, 'Wear and Tear, Or Hints for the Overworked', 1891, quoted by Ellen L. Bassuk in her essay, 'The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women's Conflicts?' in Susan Rubin Suleiman, Ed, *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 147.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 31. Again, Bassuk quoting Mitchell: 'The women who manifested nervous conditions such as hysteria, hypochondria or neurasthenia were profoundly selfish and tyrannical'. As Oliver Wendell Holmes said, they were like 'vampires sucking the blood of the healthy people of a household'.

more healthful fashion what I believe her Maker meant her to be, and to teach her how not to be that with which her physiological construction and the strong ordeals of her sexual life threaten her as no contingencies of man's career threaten in like measure or like number the feeblest of the masculine sex.⁶

Thus the 'rest cure' he devised, and which was widely influential in the treatment of such conditions in this period, demanded that the woman accept the total authority of the physician for the period of the cure. It required that the patient be removed from her family, friends and stimulating company, be completely confined to bed for six weeks to two months (she would be spoon-fed and use a bedpan), be fed a fattening diet, allowed to do no work or exercise, be administered enemas and vaginal douches, and be read to from improving works on women's role.

Prominent feminists and writers, Gilman and Virginia Woolf were themselves subjected to this treatment, which (astonishingly!) failed in both cases. Gilman felt herself to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown for the duration of the treatment. Mitchell's injunction was to 'Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time ... Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live'⁷. It was only when Gilman, ignoring this advice, resumed her work three months later that she began to recover.

It is hard to avoid seeing this treatment as a punishment for 'making mischief'. Given his specific instructions that women were not to write, draw or paint, it is also tempting to see this as an unconscious attempt to prevent the true meaning of women's nervous illnesses being spoken or envisaged.

⁶ ibid., p. 146.

⁷ Mitchell quoted in 'Hysteria, Pain and Gender' from David B. Morris *The Culture of Pain*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p112.

There is some suggestion that Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* in order to expose the treatment - she certainly sent a copy of it to Mitchell 'in order to show him, she said, "the error of his ways."' ⁸ In the story, the heroine, suffering at first from an undefined but apparently mild complaint, is subjected by her husband to a version of the rest cure, and ends up apparently completely mad. Bassuk concludes that it is the story of 'a female protagonist who starts to go mad as a result of the "cure".' It has also been read as Gilman's 'meditation on the psychosocial bond that links domestic confinement, male domination and the distinctive, elusive pain of women's illness.' ⁹

The rational values and language that Gilman advocates elsewhere in this story are shown to have no room in them for representing the traumatic events of the narrator's emotional life - particularly her inability to respond to her new baby, who is largely absent from the story. Unlike the heroines of the other stories, 'I' is unable to talk about what is wrong with her. I argue that it is the failure of language to accommodate her experience that is the real subject and trauma of this book.

The Yellow Wallpaper has a chilling psychological force. The story employs the conventions of the first person narrator - who is never given a name - in such a way as to completely enmesh the reader in the story; to so entangle them in the language that at the end there is confusion about what really happened and the way it unfolded. The device of the journal means that the reader has no external standpoint from which to judge the heroine's mental condition. No fixed diagnosis can be made; we only know what she tells us. The 'truth' of her condition is to be found within her language, which I will analyse in detail. It also suggests that despite what the heroine says, writing is not an unproblematic cure for her condition, because she *is* writing, in the journal. The problem is that she is unable to express in writing the

⁸ Morris, p 114.

⁹ Morris, p 114.

emotions that trouble her, partly because she has internalised the prohibitions on emotion by her husband and doctor, and partly because the clipped, rational tone she adopts when speaking about herself cannot express them.

From the opening passages, there is an opposition set up between rationality - the unshakeable belief in the logical order of the social, physical world - and a romantic yearning for the irrational, the supernatural, and the unseen. This becomes the source of conflict between 'T' and her husband, John. Arriving at the house, which is ancient and has been empty for some time, 'T' 'proudly' asserts that there is something odd about it, only to be laughed at by John, who has 'no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be seen and felt and put down in figures.'¹⁰

Taking to writing in her journal in defiance of John's advice, 'T' has nevertheless internalised his prohibitions on fantasy and emotion, and censors her own forays into her imagination. The terse style of her writing, with its short, abrupt sentences and paragraphs, establishes a picture of 'T' as someone under extreme internal pressure from the build up of repressed thoughts and emotions. Censoring switches of attention occur when she thinks about her mental state; and with them she tries to deflect emotion she feels to be irrational, for instance her 'unreasonable anger' at John. When these threaten to enter her consciousness as she writes, she turns immediately to describing the house, which is thus established as a figure for her condition (one that is also used by Rhys, John and Bourgeois.)

'... but John says the very worst thing I can do is think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. So I will let it alone and talk about the house.'¹¹

¹⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, London: Virago Modern Classics, 1981.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 2.

These descriptions emphasise from the first the 'hedges and walls and gates that lock'. As the story unfolds these symbols of enforced enclosure are multiplied, to include not only the walls of the house, but also the bars on the window of her room, the heavy bedstead, and the gate at the top of the stairs. Similarly the ranks of people against her are expanded to include not only John, but her brother, (also a physician), the threat of Weir Mitchell, and John's sister Jennie. This establishes the increasing desperation of her attempts at repression. Simultaneously, the language used to describe the things that figure the emotions she is repressing, in particular the wallpaper in her room, becomes more florid and violent.

The yellow wallpaper is vividly described, in language that is in contrast to the prevailing flat, even tone. The pattern is 'Dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide, plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.'¹²

The initial general identification of 'I' with the house becomes focussed on the wallpaper. She becomes aware that this hated and incomprehensible front pattern is in fact bars, and behind these bars she discerns a vague shape,

...a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then. But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so- I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.¹³

This figure is a woman, moving round behind the pattern and trying to get out. 'I' begins to sleep by day, and at night she tries to help the woman behind the pattern to escape. She also becomes aware that the 'recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at

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ibid., p. 13.

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ibid., p. 18.

you upside down'¹⁴ are in fact the heads of some of the women who've pushed their way through the pattern but been strangled by it. These are occasions of only partially successful control, and the evidence of their repression is visible and disturbs 'I', who thinks the heads should have been 'covered up'. The inner conflict is figured more and more as a violent one, both in the language used to describe the paper, which becomes actively malevolent, and her discovery of the violence that's been done to the room.

The final scene of the story sees 'I' possessed by the woman behind the paper. She has locked herself in the room, intending to pull off the paper and free the woman; but she has a rope to tie her with if she tries to escape; there is a suggestion that 'I' intends suicide if her final attempt at control is unsuccessful. The strangled heads in the pattern have prefigured such a suicide. She is 'angry enough to do something desperate'. There are countless creeping women loose outside now, and she wonders if 'they all came out of that wallpaper *as I did*'.¹⁵ She is now possessed by that aspect of herself which has been so long pent up, and in fact it's the possession that *saves* her from suicide. "'I've got out at last", said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"' Although the tale ends with the narrator reduced to crawling round and round the floor, there is a sense of triumph in the telling.

There are some inconsistencies in 'I's apparently lucid account of her reading of the wallpaper. The discovery that the vague sub pattern is actually a woman trying to get out happens several times; she is never sure how many there are; and the top pattern is increasingly elusive. Originally, although it 'commits every artistic sin', it seems to have some element of repetition to it, but later descriptions imply that it stretches endlessly on horizontally, with no repeats. Her inability to describe the wallpaper suggests her unrepresentable emotional life. The attempt to maintain the

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ibid., p. 16.

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ibid., p. 35, my italics.

social façade is increasingly one that inflicts violence upon the heroine, and the pattern becomes a malevolent fungus. Like 'I' herself, the reader's attempts to comprehend the pattern are frustrated, 'You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you.'¹⁶

'I's uncovering of the signs of violence in the room, and the increasing malevolence she feels coming from the wallpaper contrast with her speaking voice's passivity, querulousness, lethargy and eventually paranoia. The more she represses and denies her anger, the more of her symptoms she sees in the room; and the more she withdraws emotionally from her condition, the more violent the wallpaper that figures it becomes. The wallpaper's influence spreads beyond the room, yellow streaks rub off on everyone's clothes and the smell of it sticks in her hair even when she's out riding.

In her early descriptions of the room, 'I' mentions the way great patches of the paper have been stripped off, that 'the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed, which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars.'¹⁷ At the end of the story, she herself physically attacks the room in her attempts to free the woman behind the paper, producing the same damage. Thus there is a sense that she is *returning* to some earlier traumatic scene, that it has *always already* happened. This produces an unsettling and uncanny effect for the reader, rather like that suggested in John's paintings by her repetition of images of her room, and by the sense of a compulsive stare in which the viewer becomes involved.

The story has a vehement, impassioned, traumatic effect, an explosive but invisible rage which is dramatically different, and far more potent, than the reasoned, righteous indignation

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ibid., p. 25.

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ibid., p. 9.

that fuels the plots of Gilman's other feminist stories.

As well as anger at her husband though, there is another and sadder pain that 'I' is unable to voice in this story, and that is over her relationship with her absent child, who is mentioned only once:

There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper. If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.¹⁸

This suggests that the baby must be protected from the wallpaper - from the mother, in other words. Gilman was never able to publicly find a way to address the complexities of her own breakdown's effect on her relationship with her own daughter. In his psychoanalytic reading of the work, Jeffrey Berman has argued that in this story Gilman unconsciously works through this relationship, and through her own traumatic childhood and emotional abandonment.¹⁹ Certainly, the descriptions of the wallpaper allow the reader to feel the anger and pain that are notably absent from Gilman's autobiographical account of these events in *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*.

If Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* to advocate writing as the cure for nervous illness, in opposition to Mitchell's rest cure, it does not quite achieve this, at least not at the level of plot. What in fact happens is a more complex exploration of the relationship between women and language. This is because the story is in the form of a journal, secretly kept by the heroine. There is a very strong sense that it is *within* language that her malady is produced. It is her inability to find form for her mental life within the rational language she adopts in trying to write about it that breeds her increasing obsession with the wallpaper, which manifests what she cannot speak. The way the writing frees her is paradoxical.

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ibid., p. 22.

Berman, Jeffrey, *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis*, New York: New York University, 1985.

At the end of the story, she has acknowledged and expressed the rage she began by repressing. Her language has become more vibrant and lively, much freer from the strictures she imposed on herself to begin with - more hysterical, less obsessive. It could be argued in these terms that she works towards a more 'female' language. She lets out the formless female behind the bars of the pattern, a metaphor for the rupture of her constriction. This fits remarkably closely to Kristeva's characterization of the issue. She says, 'Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgement'²⁰

This welling up of 'I's repressed irrationality or her subconscious empowers her, but it can only appear mad to her husband, and to the reader. Thus we are left with an uncertainty at the end of the story. 'I' sounds much saner, but is behaving completely madly.

The suggestion is that when a woman refuses 'femininity' she can only appear mad. 'I' at the end of the story is in one sense doomed to repeat the traumas that the ideology of femininity espoused by Weir Mitchell demands she repress. But at the same time, her 'voice' is now whole, her split self joined, her language firm and clear, and it is she who commands her husband, he who submits and faints.

Chapter Four

Jean Rhys: Out of the Attic

The exploration of dream imagery; the logic of the unconscious; the representation of female experience repressed by conventions of femininity: these features that distinguish *The Yellow Wallpaper* from the rest of Gilman's writing are the main foci of the fiction of Jean Rhys. In Rhys's novels, women are trapped in rooms by their powerlessness to accommodate their inner worlds with their social identity. Rhys's writing is characterised by a poetic style which blends images, word associations, and fragments of songs and sayings to build a rich and complex female subjectivity. This complexity of inner monologue is in tension with the flat and inadequate language of the heroine's interaction with the other characters in the novel. Rhys's women are caught between two modes of being and expression which they are unable to reconcile. In her final novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the heroine is again locked in a room, but on the walls the truth of her condition begins to appear, and finally she escapes.

Jean Rhys was born in 1890 in Dominica, one of five children. In her autobiography she describes feeling rejected by her mother, whom she recalls as uninterested in her. She felt more affection for her father, a doctor, who was supportive of her acting ambitions. She moved to England in 1907, studying acting briefly before starting a series of jobs as a chorus girl, actor and model in England and Europe. After the end of her first love affair she began writing, and her early books, published in the thirties, were critically acclaimed by Ford Madox Ford. She was married three times, and did not publish any new writing until 1966, when *Wide Sargasso Sea* was extremely well received. She had two children with her first husband, a son who died at the age of three weeks, and a daughter who went to live with her father following their divorce. Rhys died in 1979.

The 'Jean Rhys' who emerges from a reading of her published letters and the memoirs of those who knew her is a complex and difficult character. She battled depression and anxiety, and felt herself to be at the mercy of circumstances. Francis Wyndham, a friend and editor of her letters, writes that she suffered from 'congenital physical fatigue' which made her often dependent on others against her will: 'Friends, lovers and relations with sturdier constitutions were always distressed, often irritated and sometimes repelled by the air of helpless passivity with which she made her exigent demands.'¹ Despite this, friends also recall her charm and wit, and her delight in frivolity. Rhys was troubled by a profound feeling of alienation, she felt an outsider wherever she went. She said that she had been homeless ever since she left Dominica, but on reading her autobiography it seems that this sense of isolation also colours her childhood memories. Rhys was tormented by nameless fears; she felt that the world was against her, and that 'people' were out to get her. She sought security and safety through relationships, but the feeling of being protected was always short-lived.

Her works are autobiographical in the sense that they deal with a sensibility similar to Rhys's own. Writing was therapeutic for Rhys, as was painting for Gwen John and writing for Gilman. It was a way of giving shape to experience, and thus coming to terms with times of frustration and unhappiness in her life. Rhys told David Plante, with whom she collaborated on her autobiography in the years just before her death, 'Only writing is important. Only writing takes you out of yourself.'² She also referred to writing as a response to the hostility and lies of 'people' - she felt herself to be almost universally

¹ D. Melly, and F. Wyndham, eds., *Jean Rhys: Letters 1931-66*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1985.

² David Plante, *Difficult Women: A Memoir of Three*, London: Futura, 1984.

misunderstood. Francis Wyndham has written that the frustrations of Rhys's personal life were partly a result of 'the complex emotional amputation which Jean performed on herself after the end of her first love affair to prevent any recurrence of the grief and hurt which overwhelmed her then.'³ Her sense of embattlement seems also to reflect her loss of connection to place and culture. Rhys never came to terms with 'Englishness', but neither did she want to return to Dominica, fearing the changes that would inevitably have taken place since her childhood.

The heroines of Rhys's novels have similarly performed 'complex emotional amputations' on themselves. They are also displaced – individuals cut off from family and social networks. Her early novels are portraits of women who drift aimlessly through a grey and hostile world, dissatisfied, poor and fearful but totally unable to help themselves. They search for security and warmth through relationships with men, but these are doomed to failure. Her heroines have no real connections with the other characters in the book, and their passivity thwarts all attempts of help. Her typical heroine is a 'marginal' (but not working class) woman who does not fit the roles of bourgeois wife and mother, or the 'acceptable' nurturing professions. They are actresses, artists' models, drifting on the edge of prostitution and the arty circles of London and Paris. These characters move on the edges of 'respectability', but remain tied to conventions of femininity. They feel that it is only in the role of the beautiful and adored woman that they can have any power, and not become objects of scorn. This demands the repression of sexuality, the body and strong emotions.

Rhys's work has been taken as an analysis of 'the female condition', and has attracted a great deal of both support

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op cit., Melly, D. and Wyndham, p. 11.

and criticism from feminist writers. To be female in her fictional world is to be frightened, vulnerable, alone and powerless, dependent on men for financial and emotional security.⁴ The most striking aspect of Rhys's fiction, however, is the language through which this female predicament is articulated.⁵

Like the paintings of Gwen John and Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Rhys's fiction addresses the difficulties that women face in finding public form for their experiences. There is a split within the language of the heroine herself between an impoverished speaking voice unable to communicate within the world of the novel, and the fears, anger and desire that animate her interior monologue. Her female characters do have inner resources of strength and vibrancy, but they are unable to 'speak' or access these, partly for fear of appearing 'mad' or 'unlady-like'. Rhys's concern is not with external social conditions as some critics have suggested (her novels ultimately resist the assignment of any external cause to her heroine's predicament), but rather with the way the conflict between the symbolic and the feminine is experienced within female subjectivity. Her heroines are condemned to endless dreary repetition in their rooms unless they can allow into the realm of speech the dreams, memories and images that hold the key to their desires and fears.

⁴ Some, like Linda Bamber in 'Jean Rhys' *Partisan Review* 49,1, 1982, and Drusilla Modjeska in *The Orchard*, see her as endorsing a view of women as passive, helpless victims, manipulatively dependent on men.

⁵ Mary Lou Emery has made an analysis of Rhys's use of language similar to my own in 'The Politics of Form: Jean Rhys's Social Vision in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *Twentieth Century Literature* 28, 1982. Rachel Bowlby has similarly diagnosed the predicament of her early heroines in *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge, 1992. See also Sylvie Maurel *Jean Rhys*, London: Macmillan, 1998.

Rhys's writing constructs a layered subjectivity in which social prohibition is internalised. This is represented by a rational, linear form of speech which is interspersed with the fluid logic of dreams. In the early novels, word associations, fragments of dreams, phrases from songs, and memories filled with fire and water reveal to the reader the heroine's fears and desires. The heroines themselves do not allow these into their speaking voice, and they are thus alienated from both the other characters in the novel, and themselves.

Voyage in the Dark has essentially the same heroine in Anna Morgan as Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Anna Morgan and Antoinette Cosway Mason share the same memories of a West Indian childhood full of scents, colours and warmth, which they recall in the cold drabness of an England in which they are imprisoned in rooms. '[T]his is London - hundreds thousands of white people white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike frowning down one after the other all alike all stuck together...' ⁶, says Anna. This black and white world which offers her no joy conjures up text on a page - it is the 'writing' of a social order which excludes her embodied experience. 'England' is figured as a homogenous and repressive society at odds with the sensual 'Jamaica' of Anna's childhood. Rhys's language draws on her own experience of the contrast between these two cultures to suggest the complexity of female experience. Anna herself is doomed to a dreary and repetitive existence because she cannot find a public way to reconcile these two modes of being. It is in *Wide Sargasso Sea* that Rhys writes of a woman who finally embraces a more fluid understanding of subjectivity when the repressed returns to transform her prison.

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Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969 (First published London: André Deutsch, 1967) p. 16.

Wide Sargasso Sea, like *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is the story of a madwoman in an attic. Rhys was fascinated by the first Mrs. Rochester in Emily Brönte's *Jane Eyre*, the mad Creole heiress imprisoned in the attic whose existence prevents Jane and Rochester from marrying. In Rhys's novel the events leading up to her 'madness' are explored, and differences between English and Creole culture are embellished. Called Bertha Mason in the Brönte novel, Rhys's heroine is named Antoinette Cosway. The change of name signifies her predicament, a young woman whose fate is controlled by men - Mason is the name of the un-loving step-family who arrange her marriage to Rochester, and Bertha is the name that he gives her to possess her and disconnect her from her past. Rhys gives 'the first Mrs. Rochester' a past, and she tells Antoinette's story through the conflict between different expectations of female subjectivity and expression.

The novel is in three parts. The first and last sections of the book - Antoinette's childhood and then her confinement in the attic - are told in her voice, while Rochester tells the middle section, about the disastrous collapse of their marriage. This heightens the sense that Antoinette's madness is a result of how she is seen by others. The multi-voiced narrative, in which her jailer, Grace Poole also speaks, undoes the authoritative voice of the novel. Reality is multi-faceted, and the reader is involved in deciphering the 'meaning' of Antoinette's condition. What is shocking about Rhys's retelling of the story is that we slowly realise that Antoinette is never mad.

Antoinette is an outsider - her Creole blood is regarded as 'tainted' by the English. She has close relationships with several black characters - a childhood friend, Tia, her nurse Christophine, and her half-brother, Sandi, with whom it is suggested she has an affair. But these relationships too are complicated by the cultural clash, and the changing political situation. Traumatized as a

child by her mother's abandonment of her, her younger brother's death during a black uprising and her mother's subsequent breakdown, Antoinette has never been able to deal with these experiences. She has repressed them as the telling of her story shows. Rochester awakens her long repressed emotions on their honeymoon, but he is unable to deal with their strength. Her sexuality also is too intense for him, he feels overpowered and begins to long for cool England. Antoinette does not fit Rochester's image of an English wife, and she suffers a breakdown when he, too, withdraws his affection. But, as her nurse says, she could have been saved. Antoinette becomes angry with Rochester because he asks questions about her mother and then refuses to talk about her; he cannot deal with the wound he has reopened. When he suspects she is no longer 'untouched', it is her sexual appetite which makes him believe the rumours. She is punished because she is no longer feminine, and it is her confinement in the attic that sends her mad.

In the first part of the novel Antoinette tells the story of her childhood. The reader is shown that she has repressed traumatic events, partly because she is unable to speak about them, and partly because she childishly believes that ignoring them may make them not be true. Like 'I' in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, she censors the emotions she is unable to deal with and, as in Gilman's writing, Rhys gives form to these through switching Antoinette's voice away from the traumatic event to a description of her surroundings. Antoinette's description of her mother's rejection of her is one such scene:

She grew thin and silent, and at last she refused to leave the house at all.

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible - the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell... Orchids flourished out

of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snakey looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root... I never went near it.⁷

No emotion is overtly expressed. The snakey, mysterious and repellant garden gives shape to the emotions absent from her speaking voice. In Rhys's poetic language, the effects of the uncanny such as the confusion between animal and vegetable in this passage are used to convey Antoinette's 'unspeakable' experiences. These mutating, fluid images are infused by the sights, smells and sounds of the Jamaican landscape.

After her mother's breakdown, Antoinette is sent to a convent. Her black nurse and confidante, Christophine, has left, her stepfather is away and her aunt is about to leave for England:

As she talked she was working at a patchwork counterpane. The diamond-shaped pieces of silk melted one into the other, red, blue, purple, green, yellow, all one shimmering colour. Hours and hours she had spent on it and it was nearly finished. Would I be lonely? She asked and I said 'No', looking at the colours. Hours and hours and hours I thought.⁸

The shimmering colours melting together represent the warmth and affection that the abandoned Antoinette craves, but she is unable to acknowledge this to her aunt. The colours also recall the maternal, semiotic space which must be abandoned to enter the social order, and the repetition 'hours and hours and hours' suggests the emptiness that Antoinette finds there. She is doomed to this dreary existence both by her mother's rejection of her, and by her own fear of 'madness'. As a woman, Antoinette is faced by the two choices that Kristeva outlines. Either she accepts the social role offered to her,

⁷ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969, 1993 (first published Andre Deutsch 1966) p. 16.
⁸ *ibid.*, p. 47.

that of Rochester's wife, which demands that she assume the identity of a proper English wife and repress her desires and fears or, like her mother, she can go 'mad', and hysterically refuse this sacrifice.

Antoinette accepts her arranged marriage to Rochester. Their relationship is depicted as a struggle between incompatible modes of being. His reserved coolness is contrasted with her awakened sensuality. On their honeymoon in a hilltop house he falls under the spell of the jungle that loosens his will, and she falls passionately in love with him. For a short time they are happy, but as rumours of Antoinette's mother's madness reach him, he turns against her, feeling that he has been tricked into marrying a lunatic. When it is insinuated that Antoinette had had affairs before their marriage, he rejects her completely. Antoinette becomes desperate, but in her despair he sees the madness he fears, and her fate is sealed.

For Rochester, Antoinette is identified with the Jamaican landscape. 'It was a beautiful place - wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, 'What I see is nothing - I want what it *hides* - that is not nothing.'⁹ Like the landscape, Antoinette both attracts and repulses him, and when what she is hiding begins to emerge, he cannot cope. Although Rochester is fascinated by the lure of the exotic female other, the reality of her hidden life is threatening. Antoinette becomes distraught and violent as the long-repressed memories of her past are probed, and as Rochester too withdraws his affection.

However, Rochester is not made out to be a complete villain. The device of telling this part of the story in his

voice allows us to see that Rochester's response to Antoinette's breakdown is structured by cultural assumptions he is unable to shake. The tragedy is a result of the failure of communication. The smooth face of Antoinette's exotic beauty disappears as she begins to relive her traumatic past and to make her own emotional demands, and she has no language other than 'madness' through which to express emotion. Rochester's masculinity is threatened by the eruption of her female pain, and thus he rejects her. Their relationship becomes a battle of hatred, and Antoinette loses. Rochester says:

j
You hate me and I hate you. We'll see who hates best. But first, I will destroy your hatred. Now. My hate is colder, stronger, and you'll have no hate to warm yourself. You will have nothing. I did it too. I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out.' ¹⁰

Antoinette is left 'a grey ghost in the daylight'. Like the heroines of Rhys's earlier novels, she is cut off from her memories and her emotions, unable to speak them, and thus unable to understand or to change her situation.

The story resumes in Antoinette's voice. She is imprisoned in Rochester's house, cold and unable to remember why she is there:

In this room I wake early and lie shivering for it is very cold.... In the end flames shoot up and they are beautiful. I get out of bed and go close to watch them and to wonder why I have been brought here. For what reason? There must be a reason. What is it that I must do?¹¹

The room in which Antoinette is imprisoned becomes the figure through which her subjectivity is explored. Like the rooms in John's paintings and in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this room is both the means of her repression, and the site in which the repressed returns. In the final

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 140.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 146.

section of the book, the speaking Antoinette is a 'grey ghost' in a room whose walls are permeated by the traumas of her past, as her lost mother reappears. The room shifts from reality to dream, taking her back to her childhood, and there is no change in language to indicate that the dream is less real than the real. The objects in the room become animated, and lead Antoinette back to herself. In this way, the reader becomes involved in the processes that make Antoinette. We cannot 'see' or 'fix' her, (as Rochester has tried to do), rather we are engaged with her in the processes of making and unmaking the self.

Like 'I' in Gilman's story, the truth of her condition and the experiences she has repressed, begin to appear on the walls of her prison, and a dream tells her what she must do to escape. In this room, Antoinette's memories are as real as the furniture. 'Looking at the tapestry one day I recognised my mother dressed in an evening gown but with bare feet. She looked away from me, over my head, just as she used to do.'¹².

Throughout the novel, Antoinette has been troubled by a recurring dream which prefigures her entrapment. Now she dreams the final part of this dream, and it tells her how to escape. In the dream she is wandering through the corridors of the house when she comes to a red room full of candles. The room shifts, becoming a room from her childhood, and she knocks the candles over, setting it on fire. Reflected in a mirror, she does not recognise her image, and thinking that she has seen the ghost who is said to haunt the house, she runs away, putting a wall of flame between herself and this frightening figure. The description of this 'woman with streaming hair' recalls the descriptions of Antoinette's mother - in the dream, Antoinette is re-enacting her flight from trauma. She runs

out onto the roof where in the red sky she sees her whole life, and when she jumps off the roof it is to reconnect with this lost past.

Through the novel, the colour red is used to suggest the passions that Antoinette is forced to repress. In her attic she searches for what she has hidden, and when she finds her red dress, which Richard Mason had called 'intemperate and unchaste', she begins to remember. When she takes the dress out, she smells 'the smell of vetiver and frangipani, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain.' The dress can reconnect her to what she has lost. 'I let the dress fall on the floor, and looked from the fire to the dress and from the dress to the fire', and later, 'But I looked at the dress on the floor and it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do. I will remember I thought. I will remember quite soon now.'

When Antoinette was in the convent, she had expressed a wish to embroider her name in fire red:

We are cross-stitching silk roses on a pale background. We can colour the roses as we choose and mine are green, blue and purple. Undemeath I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839.¹³

The use of the future tense is significant here. This passage suggests that Antoinette must find a way to connect her emotional life and her public identity, to represent herself in a way that brings identity and experience together. How is she to overcome the stifled identity that the symbolic role of wife offers her, but also avoid the descent into madness that claimed her mother? Although we 'know' from the way in which Antoinette's

fate has already been written in *Jane Eyre* that she dies in this fire, in Rhys's novel there is a sense of liberation in this final scene. When she wakes from her dream, Antoinette knows what she must do. The novel ends with her leaving the room: a candle 'burned up again to light me along the dark passage.' Antoinette has trusted her dream and overcome the repression forced on her by Rochester, and as she leaves the room, it is she who is in control.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys finds language for her female subject's unsayable experiences through the use of colour, dream imagery and vivid descriptions of her surroundings, which are in sharp contrast to the emotional flatness of her speaking voice. These devices in the writing give the reader a very compelling entry into Antoinette's psyche. Her emotional life is not symbolised or literally described but, rather, powerfully suggested, and it is because these passages are not literally intended that they are so effective and haunting. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a compelling picture of a mind under intense pressure, of its repressions and compulsions. As in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this formal logic suggests the subject-in-process. The rational 'I' is confronted within the work by the experiences it has repressed, and thus for the reader its authority is undermined. Gwen John achieved a similar effect in *Self-portrait in a Red Blouse* where the pulsing red body is in contrast to the impassive face.

A sense of the uncanny pervades *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In this novel as in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator is continually discovering afresh the point at which 'things changed', which for the reader suggests the compulsive return to a traumatic scene. The force of Antoinette's unsayable experiences are suggested by her elusive search for security. She is troubled by dreams which foretell her fate at the hands of a stranger, and she is continually trying to ward off danger. This comes through in the

descriptions of the estate itself, the forest and garden are her refuge, but they are also menacing places.

The novel is structurally quite similar to *The Yellow Wallpaper*, where an increasingly paranoid 'I' speculates on the plots of her husband, his sister and the doctors, building up the evocation of an embattled subjectivity. And again, this menace, for the narrating voice, is not described but sensed through the machinations of pattern. In the same way, Gwen John's self portraits of absence depict a compulsive stare at her domestic surrounds, under whose very intensity the room changes into a pattern of her fears. These are not literally described, but sensed in the air of 'strangeness' that hangs over the works. All these works are filled with foreboding. Structurally, they reveal that what is feared has already happened, the rooms and settings are a return to sites of repression.

Like the other artists, Rhys explores the way in which her female subjects are oppressed by a world where femininity is equated with passivity. Because Antoinette cannot give form to her fears, their eruption is threatening and dangerous - like 'I' in Gilman's story, she is undone. The strength of Rhys's writing is that she works towards a language in which the repressed experiences of women can be communicated. As with the other artists, it is through dream language and a sense of the uncanny that their presence is felt.

Rhys's fiction draws on her own experience of different cultural traditions to find imagery and a poetic style which dramatises the conflict between emotion and repression in female subjectivity. The multi-layered sense of self developed in her writing finds a visual equivalent in the work of Louise Bourgeois.

Chapter Five

Louise Bourgeois' Femmes-Maisons

In Gwen John's room paintings, subtle changes of scale and oddities of space render a familiar scene uncanny, to suggest female experiences censored by 'femininity', and unrepresentable through the conventions of naturalistic painting. In a life devoted to gaining access for women to the institutions of power, Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* suggests, perhaps unconsciously, the repressive nature of the rational style associated with masculine authority. In other words, she can live a life that escapes the conventions of femininity, but the language available to her cannot represent her most intimate life, and this is a burden. It is through the imagery of the wallpaper and the room in which her heroine is imprisoned that Gilman is able to suggest the presence and pressure of experiences and emotions that her commitment to rationality and reasonableness do not allow her to explore elsewhere.

Louise Bourgeois's late works are a complex and complete exploration of this 'feminist signifying space' and, in them, the threat of madness, with which this process is coupled in the work of the other three women, is exorcised. Bourgeois is engaged in a highly original practice of self-representation, and like John, Gilman and Rhys, her concern is to find form for the unspoken and invisible aspects of female experience. She has exhibited consistently since the forties, and after a long period of neglect she has become a major figure in the world of contemporary art, her work being featured in major international survey shows such as Documenta and the Venice Biennale.¹

¹

In 1992 Bourgeois's work was selected for Documenta IX at Kassel, and in 1993 she represented the United States at the 45th Venice Biennale. For a full exhibition and acquisitions history see Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1996.

Famously photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe with her phallic sculpture *Fillette* tucked under her arm and a mischievous smile on her face, Bourgeois has broken all the 'rules' of sculpture in a determined exploration of childhood and relationships from a female point of view. Her work encompasses painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking and installation, in a wide variety of materials, but this diversity is unified by the recurrence of certain obsessive themes and motifs. A major concern is the refusal of the ideology of femininity as passive and domestic, worked through in the *Femmes-maisons* drawings and sculptures, and in the *Cells*, the installations that Bourgeois has worked on in the last decade.

The charged atmosphere of these rooms with their carefully chosen and positioned contents recalls the staging of John's room paintings. In Bourgeois's cells the shadows that disturbed John's domestic scenes are given form. Her hysteric in a room also recalls the madwoman in the attic of Gilman and Rhys.

For Bourgeois, the function of art practice is 'to give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering. What happens to my body has to be given a formal aspect.'² Making art is a way of confronting fear, and 'understanding and controlling fear helps you move forward day after day.'³ It is a way of overcoming anxiety brought on by the recurrence in the present of memories and fears of the past. Drawing explores forms for anxiety, while the making of sculpture and installation is a transcendent, purging activity.

² *ibid.*, p. 10.

³ *ibid.*, p. 137.

The sources for her work are moments of bodily tension, as well as memory. She refers to the flare of desire, pregnancy, mourning, and the eruption of guilt.

Bourgeois tells stories about her work which are widely quoted.⁴ She has said that she considers herself a specialist in femaleness,⁵ and her stories are irresistible because they are myths of female rites of passage. They refer to female vulnerability, and her work features women pierced by arrows or armless and leg-less, but she also refers to women's strength, power and ability to wound. However the recurring note in her stories about femaleness is the feeling of being silenced, of being unable to communicate the fears and desires that animate her body.

She writes of her traumatic childhood in which she, and the rest of the family, were in fear of, and silenced by, her father who was having an affair with their tutor. The anger at her father, and a feeling of abandonment by her mother, return to her in the present. 'As I say, my father was promiscuous. I had to be blind to the mistress who lived with us. I had to be blind to the pain of my mother. I had to be blind to the fact that I was a little bit sadistic with my brother.'⁶ She states that as a child she suffered guilt for being born female - her parents had wanted a boy, and she was named Louise after her father Louis. 'A daughter is a disappointment. If you bring a daughter into this world, you have to be forgiven, the way my mother was forgiven because I was the spitting image of my father.'⁷

⁴ A recent book of her drawings includes her comments on the memories and feelings that provoked them in tandem with the works. See Louise Bourgeois, *Louise Bourgeois: Drawings and Observations* Bullfinch Press, Canada, 1995.

⁵ Bernadac, op cit., p. 90.

⁶ ibid., p. 54.

⁷ ibid., p. 94.

In the world of Bourgeois's work and stories, silence is a feminine attribute. The inability to speak, together with the build up of anxiety and the necessity to externalise fear and extreme states, is the undercurrent in her depictions of women.

Referring to one of her drawings she says, 'This has to do with the effort to be nice and proper, which is very hard to accomplish. I wanted to be nice and proper in order to please my parents. And they never ever realised how difficult it was for me not to get angry, not to get revolted.'⁸

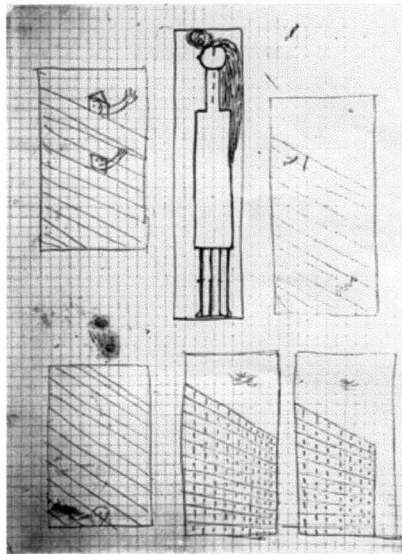


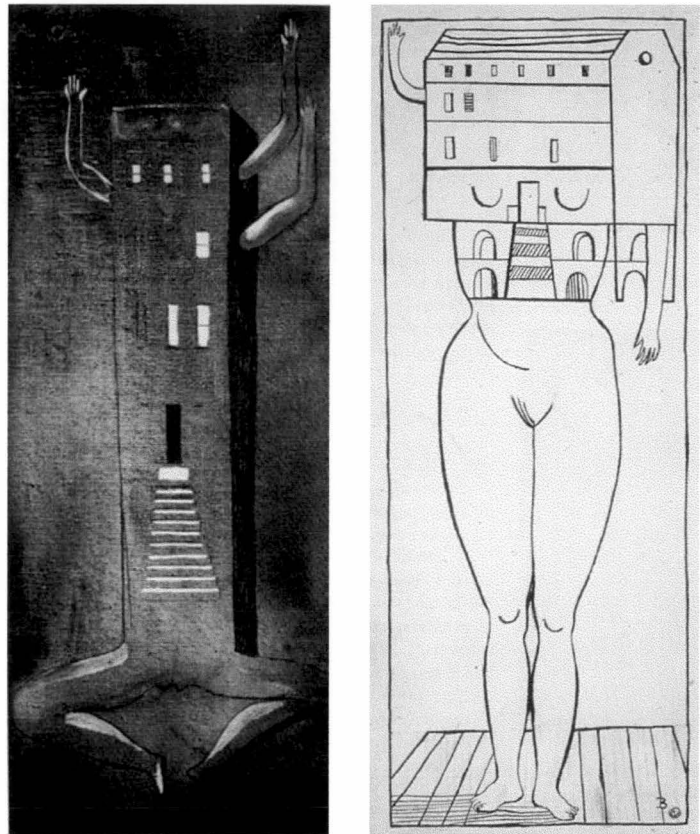
Figure 8. Louise Bourgeois *Untitled* 1946-47
pen on paper

This drawing, *Untitled*, 1946-47 shows the figure of a woman confined by a rectangle, on a page where five other paler rectangles contain grid-like structures reminiscent of high rise buildings. It suggests the motif of the *Femme-maison* which will be the site of Bourgeois's ongoing exploration of the repressed of female experience.

⁸

Louise Bourgeois, *Louise Bourgeois: Drawings and Observations*, Toronto: Bullfinch Press, 1995.

The early *Femmes-maisons* appear in drawings and paintings of a woman's legs topped by a house in place of torso and head. Sometimes arms, out of proportion, wave from the house. In one drawing there are three arms. There is an Alice-like quality to these images, it is as if the house cannot contain the woman, whose body bursts out of its confines, and this dislocation of scale is unsettling.



Figures 9 & 10
Louise Bourgeois;

Femme-maison 1946-47
Oil and ink on canvas, 91.4 x 35.5

Femme-maison 1946-47
Ink on paper, 23.2 x 9.2



Figure 11.
Louise Bourgeois, *Femme-maison* 1983,
Marble, 63.5 x 49.5 x 58.5

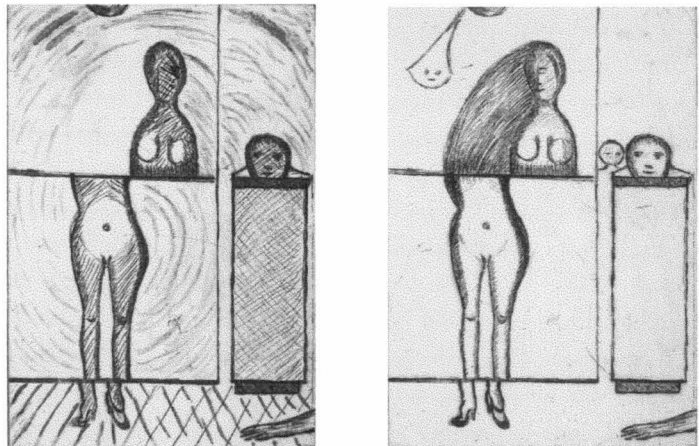
In *Femme-maison* 1983, a marble sculpture, a tiny house-like form sits atop a swirling, organic mass of drapery. Here the form of the house has become more minimal, and the representation of the body more abstract. The work pivots on the contrast between the purist geometry of the house and the mysterious swellings of the bottom heavy draped form below it. The *Femme-maisons* use the contrast between female body and house to suggest the silent weight of female experience that does not fit the confines of domesticity; that will not be boxed up.

Bourgeois rarely refers publicly to her husband and sons, and to her own life as a wife and mother. Rather, the 'domesticity' that she explicitly works through is that of her own childhood, and the house for her represents the structure of the patriarchal family, and the female child's imprisonment and silence within it.

Bourgeois explores the relationships that are hidden behind the walls of the house, and behind the facade of united, happy family. Her work addresses the repressed fears, angers and sadisms of family life, from a female child's point of view. She explores the recurrence of past

trauma in the present, and the way these experiences are constitutive of identity. In 1990 she worked on a series of prints, *Dismemberment ANATOMY*., in which a woman is divided into three - her feet slightly offset from her legs, her upper torso and head removed to one side.

These works recall the *Femme-maisons* in that they show the dismembered woman who underlies those works, but it as if they begin to move inside the house. In the third state of this series, Bourgeois has suggested the woman's face, looking into her truncated legs and belly. Her two halves are reconnected by a stream of fine lines like hair, which suggest a flow of energy between them. This image recalls the attempt to reconcile symbolic identity and female experience by the 'mad women' in their attics of the fiction of Gilman and Rhys. The work prefigures the forms which occupy Bourgeois's *Cells*.



Figures 12 & 13 Louise Bourgeois;
Dismemberment ANATOMY 1990
Dismemberment ANATOMY 1990
 Etchings, early and late states.
 Both 17.6 x 12.6 cm

The *Cells* continue this move 'inside' the *Femme-maison*. The works have a compelling and haunting beauty reminiscent of fairy-tales. They are like frozen dramas of confrontation, whose formal perfection is accompanied by a pervasive sense of threat, in which the viewer becomes involved. Through them we take part in the tensions of their 'heroine'.

The rooms are constructed out of old doors or windows, materials suggestive of the past and bearing the traces of passing bodies on their scratched and stained surfaces. Body parts, congealed to hard stone in poses suggestive of extreme physical states of anxiety or pleasure, are placed on old furniture, confronted sometimes by instruments suggestive of physical harm, sometimes by mysterious glass vessels. Protective coverings like clothes and sheets also appear. An atmosphere of extreme silence and stillness pervades the works - there is a suggestion of punishment or of arousal, the scene is directed towards a completion which is endlessly deferred. The body and the inanimate objects which can act on it exist in a heightened air of tension without resolution.

The works are exhibited in series, but each separate cell is also an autonomous piece. I want to consider the series exhibited in Venice in 1993, in which Bourgeois explicitly addresses family relationships. I will concentrate in particular on *Cell (Glass spheres and hands)*, which was bought by the Victorian National Gallery, and which I can comment on from first hand experience. Firstly, however, it is necessary to put it into context, considering the dynamic, emotions and references that run through the series of works, and comparing them to the 'rooms' of the other artists' works I have been looking at. In a similar way, Bourgeois takes the room as a complex site in female subjectivity - it is both a refuge and a prison, a site of empowerment and of intimate experiences, and a place of confinement within a restrictive ideology of femininity.

The series of works consists of five cage-like cells preceded by *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)*, the most 'defended' of the cells, which is enclosed by metal doors and must be approached by way of a walled corridor.

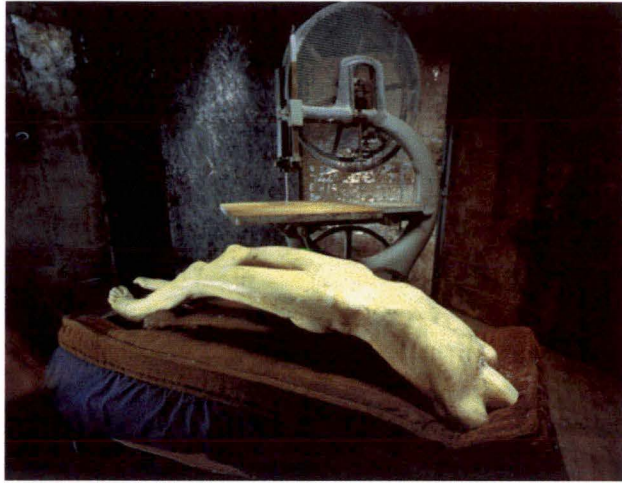


Figure 14.
Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)*, 1992
Steel, bronze, cast iron and fabric, 302.3 x 368.3 x 304.8

Inside, a bronze body convulses on an old brown bed on which is embroidered 'je t'aime' - I love you. The body appears masculine, but his sex is concealed. Headless and armless, his feet twist in agony or ecstasy. Also in the room is a large, old-looking bandsaw. This work is charged with sexuality and violence - the bandsaw threatens the mutilated figure, but one can also imagine the body thrilling to its aggressive whine. Hysteria is the manifestation by the body of states of fear and desire that are repressed and unspeakable, and in this sense it is a language of the body. The use of a male body for a work whose story is about 'Louise' has several connotations. It suggests that it is the 'masculine' aspect of a woman - her rationality, her ego - that is convulsed by the bodily experiences this identity represses, and at the same time invokes the way in which these experiences run counter to 'femininity'. The sentimental expression of love is in tension with the intensity of violence and vulnerability of intimate relationship realised in this work, which explores the complexity of emotions and responses that underlie 'I love you'.

In the next five cells, the walls are permeable. It is as if having been confronted with madness, the convulsive return of the repressed, one can begin to peer in to the story behind the hysteria.

In *Cell (Choisy)*, a guillotine blade hangs over a small marble house, which is both Bourgeois' childhood home, and reminiscent of the houses in *Femme-maisons*. The blade that hovers threateningly in *Arch of Hysteria* is now poised over the house. The next cells will 'slice open' this domestic scene, exploring what it conceals.

In *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)* the confrontation is between marble spheres set in a block and representing eyes, and multiple adjustable mirrors. There is an anxiety, the multiple mirrors conjuring up the constant need to 'fix' identity, to pin down the self and, at the same time the impossibility of this. There will always be another view, each one is necessarily partial, and the mirror hides as much as it reveals.



Figure 15.
Louise Bourgeois *Cell (Choisy)* 1991
Metal, glass and marble, 302.3 x 368.3 x 304.

Cell (Glass spheres and hands) has the effect of a shed at the bottom of the garden, an old abandoned glasshouse, some of its panes smashed, others obscured by peeling paint. You approach it not quite knowing what to expect; anything could be lurking there. Seeming at first to be an old glasshouse, it is actually made from old industrial windows, and it has a scored and dusty floor of old wooden boards. Together with the battered, chipped and heavy old furniture inside - chairs, stools and table this lends the family scene within it an association with institutions. It evokes the sensations of a small child submitted to rules and intrusive procedures they do not understand, which promise pain.

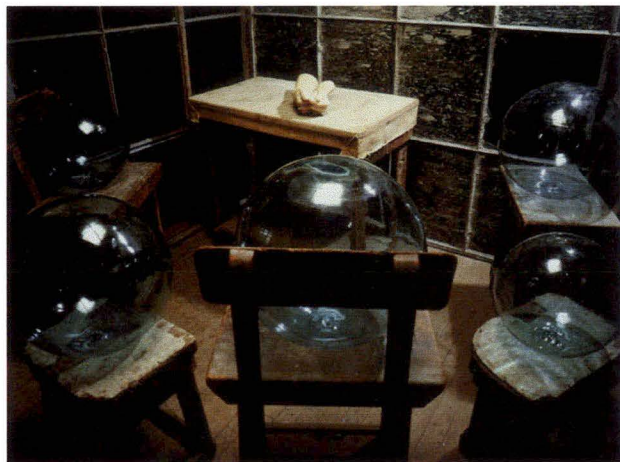


Figure 16.
Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (Glass spheres and hands)* 1990-93
Metal, glass, marble, wood and fabric, 219.4 x 219.4 x 218.4

The three chairs and two stools are grouped in a semi-circle around a small table which is pushed into a corner. On each heavy-bottomed chair is a large, beautiful green glass sphere. The table is covered by a peculiar and somehow repellent fabric, stretched tightly and pinned over its corners, so that the line of the edge of the tabletop can be seen underneath it. It has a quality of skin that

softens but does not disguise the wood beneath. What is on top of the table is a pair of marble hands, truncated just below the wrists. The hands are pressed together, a gesture of silent distress or excitement suggesting reassurance of one's physical existence when under threat.

There are six 'beings' in the room - the five spheres like a different species are gathered to watch the silent wringing of the hands. Bourgeois's own story of the work sources it in her childhood, as a self-portrait of herself within her family.¹² In the self-portrait reading, the hands are Bourgeois, the glass spheres the other members of her family, trapped in intimate proximity, the family circle unable to communicate, each trapped within their own bell jar. In this sense it is a potent image of the nuclear family in its horrific aspect. Bourgeois has made a potent metaphor of her own anxiety in a particular situation, of the feeling of childhood isolation, lack of communication, the physical tension of speechlessness that returns in adulthood. This work suggests the recurrence of this fear and anger, and the necessity to find forms to communicate it. The duality of past and present is also undone in this work. We imagine we are looking at a childhood scene, but the hands are adult sized, suggesting that this experience is not over.

In *Cell (You Better Grow Up)* another family scene is constructed. This time the composition is structured around threes: three hands, three small perfume bottles, a three-mouthed clay vessel and a three-tiered glass bottle. In the bottles there is a small female figure, while three mirrors reflect the scene from different angles. This time the hands are joined, the older one touching the tensed younger ones reassuringly.

¹²

National Gallery of Victoria, *Louise Bourgeois*, catalogue of exhibition held at the NGV, 1995, curated by Jason Smith, with an essay by Robert Storr, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1995.

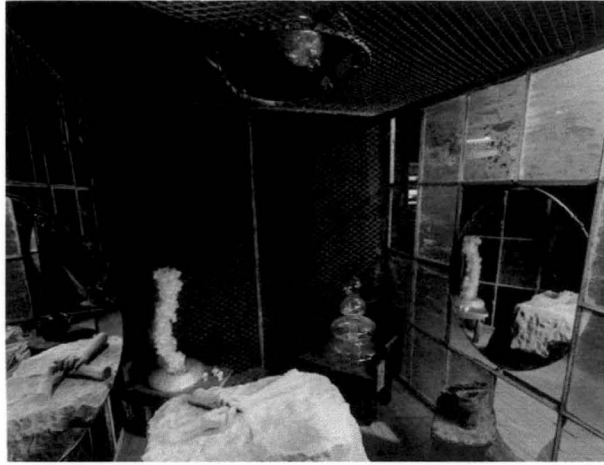


Figure 17.
Louise Bourgeois *Cell (You Better Grow Up)* 1993
Metal, glass, marble, ceramic and wood, 210 x 208 x 212

The perfume bottles, like the whispered 'je t'aime' in *Arch of Hysteria* suggest sentimentality, while Bourgeois has said of the glass tower and the vessels that they are 'self-indulgent shapes ... a form of romanticism, a state of abandon, a *laissez-faire* attitude, a childlike dream.' The mirrors reflect different versions of the scene, the different and conflicting interpretations of reality amongst which we grow up. The grown hand protects and shelters the anxious youngster, but says Bourgeois 'you'd better grow up'; otherwise you remain the trapped figure in the stacked glass, cut off from the world. There is tenderness in this scene, and the way it follows on from the one before is interesting. Although the female figure remains trapped in the glass spheres, there is also connection: the hands have joined.

The final room, *Cell (Three White Marble Spheres)* is a cage containing two large and one small white marble spheres, reflected overhead by a mirror and the scene permeated by a blue light suggesting calm. The large spheres, the parents, are protective of their offspring, but they also dwarf it. It is a scene of family togetherness and oneness, which indicates a reconciliation, a coming to

terms. The door is open, and the little sphere can roll off by itself.

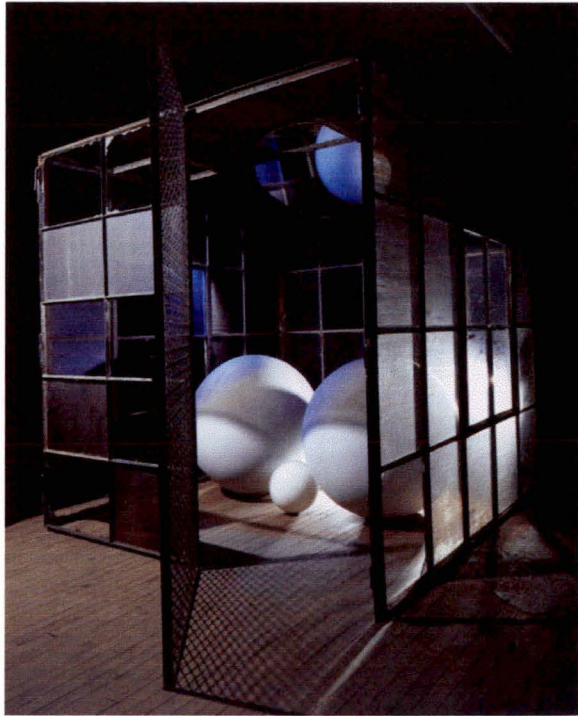


Figure 18.
Louise Bourgeois *Cell (Three White Marble Spheres)* 1993
Steel, glass, marble and mirror, 213 x 213 x 213

Bernadac says, 'In this suite of cells, Bourgeois brought together all the recurring themes in her work, focusing on the role of the past in the creative process, the weight of familial authority, and masculine-feminine relations.'¹³ One could say that the hysteria produced in the present by the underlying events of childhood, which continues to pattern present relationships, has been worked through. She explores the reasons for hysteria in childhood fears and silence, and paternal prohibition. But she also comes to terms with the family space.

These *Cells* are moments of terrified expectation, like an in-drawn breath, a gasp, and like the terrors of childhood, formative psychologically but never to be told, their pressure builds up. These rooms explore ways of giving form to, communicating these childhood terrors. One could no doubt make psychoanalytic or other interpretations of them, but I am not interested in thus

¹³

Bernadac, op cit., p. 144.

closing down their meanings. The point is the way they engage the viewer, forcing us to gasp, involving us in the complexities of the subjectivity they represent. We know how Bourgeois feels when we see these works, and we recognise ourselves. As with the other works, the room becomes a site for working through this way of representing subjectivity as a process, of finding a way to represent a woman as herself, and not as a signifier for male concerns. We become involved in the experience of a female subject.

Because of their construction, we peer into these works, and often there is a mirror to reflect our gaze. There is no masterful view to be had. As with the other artists' works I have discussed, we have to construct the 'I' ourselves. We become bound up in its processes, rather than mastering it with a look. The walls function both to enclose the drama in an atmosphere of memory, and to control and limit access to the scene - you have to peer through windows, or in some cases traverse a labyrinth. Doors and windows and wire mesh are also permeable. They suggest the way memories are not locked away behind walls, but recur in the present. These *Cells* refer to the cells with their permeable membranes that make up our bodies. We are made of our memories just as much as physical substance, suggests Bourgeois. But the work also operates on another level which is to do with the installation aspect; the way in which it is encountered. When I look at this work I am peering in from outside. The wariness with which I approach stirs my own memories. It has the effect of looking back in time. That is, the way a viewer encounters the work is like the wary approach to a traumatic memory. It is difficult to look in at this piece. I cannot see it from all angles because some of the panes are painted over. Some are broken and the jagged edges of the glass suggest hazard, the continuing ability of this scene to wound, that it is not confined to the

past as a pure object of contemplation, but a continuing part of existence.

As in the writing of Jean Rhys, with its switching between different points of view and different registers, Bourgeois uses a 'collage' aesthetic which combines different systems of signification in the one space to mirror the spectrum of consciousness by combining found objects with exquisitely carved marble. As with the works of Gilman and Rhys, there is a minimalism to these pieces. They are precise in a way, which renders them uncomfortable, infused with tension.

Despite - and perhaps because of - Bourgeois's stories her work demands the involvement of the viewer, and reaches out beyond her own individual experience. It reaches out paradoxically because she is so intensely concerned with tracing the dynamics of memory and emotion and their role in subjectivity. Her stories both invoke personal readings of the work, and are strangely universal, rather like modern myths or fairytales. She reveals far less of herself than she seems to, instead involving the viewer in the work and unsettling their own concept of identity.

Art for Bourgeois is a site of empowerment; she overcomes anxiety through forms and processes. This has a double effectiveness. She overcomes her own anxiety, but it is turned outwards. That is to say, her works make their viewers anxious. They do this by making us powerfully aware of an encounter (in the sanitized, 'safe' aesthetic realm) with the anger and fear of a particular woman, forcefully but coldly expressed, which is still something we are not used to seeing (i.e. it is symbolised, given form, not just an outpouring of inarticulate emotion). At the same time we are also forced to confront and question our own repressions and rational certainties. Donald Kuspit writes, 'Her work deals with being a

woman in a way that Freud could not have fathomed.

It talks about things we don't want talked about, acknowledges forces we don't want broadcast loudly, and certainly not let loose. Such forces, we feel, can only add to the world's mischief, as though our poor state didn't in the first place have to do with silence - a conspiracy with the self to stay ignorant - about the unconscious.'¹⁴

Children eat their parents and parents eat their children in work that explores the complexity of relationships and the multiple levels on which our interactions happen.

¹⁴

Kuspit, Donald, 'Louise Bourgeois: Where Angels Fear to Tread', *Art Forum* vol. 25, March 1987, p. 115.

Chapter 6

The Drawings: Wallflower

In developing my comparison of the works of John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois, my interest has been in the strategies whereby these women have developed forms to communicate the aspects of their experience which were for so long absent from representation. Women's self-representation has been caught within the double bind of 'femininity,' and the language of the rational self. What particularly struck me about these works is the way that they mirror the dynamics of repression - they both construct and undercut these conventions. Their approach is effective because it provokes anxiety in the viewer or reader - who feels the force of what is repressed, and has to think about the 'self' of the work in a different way, to participate in the processes that constitute subjectivity.

I was interested in making a critical analysis of their work, and in finding a way to illustrate their common concerns. I made the drawings as a response to the way the works, and the imagined lives of their artists and authors, took hold of me. As I read and looked, fragments from the images, the novels, the biographies and letters of the artists and writers merged, creating a composite woman whose story I wanted to explore. In making the drawings I wanted to find a form of illustration that perpetuated the anxiety-producing effects of these works, and that responded to their formal language, rather than literally illustrating the plot. The technical challenge was to find a way of making the drawings intense without using expressive, gestural marks. The solution was to build up finely worked areas of detail to create tensions between different areas of the work.



Figure 19.
Odilon Redon,
Death: My Irony Surpasses All Others! 1889
Lithograph, 26.7 X 19.7cm

Other artists who have taken a similar approach to illustration are Odilon Redon and Peter Milton. Redon's suite of lithographs *To Gustave Flaubert: Six Drawings after the Temptation of Saint Antony* are autonomous works inspired by a reading of Flaubert, and they respond to the mood and language of the work. Stephen Eisenman has written perceptively about the relationship between Flaubert's *Temptation of Saint Antony* and Redon's prints.¹ 'Practiced habits of looking and reading are called into question by Redon's series... Redon hides the true textual source of his image or chooses to illustrate passages which make little sense when isolated from their surrounding texts.'² Eisenman argues that Redon finds visual forms for the abstract ideas of Flaubert's work. '[W]e are constantly pulled between alternative readings of foreground and background, inside and outside, night or day, and dumbfounded by ambiguities in gesture, facial expression, and the relationship between text and image.'³ Eisenman traces the connections between this visual destabilisation and the 'opacity of the signifier' in

¹ Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Temptation of Saint Redon: Biography, Ideology and Style in the Noirs of Odilon Redon*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

² *ibid.*, p. 218.

³ *ibid.*, p. 225.

literary modernism. He also suggests the connections between Flaubert's and Redon's intentions 'to examine, and then to ironize death, sexuality and the feminine.'

Peter Milton has made illustrations for Henry James's work which convey the complexity of James's prose. He writes of his suite of images centred round *The Aspern Papers*, 'I eschewed literalness and looked at the story from the viewpoint of its thematic elements on which I ran a kind of discursive series of variations.'⁴ He draws on James's source materials and locations, as well as the novel itself, and he develops a style 'appropriate for James's prose style and its intentional ambiguities, as he plays with the reader.'

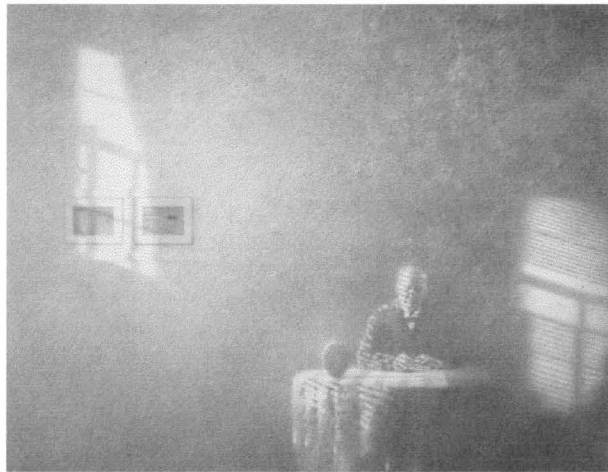


Figure 20.
Peter Milton
Ca' Cappello #8, 1992
Graphite on drafting film, 20 x 25 inches

In one of the works in the series, *Ca' Cappello #8*, for instance, he attends to 'the "chagrin" and "intolerable loss" that James evokes in the last sentence of his story... [T]he motif of rippling water has turned into shadows from the Venetian blinds playing over the solitary figure.

⁴

Peter Milton, *The Primacy of Touch: The Drawings of Peter Milton*, New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1993 p. 93.

A picture of a boat is on the wall.’⁵ Milton also uses a collage technique in finding imagery - a combination of photographs and found images, and drawing. His works combine moments from James’s life with the mood of the novel, and imagined scenes of James in Venice.

Both Redon and Milton use black and white, and work with graphic media like drawing or printmaking. Somehow this seems appropriate to suggesting the way that imagery is inspired by text. Milton often works on drafting film and when I was trying to work out how to get the effects I wanted I studied his work closely. Compositionally, the works of both artists use ambiguous, suggestive spaces inhabited by finely worked details in strange juxtapositions.

David Brooks’ novel *The House of Balthus*⁶ works in a similar way but from the other direction. It imagines a strange house in the various apartments of which characters from Balthus’s paintings and life go in and out of focus.

In response to the dislocation of femininity which connects the works of John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois, after much trial and more error, I decided to make the drawings as ‘wallpaper’ in a small and enclosed space. My intention was to make them ‘beautiful’, ‘feminine’, and at the same time slightly uncomfortable and uneasy. ‘Femininity’ is suggested through delicacy of touch and a pattern suggesting floral wallpaper. Beneath this pattern I used motifs drawn from the works, and from incidents in the lives of the artists, to suggest the experiences femininity conceals.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 95.

⁶ David Brooks, *The House of Balthus*, St Leonards, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 1995.

In reading about Gwen John, I was compelled by the stories about her adventures in the parks of Paris and the surrounding countryside. When her beloved cats went missing, she would spend nights camped out in parks where they had been lost, waiting in a state of distress for their return. She also camped outside Rodin's property, drawing the house and waiting to catch a glimpse of the man himself. These nights were filled with harassment and the threat of assault by 'rodeurs'⁷; the joys and pains of John's passion for her cats and for Rodin; and her love of being outside amongst the trees. A fragment of one of her letters to Rodin suggested this secret outdoor nightlife entering her room. 'In the evening my room gives me a quite extraordinary feeling of pleasure. I see the wide sky. ... And the trees that I can see seem, in the nights like a great forest.'⁸ This was the starting point for the first image, where I collaged Rodin's house onto John's legs, borrowing Bourgeois's motif of the *Femme-maison*, to make an image of a woman hiding in the bushes, passionately waiting. I used a pattern to suggest the forest appearing on the walls of her room.

This resonated with the descriptions in *The Yellow Wallpaper* of the mysterious women who escape from beneath the wallpaper and are seen by 'I', from her window, creeping around the garden. The motif of the baby came from the baby who is so absent from the young mother's story. I was also thinking about the submerged grief over a lost connection with the mother that runs through the biographies of all four women.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* images of Antoinette's mother appear in the tapestry on the walls of her prison. She is

⁷ 'Rodeurs' was John's French term for men who harassed her in the street.

⁸ Mary Taubman, op cit. p. 112.

identified by her 'streaming hair' which also features in descriptions of Antoinette. When Antoinette is about to jump off the roof, she imagines her hair streaming out like wings to bear her up, and this recalls an earlier image in the novel of a burning bird, after the fire that destroys her childhood home.

Louise Bourgeois's first drawings were done for the tapestry workshop run by her parents. She used to fill in the outline of the missing lower sections of tapestries to be restored – usually feet or horses' hooves. She writes that it was then that she realised that drawing was a 'useful' activity – usefulness being an important value for her. To me this suggested drawing as the act of the dutiful daughter overlaying the personal symbolism worked out in her later drawings – rather like the emergence of hallucinatory images through pattern and tapestry in the work of Gilman and Rhys. The recurrent blades in her work, for instance the guillotine and bandsaw in the cells, and their link with sexuality, suggested the motif for the final panel.

There were various sources for these motifs, which are evident in different styles of drawing. The bodies and body parts are observational drawings using myself as a model. They are roughly life-size and have slightly more depth than other elements. As they are meant to emerge from the background in the hallucinatory fashion of the images that appear on the walls in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, they are treated with mark-making similar to the background texture. Form is suggested by varying the intensity of these marks. In contrast to this are motifs drawn from elements repeated within the four artists' works, or which became insistent to me, such as the cat, bird, ears, and blade. For these I found photographs or other existing images I then redrew or traced. They are very small, and more finely drawn.

The aim here was to create a disjunction of scale and style within the drawings that would disrupt a viewing of them, and intrigue the viewer. Conceptually, this refers to a way of representing the self as layered, and of combining fragments from different discourses, which is particularly evident in the work of Rhys and Bourgeois.

As I worked on earlier versions of the drawings, I was trying to find a way to illustrate the slippage between rational and irrational language in these works. At first I was covering paper in dense fields of graphite writing, and then rubbing back into it to create dream-like, blurry forms and motifs. This was not really successful because the images ended up looking 'dirty', and overworked - it wasn't possible to get pure whites and so there was no light in them. I did however like the textures I got - they were muffled and suggestive - like stains on a wall which form themselves into images as you look at them and then dissolve.

I wanted to find a way of controlling the whole image from the start, to produce formless and suggestive textures in some parts, and precise figures and motifs emerging from this texture in other parts. This was meant to suggest the way that, when considered consciously, from a foggy blur dreams and memories yield certain very precise and clear images. It also refers to the scenes in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* where such images appear. Similarly, in the works of John and Bourgeois there is a sense of the retrieval of images from memory – configured by the space surrounding objects or figures in John's paintings, and in the relationship between the walls of the cell and the objects in Bourgeois's installations.

The third element in the works is the pattern, which yields the images from its the texture. This replaced the text in the earlier works, but it was meant to suggest rationality

and conventions of femininity. The method I used was to generate a pattern, which could be repeated over the wall, forming the connections around the whole room. I drew this pattern onto paper, and photocopied it to make the pattern for the whole wall. Then I drew on to this paper the figurative elements. Placing sheets of drafting film over the top, I used textural marks to fill in the spaces between the pattern, and to work up the figurative elements from this background fog. This enabled me to have control over the entire image, to keep clean whites that would let some light into it, and to blur the figures in and out of the background: drawing without an outline.

The motive for exhibiting the drawings in a small room was to evoke the rooms that appear in the work of the four artists and writers. I wanted them to be seen in a claustrophobic, enclosing space which surrounded the viewer, and in which you would not be able to see all the drawings at once – there would be things happening behind your back. It also echoes the motif of the room the works of the four women. I thought of it as a ‘reading room’.

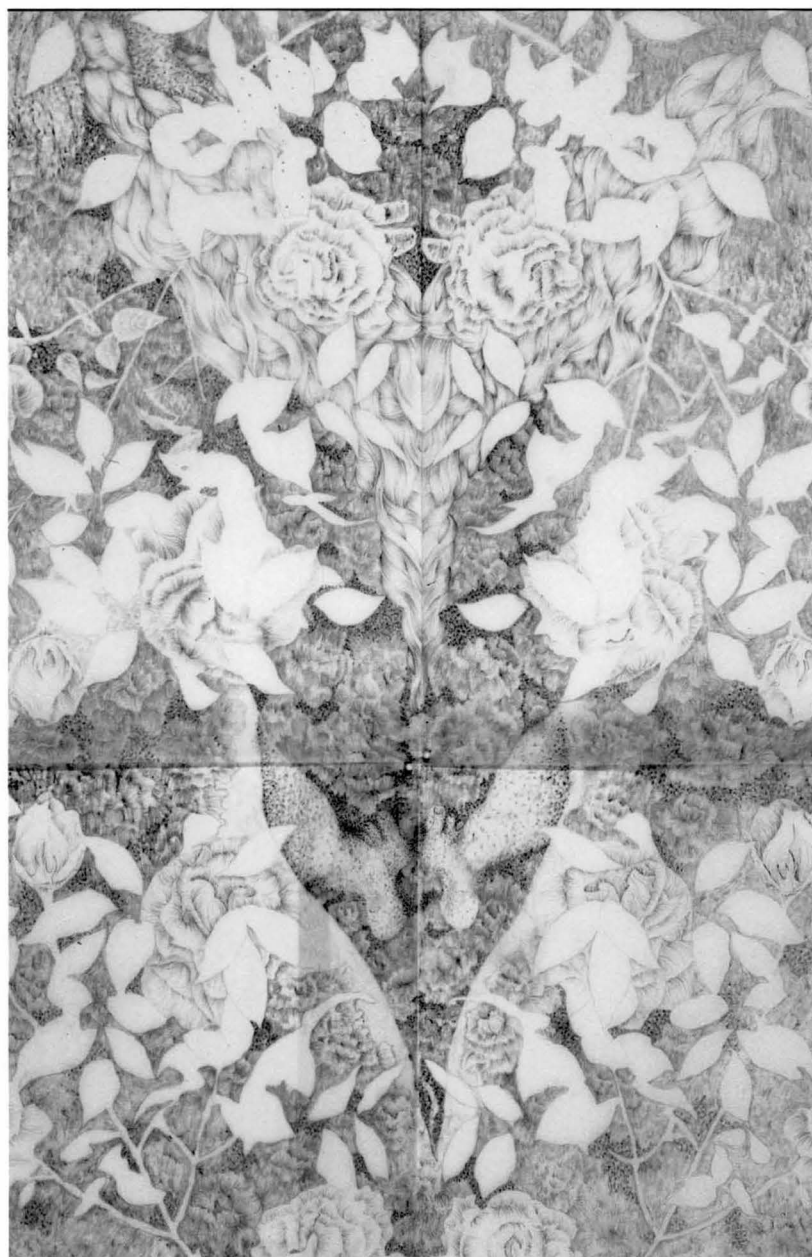
The choice of drafting film was influenced by its membranous nature, and the precise, smooth drawing surface it offers. In the studio, the effect of ambient light behind the drawings added an extra dimension to the work. Initially I had planned to build a totally enclosed space with solid walls, but I realised that to do so would compromise the attractive translucent property of the film. I decided to construct the room in such a way as to enhance the translucency and fragility of the support medium. This has the added advantage of making a shadow of the drawings visible from outside the room.

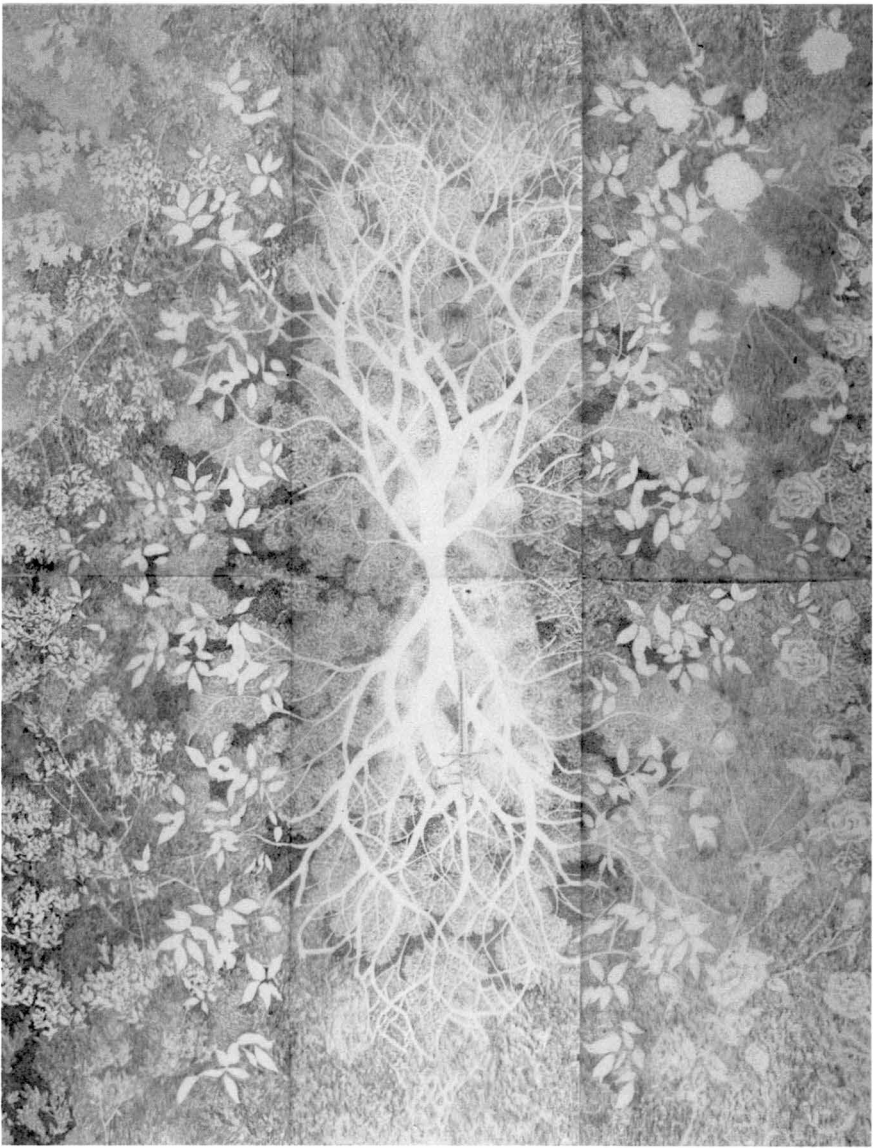
The spacing of the studs was determined by the width of the drawings. Seen from the inside, the shadow of the frame echoes the structure and pattern in the drawings. The juxtaposition of the solid geometric frame with the permeable walls recalls the psychological tensions of the subjectivities of the four women artists.

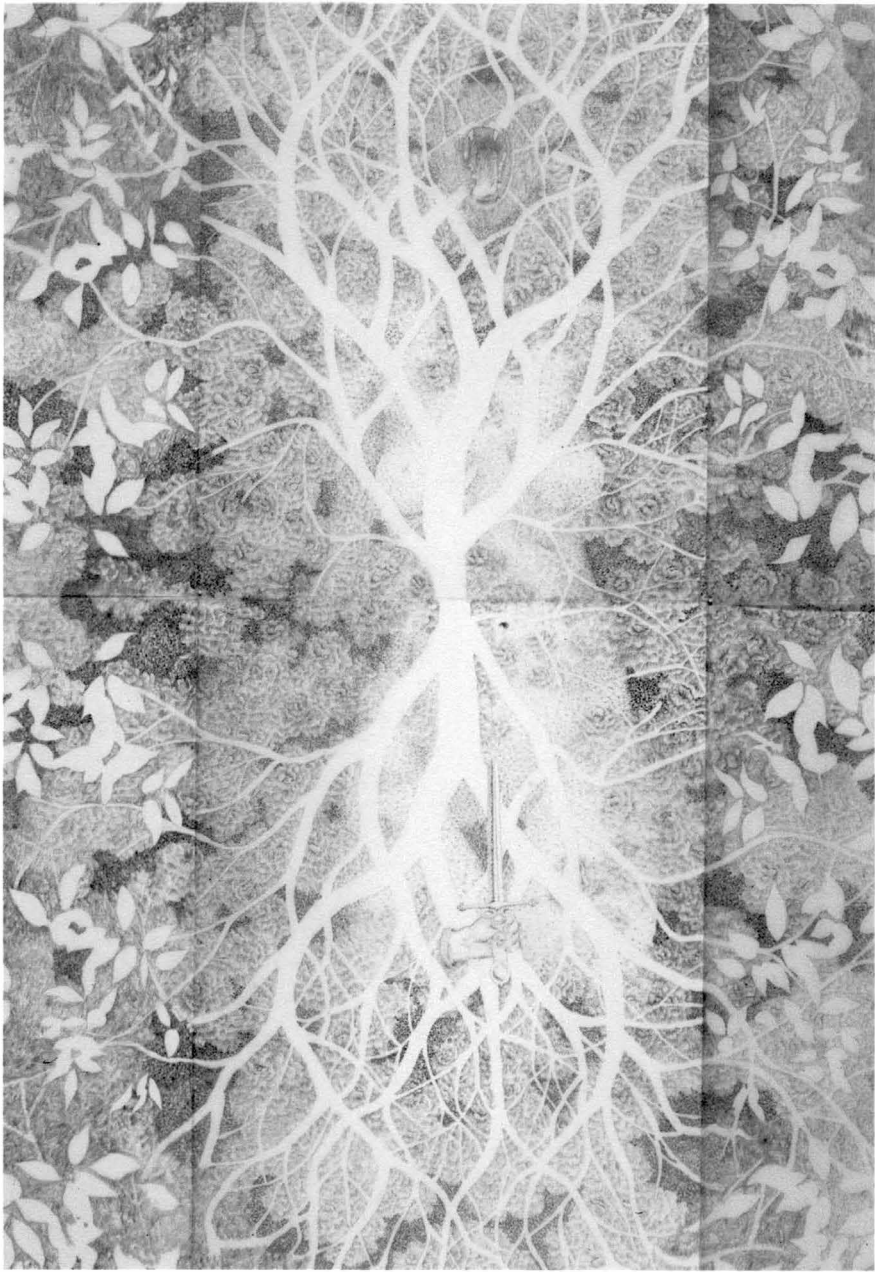
The obsessive technique of these drawings produces a complexity which aims to invite and reward extended viewing. Conceptually, it mirrors my fascination with the works of John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois. Reading and viewing artworks is not a passive activity, but a source of creative energy. I wanted to inhabit these works; to 'fix' the image of that complete and yet elusive fictional world. The drawings become a self-portrait of myself as a reader and viewer.

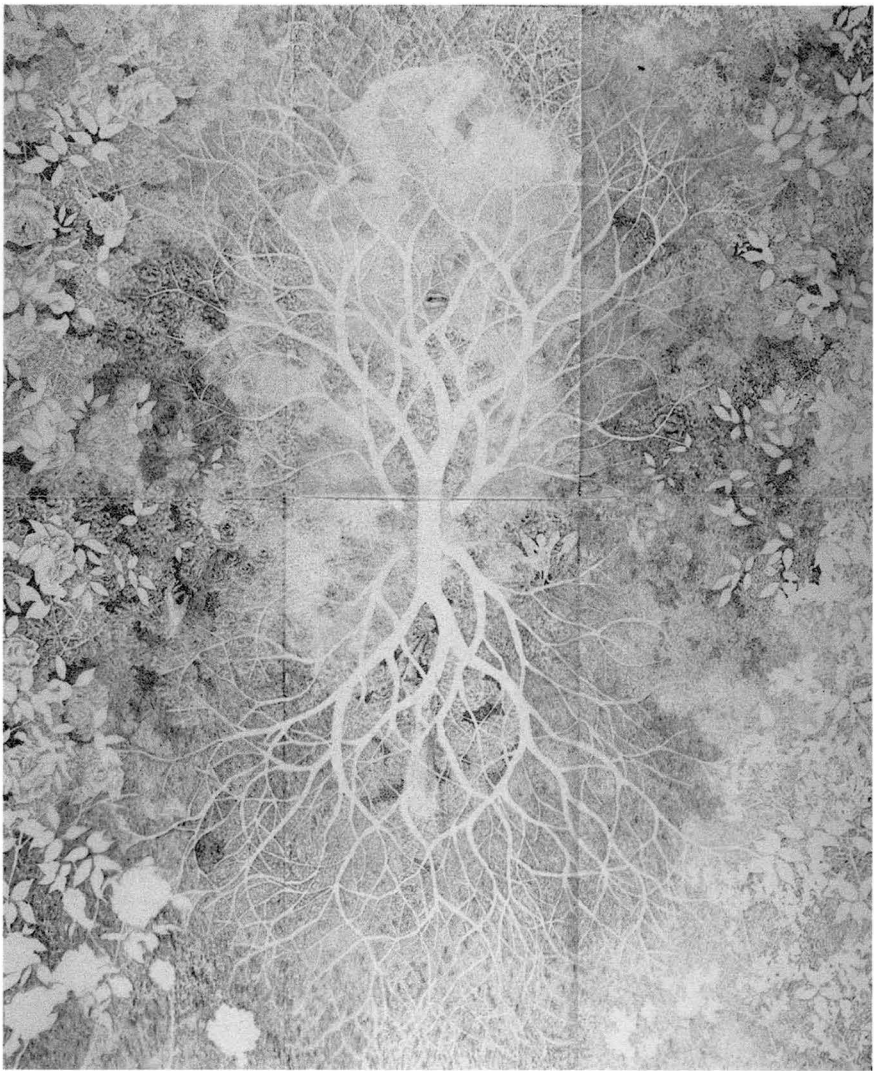
The following pages contain studio documentation of the drawings. Each image is 186 x 240 cm, and is followed by a detail.



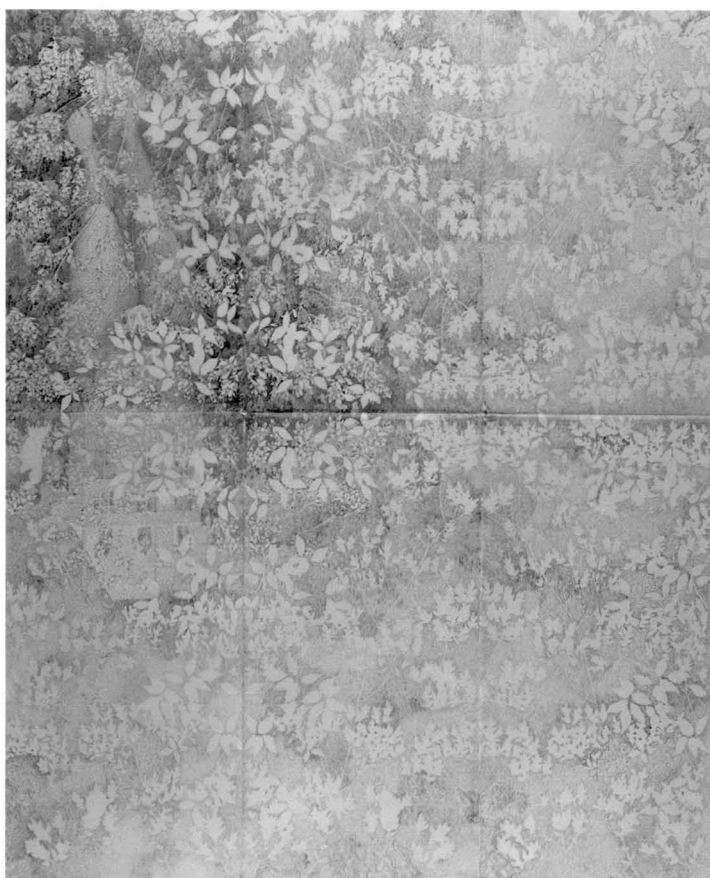














Conclusion

Gwen John said of her work 'As to me, I cannot imagine why my vision will have some value in the world – and yet I know it will ... I think it will count because I am patient and recieillé, in some degree.' Later she commented on this last word 'recieillé ... don't you think that French word is beautiful – it means I think to gather in, to be collected.'¹ This thesis makes an argument for the persistent relevance of her inward vision.

I have suggested that, rather than self-expression, these works by John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois all deal with finding form for the dynamics of repression and return that structure subjectivity, and they do so in a way that engages particularly with the experiences of women. They show that cultural constructions of feminine identity and behaviour offer truncated possibilities for the expression of women's embodied experiences. In comparing these works, I have traced their shared concern with giving form to these repressed aspects of 'femaleness'. John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois represent women as embodied subjects animated by fears and desires, not as the objects of male desire, or as signifiers for male fears and wishes. By engaging the viewer/reader in the processes of repression and return, they suggest the inadequacy of the model of the subject as self-knowing and authoritative which, as has been argued by many writers, structures the traditions of the 'I' in writing, and the conventions of the portrait. These works realise Kristeva's conception of a feminist signifying space, and conceive the self as a subject-in-process.

The room is a motif common to all the works. It becomes a site in which the processes that constitute the female subject are explored. Gwen John's rooms begin to remember; the repressed begins to loom in those strange,

¹

Gwen John, quoted in Mary Taubman *Gwen John*, London: Scolar Press, 1985, p 18.

shadowy non-corners, while in the fiction of Gilman and Rhys, repressed memories and emotions surface on the walls of the room. In Bourgeois's installations these dramas are staged in a space that is at once real and imaginary.

There are interesting formal similarities between these practices. The four artists mix different modes of signification within the one work. In the art of John and Bourgeois symbolic objects, precisely rendered images of the body, and ambiguous or abstract forms are juxtaposed. The fictional language of Gilman and Rhys, is marked by shifts between different registers and the incorporation of fragments from other discourses. Their texts are enriched by imagery that is at once vivid and mysterious.

Kristeva has suggested that the exploration of the unconscious, and of irrational signification is difficult for women to sustain. Certainly to read the lives and letters of these women is to be struck both by their tenacity and by their sense of alienation and doubt. For Gwen John, painting was a necessary process, but she had great anxiety about showing her work. Gilman battled fatigue and depression to lecture and write on the feminist cause, but *The Yellow Wallpaper* is the only work in which she uses dream logic and a fragmented narrative voice to shape the formless and unheard aspects of female experience. Rhys was also plagued by doubts and anxiety and suffered a long period in which she was unable to finish work. The project of finding form in which the fears and desires of individual women may be brought into shared representations becomes one of the central concerns of her fiction. Louise Bourgeois has sustained her investigation of the representation of female experience with great complexity, and has developed an effectively abrasive public persona. She too has battled doubts and uncertainty in the long years when her work was unrecognised. The current level of critical and

general interest in Bourgeois's work suggests a shifting cultural climate which has perhaps propelled and nourished her later work.

This thesis has traced an evolution of a sensibility in the work of four artists and writers whose careers span the century. They have in common an awareness of particular problems facing women's self-representation and, through their practices, seek to overcome them. I have taken a tandem approach to the formal strategies and common concerns of John, Gilman, Rhys and Bourgeois. The project consists of a written critical analysis, and a room of drawings.

In this paper I have outlined the significance of these practices to feminist criticism. Through the drawings I have extended and made visible in an experiential way their connected concerns with female silence. The emphasis of the project has been on reading and looking as a layered process. It combines critical analysis with a less rational, and more personally motivated, exploration of the works.

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