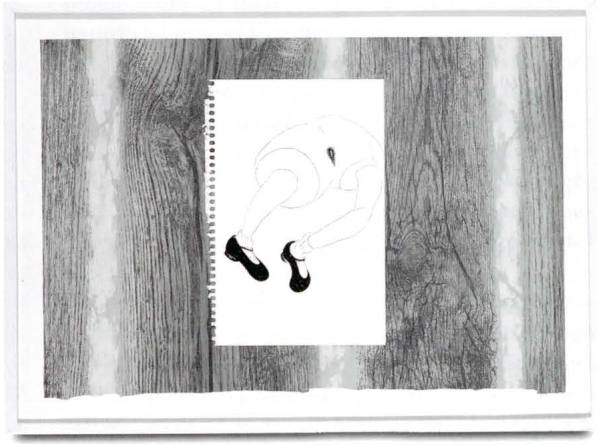
Camhi, Leslie. “Domestic Horrors.” Parkett No. 50/51 (1997) pp. 200 – 203

PARKETT



LESLIE CAMHI

Domestic Horrors

Avec ma main brûlée, j'écris sur la nature du feu.[1)]

Rounding the corner some years ago in a major museum, I nearly stumbled over a cast of the figure of a woman. She was lying on the floor in fetal position. Her eye was blackened, and her hand was held protectively against her face; footprints and bruises, accusations and statistics were stamped across her naked limbs like so many blows. “Look what you made me do.” “I think you like it (Mom).” “Love is forgiving.” I didn't want to like the sculpture. It was painful; it was bad. It was simple; it was sad. But it brought back memories.

When Sue Williams first exhibited IRRESISTIBLE (1992) in a New York gallery, a man came in and kicked it. But the sculpture's resilient density—it is cast in solid rubber—made it extraordinarily resistant to attack. Had the assailant been planted there by feminists against pornography, who claim that representing violence against women only begets more of the same?[2)] For whom was this work “irresistible”? Women also felt its pull. Some bemoaned it as promoting a “victim mentality,” while others' stories of

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abuse poured in. "Even the model, as she lay in that position while I was preparing to cast her body, began to tell me stories of her own abuse by men," recalls Williams.

That one's stories are an effect of one's position is apparent in Williams' earlier work in which the position of women is usually subservient: kneeling to clean around some toilet, squatting to void a human head, or bending with drooping breasts before THE LOW SINK OF DEBAUCHERY (1991). Like those heroic, early female entertainers in vaudeville, Williams makes a mockery of the female body, sending up its "lowly" attributes in public. Many of these works are darkly, hilariously funny, but the virulent polemics they inspired in the cultural climate in which they were first shown tended to drown out their subtler qualities: their riotous line, their comic use of irony and understatement, their sense of parody and play.

The same year that Williams created IRRESISTIBLE, Dr. Judith Lewis Herman, a professor at Harvard Medical School, published *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), an influential book in which she stated that "the most common posttraumatic stress disorders are those not of men in war but of women in civilian life."[3] Overwhelming numbers of contemporary women feel themselves to be the shell-shocked survivors of a literal battle between the sexes. Herman is among the most eminent defenders of the Recovered Memory Movement, which encourages women to reconstruct the stories of their own childhood abuse in therapy (and often to confront the abuser). The results of this explosive movement were seen not only in therapists' offices, but in courts and on television. A backlash soon followed. That same year, a group of parents, whose adult children had recalled scenes of severe childhood abuse in therapy, founded the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, to combat what they consider the Recovered Memory Movement's noxious effect on "family" values.[4]

In psychoanalysis, there are no "wrong" memories, only memories that, like dreams, are subject to interpretation, whose gaps and transformations are as revealing as any fiction of wholeness promised by their recovery. Memories are not stored for eventual retrieval, like buried treasure, or skeletons in a closet, or information on a computer's hard drive; they subtend momentary experience like the multiple layers of palimpsest, and can be seen only in relation to the present.

Sue Williams says of IRRESISTIBLE: "It's not really like an artwork in that it doesn't 'wander off.' It's a clear memory from the not-too-distant past." She's referring to the work's "literal" quality: the fact, for example, that it was cast from a living body. All the quotes she used were things people once said to her. And on one terrible occasion she found herself in that position.

Are "recovered" memories accurate reconstructions of actual events from the patient's past? Can a sculpture function "like a memory" once it has been placed in a public and artistic context? What is constructed, and what is real? Or does this uncertainty and confusion mean that we are roving about the terrain of trauma, with its shattering effect upon identity and the capacity to separate truth from fantasy?

Exactly one hundred years earlier, in another fin de siècle, the American feminist and writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman published a gothic horror story called *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The story was drawn from Gilman's experience. Before she entered public life, Gilman had been a young wife and mother suffering from literary aspirations and postpartum depression. Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the leading "nerve specialist" of the day, prescribed for her a cure of absolute rest and total creative inactivity. This regime nearly drove her insane.[5]

The first-person narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a young mother, married to a doctor, who has himself prescribed rest for her nervous disorders. Deprived of distraction and confined to the bedroom of a house they've rented for the summer, she becomes increasingly intrigued and troubled by a pattern she begins to discern in the wallpaper that surrounds her.

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It 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. The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering, unclean yellow.[6]

The wallpaper teases her to make sense of it; its uncertain forms exist on the border of legibility. It disturbs her precisely because she cannot quite identify its shapes and pattern. Its yellow color reeks of bodily excrescences and a putrid animality. But the narrator determines that she

...will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion... this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.
...Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes—a kind of "debased Romanesque" with delirium tremens—go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity. But on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.[7]

Gradually, beneath these grotesque and lurid forms, an underpattern emerges: the shadowy figure of a woman rattling the bars that confine her. Yet, just as the narrator sees the wallpaper's biomorphic forms coalesce in the frighteningly literal figure of a woman, she sinks definitively into madness, tearing down the wallpaper and circling the room on all fours like a caged animal.

Sue Williams says that in her new paintings she's been struggling to shift her work "away from the literal." But the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* might still recognize some of the forms she is using. These large and exuberant canvases look like road maps to a psychosexual geography. They're filled with droopy things—tails, bows, penises, and breasts—and grabby things—hands, feet, fingers, and toes. Their moral temperature hovers somewhere around a cold sweat. Yet we should be wary of assigning them any too-precise meaning for, densely beautiful, they defy and confound the viewer at the limits of sense.

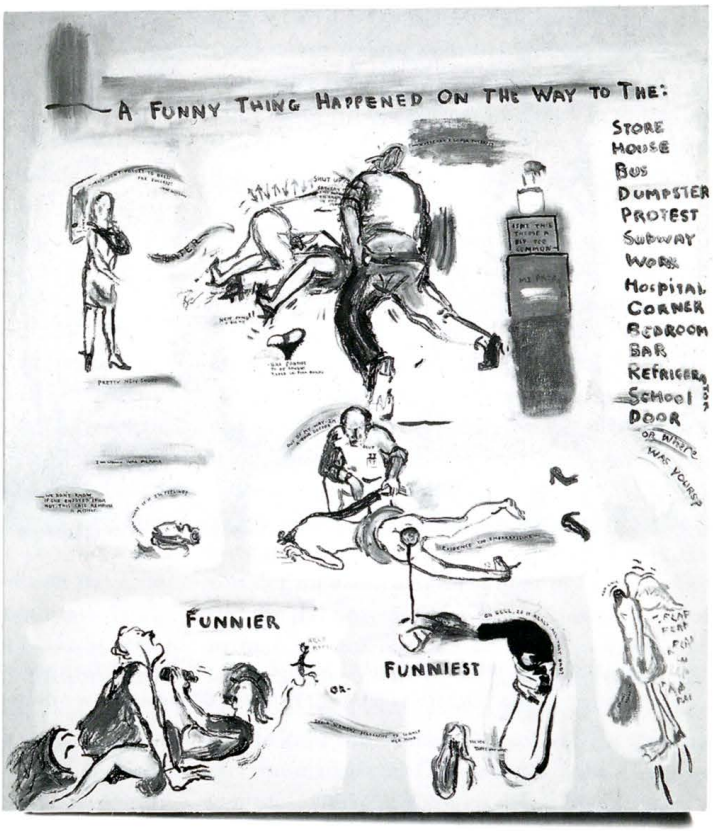
And yet, for all their strangeness, their terrain is oddly familiar. Consider SUNBATHERS IN BUTTSVILLE (1997): Its bright yellows and golds are abjectly cheerful. All its orifices are ringed with painful creases, and its distended navels are girded with pathetic fringes, like the ruffles on women's bathing suits designed to hide their spreading midriffs. Everything in this jumble of body parts drips. Or NIGHTLIGHT (1996): Its thin and wiggly penises are adorned with flounces, as women in puffy-sleeved dresses spread their flared skirts to reveal udder-like extrudescences, or bend over pots, wearing plaid aprons over a single, protruding breast. In BIG AND MULTI-COLORED (1996), tentacle-like fingers grip limp penises, women in little-girl bows and dresses sport grotesque paunches, secreting vulvae and sagging breasts. The canvases become more layered, more complex. A recent series is painted on fabric that has been rubberized, and printed with pseudo-Rococo images of courtly ladies and gentlemen in gardens and at picnics. Lines swirl over them in a host of unidentified drips, stains, and orifices.

Williams's aesthetic territory is still the intimate realm of sexual tension and domestic horror. Her imagery is often drawn from the iconography of 1950s femininity: spike heels, pointy shoes, bows, aprons, flared skirts, bed ruffles, antimacassars, and flanges. It was a time when women took to dressing up their furniture as they immolated themselves on the twin altars of femininity and domesticity. A generation of women associate this period with their mothers, and a certain revulsion for the maternal body appears repeatedly in these canvases. It was also the period of heroic abstraction in American painting, and these works also negotiate with that formal legacy.

Any appendage is potentially vulnerable and silly. Dress up a penis in a skirt or bow, and it's bound to look pathetic; breasts, whether pert or droopy, tend to invite commentary; toes and fingers can seem strangely independent of the body. Our corporeal extrusions sometimes appear mere afterthoughts of the Creator, like a ruffle added to a bed. Babies know

how to play with them; adults tend to forget just how much fun they can be. Filled with the frenetic, automatic energy of sex, Williams' elaborate webs seem like vast abstract tissues of unconscious material being woven in someone's head. To make private traumas public can sometimes seem to be a strangely depriving experience for what remains of a sense of self. Williams says that when she's alone with herself she sometimes gives herself "the willies," but by transforming these neuroses into high-spirited aesthetic practice she has found a way of giving them to us instead.

1) "With my burnt hand I write about the nature of fire." Cited in: Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina*, trans. Philip Boehm (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), p. 58 (source unknown).
2) I'd feel more comfortable rehearsing the lines of this long-standing feminist debate if Sue Williams herself had not painted an explicit parody of these positions, in ARE YOU PRO-PORN OR ANTI-PORN? (1992), which shows a smiling woman artist being drawn and quartered, while beneath her, pro- and anti-porn positions are represented by rutting and lame horses, respectively.
3) Dr. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 28; as quoted in: Elaine Showalter, *Hystories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 144.
4) The False Memory Syndrome Foundation's first annual meeting took place at Valley Forge (a symbolic choice of location?) in April 1993. See Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 121.
5) See Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in: *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, ed. Ann J. Lane (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 19–20.
6) Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973), p. 13.
7) ibid., p. 20.



SUE WILLIAMS,
A FUNNY THING HAPPENED, 1992,
acrylic on canvas, 48 x 42" /
ETWAS MERKWÜRDIGES GESCHAH,
Acryl auf Leinwand, 122 x 106,7 cm.