

THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE

22 June - 20 July 2023

ESSAY BY GILDA BRUNO

But when I look on her and hope
To tell with joy what I admire,
My thoughts lie cramp'd in narrow scope,
Or in the feeble birth expire;
No skill'd complexity of speech,
No simple phrase of tenderest fall,
No liken'd excellence can reach
Her, the most excellent of all,
The best half of creation's best,
Its heart to feel, its eye to see,
The crown and complex of the rest,
Its aim and its epitome.
Nay, might I utter my conceit,
'Twere after all a vulgar song,
For she's so simply, subtly sweet,
My deepest rapture does her wrong.
Yet is it now my chosen task
To sing her worth as Maid and Wife;
Nor happier post than this I ask,
To live her laureate all my life.

– Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (1854–1862), Part I, Book I, Canto II: l.25–l.44

Few things have been as pivotal to the evolution of culture as women. The enduring influence of the female form on the arts throughout history is truly undeniable; statuettes discovered by Hohle Fels and Willendorf around 25,000-40,000 years ago depict full-figured Venuses in all their glory, meanwhile the evolution of modern European poetry can be traced back to the rise of Provençal troubadour literature with its courtly love-struck verses. Yet the contributions of pioneering female artists themselves are still so often overlooked. Having first made their way into art history books as the muses behind some of the greatest masterpieces ever realised by the likes of Botticelli, Caravaggio, Rubens, and Titian, women have continuously been seen as the fuel igniting the male creative genius, rather than imbued with genius of their own.

Time and time again, the female form has been rendered in paint as little more than a symbol, a representation of untouched purity, kindness and submission. Stripped bare of any agency and posing naked on draped fabrics in drafty ateliers, the muses of the past were depicted in line with an understanding of femininity that is best encapsulated by the Victorian phrase “the angel in the house”. A wide-spread ideal of domesticity predicated on women as saintly, graceful and pious creatures exhibiting unconditional devotion to their husbands, the 19th-century saying was both ingrained in and kept alive by the perfection-oriented vision of art promoted by Royal Academy of Arts’ founder Sir Joshua Reynolds, as a legacy of Raphael’s painting style. Born as a reaction to this idealised aesthetics’ dominance over the art scene of the time, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood – a group of English painters, poets and art critics founded in 1848 by William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, James Collinson, Frederic George Stephens, and Thomas Woolner – represented an unparalleled watershed moment in the portrayal and conception of women in art.

Among the most ground-breaking figures to have shaped the course of art history, the Pre-Raphaelites were the first to foreground the inherently contradictory and multifaceted turmoil that is women’s reality in their works. By deliberately choosing their sisters, friends and lovers – people they could observe up close – as the main subjects of their paintings, the Brotherhood created more empathetic, nuanced and truthful representations of the female condition and its intrinsic complexity. Their ability to capture the antithetical motifs that make up women’s experience – pride and shame; passion and innocence; boldness and fear – is especially tangible in John Everett Millais’ artworks, including his richly symbolic painting *The Bridesmaid* (1851). Together with the aforementioned Victorian expression “the angel in the house”, from which the exhibition borrows its title, this small yet utterly poignant piece serves as the artistic and thematic underpinning of STUDIO WEST’s group show. Like Millais’ world-renowned *Ophelia* (1851–1852), *The Bridesmaid* delicately translates the unease storming its heroine’s mind as she is reminded of the constraints of her existence.

A depiction of a young lady framed by a mane of fiery orange hair and holding a small piece of wedding cake over a golden wedding ring, at first glance *The Bridesmaid* is easily misconstrued as a mundane vignette of daily life. The piece acquires new meaning once one learns of the many folkloristic rituals performed on St Agnes’ Eve in Victorian times. For girls and unmarried women, January 20th represented the perfect opportunity to gain a glimpse of their wedded future. According to the tradition portrayed in Millais’ canvas, bridesmaids would see a vision of their true love if they passed a piece of wedding cake through a ring nine times while staring into a mirror. Rendered as an emblem of chastity, underlined by the symbolic orange blossom corsage pinned on her chest, Millais’ copper-haired muse looks at her inescapable fate with eyes full of dread; her parted lips at once hinting at the abrupt, forced awakening of her sexuality and her helplessness before her groom-to-be.

Bringing together seven emerging women artists, *The Angel in the House* re-examines the plethora of ideals, preconceptions and stereotypes that have come to define the predominant view of womanhood, exploring the ways in which contemporary female creatives are visualising core aspects of their lives in the 21st century. A complex exploration of domestic ritual, femininity, memory, and emotional experience, the showcase taps into the participating artists' contrasting biographies and practices to examine the role that ordinary objects and settings have played in the construction of their personal stories, inner universes, and conceptions of self. Whether through still life scenes or painted renderings of private spaces, by leveraging ethereal visions or hyper-realistic moments of intimacy, the featured painters invite the audience to join them as they dive into fading recollections from the past and unravel dreams of the future.

In her detailed and sensorial reinterpretations of everyday garments and accessories, Florence Reekie hides subtle references to the confined nature of femininity. Redirecting the public's attention onto the function played by drapery and fabric – the soft “armours” by which we build our identity and make ourselves more desirable – the artist denounces the lasting legacy of traditional, corset-wrapped depictions of womanhood and their toxic impact on contemporary notions of beauty. While differing in style, Xu Yang's craft emerges from similar observations: taking 18th-century French Rococo art as her main aesthetic influence, she draws on its purposefully exaggerated, pompous atmospheres to establish a connection between the lavish era during which it surfaced and today's obsessive image culture. Surfacing from the clashing of Old Masters-inspired painting and a contemporary take on portraiture, her paintings transcend all temporal and spatial connotations to immerse viewers in a pearls-and-diamonds-encrusted analysis of sensuality, identity and the body.

In Pippa El-Kadhi Brown and Jess Allen's practices, fictional and real-life domestic settings hold up a mirror to their emotional realities, serving as windows into each artists' innermost selves. El-Kadhi Brown's oneiric, visceral canvases allude to her deeply psychological vision of the home, a place where the multiple sides of her consciousness and psyche burst into “a juicy, dusty, clean, hard mess”; while Allen looks at the sun-kissed, comforting ambience of the domestic environment as a time capsule of her ever-evolving story. Here, shadows and reflections speak of the transience of moments and their long-lasting, albeit progressively fading, influence on her personal experience. Imperceptible details, books and human silhouettes are placed in the compositions as bittersweet reminders of the comings and goings that mark our daily lives.

Whether prompted by distant memories or originating in the artists' imagination, Grace Tobin and Olha Prymak's offerings investigate the symbolisms linking the female realm and nature. In her cyanotype blue-shaded paintings *Inside, Out* (2023) and *Rime* (2023), Tobin weaves threads of belonging that take her back to the uniquely tranquil state of mind she felt when visiting her grandparents' house. Dispersed throughout the artworks are ordinary furnishings, objects, plants and gardens that speak of enduring human connection and

affection. Merging the physical and the fantasy world, in her fruit and blossom-filled paintings, Pryymak brings to life surreal dreamscapes permeated with sensuality, fragility and wonder. Action and stillness serve as the leitmotifs to Elena Rivera-Montanes' explorations of domesticity. While depicting the ordinariness of the quotidian, her poignant renditions of everyday incidents convey a sense of suspense and nostalgia that hints at the unpredictability of family drama and the irremediable passing of time.

What arises from this manifold selection of paintings is an investigation into the female experience which, highlighting the impossibility of reducing womanhood and its figurative representation to a set of fixed parameters, celebrates it in all of its inextricable complexity, mysticism and paradoxes.

ABOUT GILDA BRUNO

Gilda Bruno (1998) is a freelance arts and culture writer, editor and photographer currently based in London. Her work has been featured in award-winning publications including AnOther Magazine, DAZED, VICE, i-D, The British Journal of Photography, HUCK, The Face, PAPER, Re-Edition, Il Giornale dell'Arte, and more. Since July 2021, she also works as an Editorial Assistant on the print edition of AnOther.

With three years of experience in working across print and online media, Gilda has profiled a number of acclaimed personalities such as Oscar-winning cinematographer Roger Deakins, Magnum Photos image-makers Alessandra Sanguinetti and Martin Parr, street photography legend Jamel Shabazz, multidisciplinary artist Yoann Bourgeois, and AMBUSH creative director Yoon Ahn. She has also interviewed some of the most exciting names on the emerging photography scene, from Marie Tomanova and Carla Liesching to Sarah Bahbah, Max Miechowski and Hajar Benjida among many others.

Since December 2022, she is the curator of ITV-backed platform Woo's fortnightly art & culture column, Stop Scrolling, where every two weeks she brings readers a roundup of exhibitions, art fairs and photo books to check out, as well as exclusive conversations with some of today's most exciting emerging artists. In April 2023, Gilda was included in the 30 Under 30 list of Il Giornale dell'Arte alongside other Italian artists, curators, speakers, art historians, and writers currently rewriting the rules of today's art scene.

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