



Reviews

Edited by Rosie Miles

Kehinde Wiley, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, exhibition at the William Morris Gallery, 22 February to 25 May 2020.

In 2018 Kehinde Wiley was commissioned to paint the official portrait of Barack Obama. Obama is painted in smart casual dress, sitting on an elegant wooden chair with large hands crossed over his knees, against an Eden-like background of vertiginous foliage and intermittent flowers. Wiley has been painting black people onto colourful flowery patterned backgrounds for over twenty years. He usually approaches black people on the streets, invites them into his roving photographic studio and asks them to pose (often in the manner of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British portrait painting). The sitters are transformed by Wiley's use of the photographic process to become the models he uses in his paintings, where they are represented with stature, dignity and pride. Wiley met the women portrayed in the paintings in the exhibition *The Yellow Wallpaper* on the streets of Dalston, East London, and appropriately for the William Morris Gallery they are surrounded by patterns adapted from Morris's textile and wallpaper designs. The Morris designs are painted in a photorealist manner, the patterns enlarged, the colours garish, dominated by



Figure 1: Installation view of Kehinde Wiley, *The Yellow Wallpaper* exhibition, at the William Morris Gallery © Kehinde Wiley, 2020 (courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, photography by Nicola Tree).

yellow and slightly acidic. In each of Wiley's paintings a few elements of an adaptation of a Morris design gently entwine parts of the painted representations of women's bodies. All six paintings are large, oval in shape, with thick, heavy, dark frames. They are hung on deep blue walls where they glow under spotlights.

I wanted to write a review of *The Yellow Wallpaper* as Wiley's paintings in this exhibition are similar to a few of my own art works made over the last twenty years. The closest are probably a series of paintings from 2001-2 based on Kasimir Malevich's paintings from the 1920s in which images of peasants have been painted onto reproductions of Morris fabric. I have found comparison with this series instructive for thinking about the impact of Wiley's works. The painting of mine reproduced here (Figure 2) appropriates a modern machine print of Morris and Co.'s *Iris* fabric designed by J.H. Dearle. Morris's original wallpaper and fabric designs are highly schematised representations of nature, where it is always summer and never winter; the plants are always in leaf, often flowering, with their fruits available in abundance, ripe for picking and with no human labour in sight. This is a utopian vision, but one which was acceptable to the upper middle classes and aristocrats of his time: it is an image of Cockaigne, the medieval mythical land of plenty. Today Morris's work is safe and comfortable, and his wallpaper and fabric designs are widely reproduced in machine printed form and can be found furnishing the semis of middle-class England; yet they represent a trace of Morris's utopian dream and the



Figure 2: David Mabb, *Haymaking*, 2002. Oil on Morris & Co. *Iris* fabric designed by J.H. Dearle. 75" x 63".

values of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Over and around the *Iris* design in *Haymaking* (2002), the figure from Malevich's painting *Haymaking* (1928-29) is loosely copied. Malevich's peasant paintings from the late 1920s represent the Russian peasant at a time when millions were facing death and starvation due to Stalin's forced collectivisation. The peasants are represented in simple, geometrical forms and mark a development of Malevich's work away from non-representational abstraction at a time when Socialist Realism is being introduced as the dominant cultural form in the Soviet Union. How the paintings could be



Figure 3: Kehinde Wiley, *Portrait of Dorinda Essah*, 2020. Oil on linen. 94.50" x 69.25".

understood in relation to the increasing political repression of the time is difficult to gauge. The paintings show no trace of the effects of collectivisation. On the contrary, in most of the paintings the peasants stand upright, individually and in groups, with what might be read as a sense of pride and dignity. However, the use of figuration might also be read as a compromise or move towards the demands of the representational art of Socialist Realism by Malevich.

In *Haymaking* (2002), the image of the peasant is painted onto the pattern with the exception of the iris leaves which wind their way up the front of his body, appearing to imprison him behind an iris fence. The traces of Morris's utopianism overlaying Malevich's peasant suggest in Walter Benjamin's words a 'dialectics at a standstill' (from Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'). The appropriations of these past art historical and political moments come together in this painting to form an impasse, not allowing the new to appear. It is certainly difficult to read the work as anything but stuck, perhaps because the peasants were annihilated as a class and the iris leaves from the Morris and Co. design become the rather decorative bars of a prison. But simultaneously the intrusion of Morris's utopianism into the Russian image might also be read as a melancholy reminder that history did not necessarily have to have turned out that way.

To return to Kehinde Wiley's William Morris Gallery exhibition, the exhibition is titled *The Yellow Wallpaper* after Charlotte Perkins Gilman's famous short story of the same name from 1892. In the story a young woman, the narrator, is persuaded by John, her physician husband, to rest and recuperate from an apparent nervous affliction ('a slight hysterical tendency') in an upstairs attic of a mansion decorated with a wallpaper where '[t]he color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow'. The accompanying video documentary to the exhibition, shown in an adjacent room in the William Morris Gallery, opens with a quote from Gilman's story: 'I never saw a worse wallpaper in my life'. The camera then pans over some Morris wallpaper drawings and designs. In the story, as she increasingly suffers from the restrictions placed upon her by her complacent and patronising husband, the young woman begins to think that she sees women creeping around behind the pattern in the wallpaper. One woman shakes the pattern. The narrator thinks that they will eventually escape out of the wallpaper, as she comes to believe she herself did. The narrator pulls off most of the wallpaper in the attic so that her husband can not put her back. In the Gilman story, the wallpaper is described as a nightmare prison from which the narrator wishes to escape. Although she believes she has escaped from the wallpaper, she creeps around the room as though she has become one of the women inside it as insanity overtakes her.

I was interested as to why Morris's wallpaper has been compared in this exhibition

to Gilman's yellow wallpaper. It is difficult to imagine Morris's utopian imagery functioning as the representation of oppression – as the nightmare prison of Gilman's story – even if it is painted with a dominance of yellows. A number of different wallpapers might have done that job, a neo-classical wallpaper being an obvious example. Another disparity is that in Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' the women who are imagined to be inside the wallpaper are trapped and degraded figures creeping around behind the pattern. In contrast the women in Wiley's wallpaper do not creep; they are posed and painted with pride and dignity. Neither are they imprisoned by the patterns. Rather, as in *Portrait of Dorinda Essah* (Figure 3), parts of the patterns gently extend out from the wallpaper and float up around and across their bodies, more like a caress of inclusion. In other paintings the patterns rise up to their waists so that the women seem to emerge from them, rather than the patterns constituting the bars of a prison from which they have to escape.

I am unsure, therefore, how helpful Gilman's work is as a context for the exhibition. Rather we must think about what happens when Wiley paints images of black women from the streets of Dalston into yellowish adaptations of Morris patterns. Wiley paints his subjects into art history and history, whereas before their presence was only felt by their exclusion, i.e. no presence at all. The women posed have stature, dignity and pride. By placing them into the Morris designs they are surrounded by the traces of Morris's utopian dream. It is as though the women have entered that dream of abundance and plenty, although one now associated with cosy middle-class domesticity. To quote Wiley: the exhibition 'seeks to use the language of the decorative to reconcile blackness, gender, and a beautiful and terrible past'. The 'terrible past' however is largely absent. The painting of Morris's patterns using garish yellow colours might be read as a form of disquieting beauty, but it is hardly adequate to describe hundreds of years of slavery and oppression. The reconciliation is rendered in paint in a manner whereby the patterns and the images of the women are smoothly worked together, so that the black women become the beneficiaries of a nineteenth-century politics of plenty. Rather than 'dialectics at a standstill' these paintings constitute a dialectics of transformation. The yellow-dominated Morris patterns can be read not as prisons but as spaces of liberation for the women represented. Even though Morris's patterns are represented as garish over-lit spaces of middle-class security, the nineteenth-century trace of the medieval mythical land of plenty hangs on.

David Mabb