

“Woman must never forget that home is the very center of her sphere.”

– S.F.W., *American Ladies Magazine* (May 1835)

A WOMAN'S PROPER SPHERE

That there are two separate spheres in daily life – that one is inherently female (the domestic sphere) and the other is definitively male (the public sphere) – is a notion that dates back to the Ancient Greeks. In 2016, with female CEOs, presidential candidates and army rangers, and with the rise of stay-at-home dads, these spheres are no longer as distinctly separate. Using wallpaper as a common visual element, **Laurel Garcia Colvin**, **Rebecca Mushtare** and **Tricia Wright** engage the theme of a woman's “proper sphere” and weigh in on its relevance for women today.

Rebecca Mushtare draws inspiration from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* for her touch-responsive installation. The technology of thermochromatic inks, which turn transparent when heated to body temperature, allows Mushtare to bring to life the haunting story of a homebound woman's descent into madness. In Gilman's story, a female narrator is confined to a single room by her husband because of her “slight hysterical tendencies.” She gradually becomes obsessed with the room's insipid yellow wallpaper, convinced that there is a woman creeping behind it and that she herself once came from behind the walls. The story became symbolic of an entire generation of new, educated American

women who felt lost, ineffective and frustrated by the lack of outlets for their intellectual interests. Like Gilman's character, these women were clawing at the walls of their domestic interior, fighting to get out into the world. Mushtare's *Beyond 'The Yellow Wallpaper'* places viewers in the position of Gilman's woman – they, too, will have to get physical with the installation's paper in order to reveal its secrets.

Tricia Wright's use of wallpaper in her “Anaglypta Dreams” series has a more nostalgic tone. The work takes its name from embossed wallpaper developed in England in the 19th century, which is still used today, particularly in hospital-like settings. For Wright, the paper evokes memories of her childhood in England, where prints and patterns were prevalent in home décor, and of her regular trips to Ireland to visit her mother at a nursing home. The anaglypta paper becomes the textured backdrop for minimalist works that are elegiac. As in her “Marginalia” series, also on view in *SHE*, these works reposition commonplace items that are both associated with women and are considered ornamental, ephemeral or domestic. Wright moves these feminine items, presented in a visual style that references the masculine school of formalism (embodied by artists like Barnett Newman and Donald Judd), from the margins to the center of the frame. Her newest work on exhibit, appropriately



entitled *SHE*, builds on series like “Marginalia” and “Anaglypta Dreams,” but adds an additional component – the sound of her mother’s voice. The moving sculptural piece invites the viewer to step closer and listen to Wright’s mother tell the story of her girlhood and coming-of-age.

For *SHE*, Laurel Garcia Colvin transforms a corner of ArtsWestchester’s gallery into a room dedicated to the history of feminism. The concept and title, *Beyond a Room of One’s Own*, emerges from Virginia Woolf’s seminal essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, in which the author argues that to write fiction, a woman needs a space unto herself and a modest income. Colvin’s installation is a room of womankind’s own. Within the

papered walls (a motif that was designed by the artist), Colvin’s toile-inspired drawings and fabrics tell the story of the women’s liberation movement. Key texts that have defined each wave of women’s fight for equal rights, equal recognition and equal status in America (and beyond) are piled around Louis XIV-style chairs that the artist reupholstered with her own designs. At the center of the installation, a needlepoint piece quotes Woolf: “Women have sat indoors all these millions of years...” Framed pieces on the wall depict female leaders in politics, the arts, comedy, literature, and business. Each is titled with a question posed to those role models: how are we doing? Have women not only earned a room of their own, but also an equal place alongside their male counterparts?