What we do see

1 - spiral

Dear all,

Thanks so very much for having me. It is a treat to be here.

I am here to present you with the potential of what I am calling, for now, interior camouflage.

I will do so as provoked by an eighteen ninety-three French painting by Vuillard, this one. From here, I shall attempt what Lilian Chee describes as the work of an "enthusiast, [using] the scene or setting or object at hand as a point of departure, creatively, spiralling outward in arabesques."

And spiral I will.

I will proceed in two rounds of strictly nine minutes. In order to corset ideas into time further (do note that this is not as capricious as it sounds, corsets are already in this room, even if you cannot quite see them); each round is composed of nine vignettes of exactly one hundred and fifty words.

This has been the first one.

2 - entresol

We begin here, in this painting of a Parisian entresol from eighteen ninety-three. The painter was Édouard Vuillard, you can just about see his name signed at the bottom right.

An entresol is the floor squeezed between the commercial ground floor of a building, and the better dwellings found from the first floor upwards. Entresols are consequently squat, meaning they have lower ceilings than usual. They can be gloomy, these tight quarters, dark without much private space at all.

Which is to say, we are in the famous Parisian Fin-de-Siècle, but not in its glitzier corners. We are, instead, in a working class home. And hard working at that, too. During the day, this is not just a domestic space, but a workshop. A seamstress' workshop specialised in, yes, corsets.

It is in this poor room that fine ladies come to get strict yet arousing undergarments, and other feminine regalia.

3 - Mme. Vuillard

The title of this painting is no-nonsense: *Interior. Mother and sister of the artist.*

You get the gist of it.

To the right, sitting firm and spread-legged, is Madame Vuillard, née Marie Justine Alexandrine Michaud. She was a seamstress, and as a widow, she had to become the bread-winning matriarch of the Vuillard clan.

You do not need me to tell you, you do not fuck with Madame Vuillard.

Marie is everything the rest of the painting is not. While there is plenty that is fussy, and almost wobbly; Marie is quite literally solid. A human cornerstone. Immovable and supportive. Strong-headed, too.

She takes over more than half the pictoric space, her feet squarely on the floor, hands on knees. The hair part is severe.

By the time of this portrait, Mme. Vuillard has no husband and no mother. She is in mourning, and in charge, in a changing world.

4 - Mimi

Madame Vuillard commands one's attention, her contrasted figure is what we *do* see. But that is not the whole story.

To her left, we find Édouard's sister, Marie's middle child and only daughter: the other Marie.

Marie shares both name and profession with her mother. She is actually employed by her. When I say employed, I mean exploited.

She gets to live in the flat, but she does not really get paid. She also does not get a say in anything that goes on in this space. Not during the day, when it is a workshop; and not during the night, when it is their home.

Marie seems to be in the kind of relationship many daughters find themselves in with their mothers: perceived as their extension, an extra set of arms like their own, a bond as intimate as neglectful.

For practical and familial reasons, Marie goes by Mimi.

5 - wall

Édouard paints his sister in one of the most awkward poses I have ever seen in domestic portraiture. As if contorting under her mother's energy field, she bounces off her unavoidable presence.

(side note: the closest I have seen is this photograph of a young Virginia Woolf, her sister Vanessa, and their half-brother George, who abused them at the time).

This finds Mimi pressed against the physical constraint of the wall. We know there is not much room in this flat, therefore there is nowhere to hide. The way her whole lower body is positioned - elbows, forearms, waist, bum, legs - is as if she wanted to recoil further only to find that the wall was already there, blocking her escape.

A subtle metaphor this is not.

Vuillard's depiction of Mimi and Marie is quite brutal, but not wholly unsympathetic. For such stark reality, he offers a dose of magic realism.

6 - thesis

If you look closely at Mimi's left arm, you see it melt and disappear into the wall.

Marie's tartan dress, its pattern painstakingly painted by her brother, gets muddled with the bramble-like print that covers the wall.

Notice the celadon green strokes that mark the intersecting checkers on the dress. When we get to this area, they are in fugue, and become part of the foliage in the wallpaper.

This precise moment where Mimi goes from subject to object, from figure to background, is what I call interior camouflage. Mimi's mimesis, if you will.

This is a form of objectification. And while it still has to do with seeing and being seen, this has a desperate sense of agency - admittedly granted by Vuillard's brush. But if we are to agree on that agency, that complicates the powers we usually confer to a gaze, and focuses on bodily autonomy and performativity.

7 - camouflage

What we do see, then, is somebody caught *not* wanting to be seen.

Typically, we think of camouflage as an exclusively outdoor business, something needed to disguise ourselves in a wild, antagonistic “out there”, hunting, or at war.

Although camouflage may seem instinctual, the English language only got to name it in August nineteen seventeen, well into the First World War. We know because of this excerpt from *Popular Science Monthly*:

> “Since the war started [we have] published photographs of big British and French field pieces covered with shrubbery, (…) and all kinds of devices to hide the guns, trains, and the roads from the eyes of enemy aircraft.
>
> Until recently there was no one word (…) to explain this war trick. Sometimes a whole paragraph was required (…) Hereafter (…) a French word (…) will save all this needless writing and reading. Camouflage (…) it means "fooling the enemy.””

8 - etymology

If we follow the lead to French etymology, we will see that there the word camouflage had become solidified almost a century earlier, in the early eighteen hundreds. It was first an alleged derivation of *chaud moflet*, hot cheeks or, translated in English as choking pie, "a heavy-handed practical joke played on someone who falls asleep (…); cotton is wrapped up in a tube of paper, this is then set on fire and the smoke is directed up the sleeper's nostrils."

The alternative to this French origin is Italian - *cappo muffare*, to muffle the head. That is, to cover it, I imagine, as a way to disguise the face and its recognisability.

Either way, camouflage is born from soft wrappings that lead to confusion, and faces or heads that act as synecdoches, standing for one's whole being.

To camouflage is to clad oneself as a way of "unmaking" the self.

9 - citationality

By now, we have accumulated many soft surfaces.

We have Mimi's dress, Marie's wall, pliable cheeks blowing smoke, and gauze wrappings around Italian heads.

Who would have said that camouflage, woven so bloodily into history, was going to be this supple.

My definition of camouflage, though, makes it a superficial citational act. I think of it as one surface referencing another, the way we borrow other people's words in our texts, or images reproduce themselves into iconological echoes.

Camouflage is typically a uniform adopting a landscape. An incorporation of one's surroundings, giving the self up.

Eventually, it becomes harder to know where need ends and ornamentation begins. Where nostalgia and homage come in.

Stretch it towards whimsy, and you'll find walls dreaming of past gardens. Or an impoverished young seamstress willing herself a wall, citing an object to escape the entrapments of subjectivity.

That, I think we can all see.

What we do not see

1 - Édouard

In the Vuillard scene, what we do not see is, of course, Édouard himself. His father long dead, the older brother off to work for the military, Édouard is quite literally the only man in the house since his teenage years.

Marie, who runs a tight ship, knows that a growing boy is not good for business. At least, not for her corsetry business, full of women dressing and undressing, and young, vulnerable seamstresses failing to make ends meet.

During working hours, Édouard is asked to make himself scarce, and unseen. He is hidden, not unlike the way the eponymous protagonist of Chantal Ackerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* hides the couch where her son sleeps in the living room when she expects clients.

Hiding, he draws, and sketches, and yes, eventually impregnates a seamstress who, in turn, is not so much hidden as simply sent away.

2 - Thayer

Cue now Abbott Thayer, a North American painter, twenty years older than Vuillard. Although both passed by the Parisian École des Beaux Arts, their timelines never aligned, and did not meet.

Both suffered from depression, too.

Coincidences are often invisible.

Like Vuillard, Thayer painted the women in his circles and family, namely his daughters Mary (yes, another one) and Gladys.

While Vuillard painted busy, complex women; Thayer's gaze turned them into a saccharine ideal of female virtue. Oftentimes, they became angels.

Thayer was more comfortable with wings than with flesh. He had mostly worked as an animal painter, afterall.

It is this that interests us here, today. Thayer studied how wild animals hide in a landscape; a phenomenon for which, as an English speaker, he had to find his own terminology. As a painter, he tackled it with what he knew: foreground and background, colour and pattern, light and shadow.

3 - concealment

Studying around the time of Mimi's camouflage, Thayer eventually published an illustrated book, *Concealing coloration in the animal kingdom,* in nineteen o nine.

As part of his arguments on patterning and shadow, he used cut-outs that toggle between immersing and isolating an animal in its setting. Some of his attempts even featured wallpaper, abstracting the principle beyond a particular, natural ecosystem.

Thayer expanded to multiple media: collages, installations, photographs. He was, as Roy R. Behrens puts it, trying to capture the invisible.

He eventually figures there is a human side to his interests.

Art historian Alexander Nemerov writes that Thayer's work relies on "the idea that nothing, not even the most conspicuous creature on earth, was really meant to be seen."

This position leaks into human concerns: "As the object of desire disappears, so too does the predatory lust it has aroused." Notice how the subject here is preemptively objectified.

4 - shame

What one can or should see is more than an aesthetic concern, a feeling spurred by Austrian architect Adolf Loos' eighteen ninety-eight manifesto *The principle of cladding*, where surfaces covered in a manner that disguised their true materiality are deemed deceptive. Taste becomes a moral matter.

Using cultural discourse to control private behaviour makes something that happens indoors without consequences into a public matter. A forced visibilisation.

Mimi may have called it *honte*, shame. Shame is the internalisation of someone else's perception of you. In a logic not unlike Thayer's, it makes you want to hide.

Maybe it was this prickled awareness of being seen in a certain light that made Mimi will herself a wall.

Camouflages indoors, threatened, hunted.

In a domestic setting, though, this hiding through becoming not just an object, but the walls that contain and control you, bring us from hunting, all the way to haunting.

5 - haunting

Sociologist Avery Gordon calls haunting when your "home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes to view."

The haunt and the hunt meet in this domestic intersection I call interior camouflage.

On the one hand, hold the proposal to understand camouflage as a citation of surfaces.

On the other hand, the idea that it requires a refusal of subjectivity, which I earlier called a voluntary objectification.

We need a third hand, so bring up the ghost, so we can add a consideration of this behaviour as, instead of a becoming-object, an "unmaking" of the self, and un-becoming subject. A ghostification, if you will.

Soft furnishings become uncanny when their aesthetic invocations of *elswheres* and *elsewhens* become activated. And they become activated by a despair that can lead to a body wanting to undo itself.

6 - possession

Critic Mark Fisher, writing on Jacques Derrida's *hauntology*, a mixture of haunting and ontology, describes it as "the quality of (dis)possession that is proper to human existence as such, the way in which the past has a way of using us to repeat itself."

This repetition, this *pattern*, if I may, reinforces the past, and in turn, diminishes the future.

Seeing what should be gone, but not what is before us de-materialises spatial and temporal senses of belonging. Home becomes unfamiliar, even threatening.

To *possess* is to inhabit, be it a body in a room, a spirit in a body, or an idea in a mind. It is to take space.

Possession originated as ownership in real estate, back in the fifteen hundreds, before its meaning expanded to the supernatural. It only goes to show, once you inhabit a place, its past is quick to find and use you.

7 - wallpaper

Let us spiral back to the Vuillards' entresol.

What makes this home unfamiliar? What blind spot is coming to view?

What past is using Mimi? What predatory lust is she trying to confuse indoors?

We could, for instance, track how past ideologies become patterns with which we cover our walls (notice, in the clip I showed earlier of Dielman's flat, set in nineteen seventy-five, that the wallpaper is a direct allusion to the one popular in Vuillard's time). We could call this a hauntology of wallpaper. Has a nice ring to it.

But do Mimi's mimetic efforts seem actually provoked by these? She is, after all, embracing rather than refusing said walls.
Let us then return to the force field of the relationship in the room. What could the link between camouflage, wallpaper, ghosts, Mimi and Mme. Vuillard be? How is her being a daughter shaming, hunting, or haunting her?

8 - daughter

Linguistically speaking, being a daughter refers to a relationship of biological descendancy as much as to an obligatory referentiality, an "analogous relationship" to a "country, church, culture".
So, let us avoid the facile finger pointing at the corset maker. She is someone's daughter, too.
Let us go back instead to the ideas upheld in the motifs and patterns on the wall, and the blurry, symbolic confusion painted by Vuillard.

If we deem this a camouflage act, Mimi's exterior is trying to blend into the domestic interior.
If we deem it a haunting, the excess of past in the walls is materialising into Mimi.
Which way does the analogous relationship go? What is coming into view?

Well, maybe Mimi is trying to blend into the excessive past overwhelming her present and maiming her future because she is simultaneously too possessed and too dispossessed to see beyond the incorporation of these ideas.

9. End

Throw a bed sheet over a disembodied energy and you get a ghost.

Put a pattern on a wall and you get a design.

Put another person in the world and you get a daughter.

Put a daughter in a squat room, before a plate that is too empty, and a future that is too scarce, and the soft surfaces will appeal to her, call her name in the night so she surrenders her subjectivity and gives herself to the past.

She will reference the bygones with the patterns on her body.

Nothing to see, here.

The ghost may be a symptom, and so is interior camouflage.

Maybe we must, like Thayer, deploy the tools of our own trades to "fool the enemy."

The enemy is not the maximalist penchant for decoration, nor the old lady on the chair.

It is the unresolved past that howling audibly, finds us again.