

A Joining of Self by Suella Holland

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In *A Joining of Self*, Suella Holland stages a meeting of past and present selves in a process of healing.

Not *the* house, but one like it, forms a stage on which to play out a story hidden for forty years, made possible by displacement onto another place and another time. Hands work a needle into the fabrics that make a home, picking out letter by letter the lies that he told her, inscribed into the places where they were uttered – the corners of a bedroom, between the sheets, close to the floor and fluttering across net curtains like a whisper.

A careful layering of material symbols as light and quiet as the stillest still life, yet woven so tight as to become devastating, the meaning of the work emerges slowly. It confronts us with the fact of abuse and its silencing in places like this one everywhere, every day.

The most unsettling of the work's many symbolic layers, is that the camera she uses is his. It is his twin lens reflex camera: his gaze, also reclaimed. Not-quite twin gazes in a not-quite twin house, inhabited by not-quite the same person, looking at the past and the present at the same time.

But we know whose gaze this is because it notices what a child notices: the long edge of a bedframe, the quiet pool of light on a ceiling, the shadowed place behind a door. 'The unconscious abides', writes Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space*, pointing towards the domestic interior as a site where memories can become physical objects, and vice versa. 'Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.'

As generations of homemaking women can tell you, there is no securer fixing than the 'whipstitch'. It's what you use to bind edges together; it draws lines but also creates a surface on a surface by laying down parallel threads closer and closer until, here, they spell it out in bold: "Your mother is jealous", "She hates you", "you'll split up the family". Delicate and finely worked – the denser the stitches, the sounder the silence. And yet, here they are, their secrets unraveled.

The compulsion to repeat, to go back and unconsciously revisit the site of an incident until it can retrospectively be made safe, is part of the machinery of response to trauma, and also part of its pathology. But only when it is unconscious. Holland's revisiting is not a pathology, but a conscious and creative process, finding deliberate form for symptoms that, left under

the surface, might have pulled her further into patterns of harm and denial. Tearing, fragmenting, layering and obscuring all recur in her pictures, each carrying heavy symbolic value. Having worked for some years on photographing the desolation of abandoned Irish houses (and there is no silence like the silence in Irish houses, abandoned or not), she now puts herself into the picture, in order to find her way out.

Who is she showing this truth to? Who is being invited inside this house that is so quiet you can almost hear the motes of dust that catch the light as they fall to the empty floor?

There is a Freudian language designed to account for unthinkable trauma such as this, and to hold it at arm's length. (As the memoirist Melissa Febos, author of *Body Work* and *Girlhood*, points out, Freud was initially very clear-sighted about the fact that much of what was labelled 'hysteria' among women of his time was directly linked to the effects of childhood sexual abuse, but he later retracted this idea due to pressure from the families of his high-society patients.) But this is where my mind has already gone: here is the doubling of a house that is an uncanny (*unheimlich*) copy (*doppelgänger*) in which to enact a repetition that might bring catharsis... That language of the *unheimlich*, or un-homely, is filled with doubling: the things that are known and familiar but also unfamiliar, estranged to the limits of tolerance. It describes not places but experiences in which 'the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced...or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes.' Photography is a way of deliberately, consciously bringing together symbols so fully charged that they might take over in precisely this way. Here, they're saturated to the point that their meaning spills over, becoming words that mark the space out loud, speaking it for what it was.

Instead of describing, retreating via the language of psychoanalysis outwards and back to a safe place, Holland invites me to sit with the child she meets here, and to see. Word becomes image; memory becomes thought, then line, then letter. Whisper becomes whipstitch, secret becomes declaration, pulling the thread of past into present so that it can be folded back again into the fabric of time where it belongs, if it belongs anywhere.

She is there, in a yellow dress made of the same sunlight, photographed across time and then cut, woven in strips and re-inscribed. Now, that bright gingham is held in her hand, her needle laying down a doubled pronouncement: "pricktease" – she labels him, labelling her. And the words, like the house, are silenced.