

# Jane Burton: Returning

2 SEPT - 5 NOV 2023

Bayside Gallery, Brighton Town Hall

Lightboxes: Billilla, 26 Halifax St, Brighton

## Jane Burton and the creative process

The protagonist in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 parable *The yellow wallpaper* becomes obsessed with the wallpaper of her room in the decrepit country estate she inhabits while convalescing from a 'temporary nervous depression'. With little else to occupy her, the narrator spends months trying to decipher its nonsensical pattern. Evading her attempts to locate its logic, the changing light conceals and reveals different elements, taunting her to the point of manic obsession. Its secret is finally laid bare under moonlight: there, hidden behind the flourishes and 'interminable grotesques' is a woman creeping on all fours shaking at the bar-like layers. In the end, Gilman's protagonist succumbs to the optic horrors of the wallpaper. In a state of mania during her final night in the house, she tears strips from the walls to free the trapped woman. But instead of liberation, the narrator finds it is she who becomes the woman who creeps. I was captivated by this

story when I first read it many years ago: the chilling portrait of emerging psychosis; the feminist critique of patriarchy; the intimate engagement with the power of aesthetics. These aspects were all deeply affecting. But what hooked me so profoundly was the portrayal of the merging of self and place, and the ambiguity surrounding the notion of psychological residue (real or imagined) in spaces once inhabited. The disquieting idea of latent energy, spirit or repressed desire is a recurrent theme in Jane Burton's thirty-year photography practice. The reference to Gilman's late 19th century text isn't out of place given Burton's predilection for female subjects and her fascination with former eras, and the genres of gothic fiction and film noir. Like the narrator in *The yellow wallpaper*, the female protagonists in Burton's new series of commissioned works staged at Brighton's historic mansion Billilla are similarly engaged in a symbiotic relationship with their domestic settings.



Jane Burton  
Child of dust #3 2023  
pigment print 110 x 110 cm (image)  
Courtesy the artist.

Burton's young women appear as apparitions; lingering spectres emerging from and returning to the stained and embossed walls of the vast homestead's interiors. A haunting, ghostlike presence, they are suggestive of the past lives of the mansion and those who once lived there. They embody what German cultural critic Walter Benjamin described as an aura, a trace or, to use Freud's term, 'a subconscious of the interior'. Burton has consistently engaged with ideas around the subconscious and the uncanny, particularly in relation to eroticism and female sexuality. She is known for her macabre, otherworldly style that utilises the vernacular of gothic and romantic genres.

Often focusing on a solitary female figure in a domestic or nature setting, her works contain a melancholic femininity that evokes the cinematic psychodramas of David Lynch and the beguiling dark narratives of Edgar Allen Poe. The haunted house is a leitmotif made famous by Poe in his gothic short story *The fall of the house of Usher* (1839). A keen fan of horror stories, Burton often uses suburban houses for her *mis en scene* serial photographs, and, like Poe, she is interested in the powerful narrative implications and psychological charge of these domestic spaces. The claustrophobic sense of nostalgia and family history combined with a touch of voyeurism is rich ground for the uncanny to take hold. Burton shifts her focus from the intimacy of the domestic to a broader site of collective memory in the *2022 Kingdom of pleasure* series of ambrotypes on black glass. St Kilda's Luna Park has offered recreational delights to Melburnians for over 100 years, and as a child living in regional Victoria Burton visited on special occasions, recalling its foreboding magic and curious architecture.

*Kingdom of pleasure* explores the themes of remembrance and the carnivalesque through the high contrast black and white photographic methods of the ambrotype (an early form of photography popular in the 1850s). The inherent imperfections of this medium with its hard to control collodion liquid processing, are suggestive of the 'in between' imaginative states that interest Burton. Returning to this place of her childhood, Burton has generated a portrait of place that calls forth the transmutable character of memory and the supernatural potential lurking in this iconic, dreamlike locale.

In her black and white series *A phantom lover* (2020), Burton situates the female nude in a pared back interior, where there is nothing more than the roughness of the wall and the stripes of light and shade formed by vertical blinds across a window (their cheap plastic chain acting like an endearing lace frill). Confined to the corner, it is the figure who generates

the mystery; she is a translucent form that appears and reappears, performatively twisting and turning on herself within the striped stage. Through Burton's use of double exposure, two bodies merge and separate simultaneously; the self is doubled yet remains as one, locked in a tender carnal negotiation with its other. This tension exists in many of Burton's works (for example between beauty and violence, reverie and reality, permission and voyeurism) and is formally established here by the merging of the sensual curves of the body in movement and the austere, rhythmic verticals of the interior. The inclusion of windows, doors and mirrors in Burton's work signals another world beyond what is seen and suggests the possibility of escape or the threat of intrusion. In Burton's Billilla works, their presence further enhances the spectral-like atmosphere, alluding to the comings and goings of figures through the various passageways of the homestead over its 150-year history.

*Child of dust #2* (2023) depicts an empty hallway of various thresholds and doorframes. The image appears split down the middle, a doubled reality coexisting in the slightly blurred reflection seen in the floor to ceiling mirror on the left. This disjunction serves to heighten the anticipation that a ghostly figure may appear, but considering Burton's interests in psychoanalytical theory, I see it akin to Gilman's yellow wallpaper, as a threshold between the conscious and subconscious worlds—a subtle yet striking reminder of the multiple fictions possible within perception. The worn materiality of Billilla with its stained walls and chipped paint further imbues a sense of psychic corporeality. The tightly cropped compositions of *Child of dust #1* and *Child of dust #3* (both 2023) are somewhat claustrophobic with an eerie tonality reminiscent of paintings from the history of European art. Both figures appear self-contained, one basking languidly in the ethereal light entering a lace-curtained window, while the other stands beside a handleless closed door (which suggests the impossibility of entry or exit). With her back to the viewer, her long blonde hair and pale pink dress are lit from the adjacent window as she faces her own shadow—another doubling that evokes the separation and merging of dual selves and the returning of psychological shadows of another time.

**Joanna Bosse**  
Curator, Bayside Gallery

*Jane Burton is an artist who has worked with photography for over three decades. Her work explores mortality, desire, and isolation and is often darkly ambiguous, enigmatic and provocative.*

Since graduating in 1991 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours), from the School for the Arts, University of Tasmania, she has exhibited her work regularly, holding forty solo exhibitions, including a twenty year survey *Eye of the Beholder* (2009), at the Glen Eira City Art Gallery, Melbourne.

She has twice staged solo projects at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (1999, 2005), and her work has been included in numerous curated exhibitions and significant museum shows, among them: *Hold Still: the photographic performance* (2018), and *Body parts* (2015), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; *Fantastic dreamland—Contemporary Australian photography*, Shanghai Exhibition Centre, China (2012); *Trace elements: spirit and memory in Japanese and Australian photomedia*, Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, Tokyo (2008), and *Performance Space*, Sydney (2009); *Light sensitive: Contemporary Australian photography*, The Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2006); *Anxious bodies*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2003); and *Moral hallucination: channelling Hitchcock*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2000). Burton's work is held in the collections of prominent state and publicly funded galleries, including the National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Gallery of Australia, Museum of Australian Photography, and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

She has been the recipient of artist residencies in Paris, London and Beijing. Two monographs of her photographs have been published by M.33, Melbourne: *It is Midnight, Dr. \_ \_*, in 2017, and *Other stories*, in 2011.



Jane Burton  
*Kingdom of pleasure (#1)* 2022  
Ambrotype: wet plate collodion  
on black glass  
25.5 x 25.5 cm  
33 x 30 cm framed  
Courtesy the artist.