

# Jill Mulleady & Henry Taylor

## *Mirrorworld*

by Laura McLean-Ferris

There is a disturbance. It's right there on the surface. The spaces are wobbling and bending. The stairs are uneven. They melt, disappear into smoke. How does anyone walk on them without tripping? The atmosphere around the bodies is charged, incandescent.

Two paintings, one by Jill Mulleady and one by Henry Taylor, depict a nude woman on a staircase. It's a subject baked thoroughly into the history of painting since Modernism. Thus, it signals that the scenes before us at least partly take place within painting as a location: a kind of elsewhere. In Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, No. 2 (1912) a figure, constructed from simple planes and shapes – almost as though she is modeled from construction paper – is seen in multiple as she moves down a set of stairs. Duchamp had been looking at the sequential motion study photographs of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge that would eventually result in the development of cinema. He layered multiple images of a figure in motion to create a sense of movement. The woman's form, in other words, remains in the spaces after she has left them. Some echo here is still reverberating.

Duchamp's painting was removed from the 28th exhibition of the *Société des Artistes Indépendants*, Paris, before the opening in March 1912, where it was to have been shown in the Cubist section. The hanging committee took issue with the painting, its title, and some Futurist qualities with which they maintained it was associated. As Duchamp tells the story, the ensuing *succès de scandale* surrounding the painting came from the idea that "one doesn't paint a nude descending a staircase, that's ridiculous... a nude should be respected."<sup>1</sup>

The idea that nudes should be respected is both true and laughable. Huge swathes of the most celebrated female nudes can be understood within a visual language tightly connected to women's subjugation. So many of the greatest hits depict rape or its aftermath. I'm talking about excellent, beautiful paintings – the Ledas, the Daphnes, the Europas, the Susannas – nudes composed of violence and sparkling like the sun. It's a form of double-consciousness that allows us to exalt these paintings: cerebral calisthenics that permit reverence without denial about what is really going on. Two opposed things can be true. Anyway, those scenes mostly took place in an allegorical space, one that seemed to construct respect. A dark staircase would not do. Though, there were always transmissions that fluttered between the two worlds.

In fact, the painting that Mulleady's and Taylor's more closely reference is Gerhard Richter's 1966 work quoting Duchamp, *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)* – a painting of the artist's wife. Ema moves, shifting slightly. The painter's photolike image, featuring his signature blur, creates the impression of a soft trail of motion caught by the camera's flash.

The post-war look of the staircase. Its plain, soupy-green stairs, and dark floors. The empty walls, gleaming with wipe-clean paint. The way her very white, pale flesh is caught so harshly by the flare of the flash. These make her body appear vulnerable, as though she might be walking around in some semi-public space at night. I'd like to put something warm on her. That said, she is certainly self-possessed, and Richter's squeegee blur is sometimes read as a protective gesture, holding the viewer at a slight distance from the intensity of the image.

The woman descending in Taylor's painting, where the architecture follows Richter's closely, is also self-possessed, and it is also possible to read a kind of protectiveness in the handling of the paint. Large, gestural brushstrokes create blots and patches (*taches*, to use the useful, yet difficult-to-translate French word) of color, the thickness of which create a subtle sense of armor. This work is one of several by Taylor in which Black figures are painted into well-known scenes from art history where before a white figure was present. In so doing, Taylor sometimes intimates a stance of ironic humor. At others, as here, he imbues a more straightforward confirmation of presence, something better likened to grace.

As in other paintings of Taylor's that reference an existing work, certain elements cross from the original to the cover version, arriving as a simple shape or abstraction. Ema's blonde, shiny bangs become a marigold halo that frames the woman's face in Taylor's painting. Some of the greenish hue of Richter's staircase seems to have collected into a rectangle at the top of the Taylor's stairs. The architecture, however, is sliding at an

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1 Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1971, 1979) p.44.

angle. Compared to the straight, frontal steps from Richter's original, everything is canting to the right. There are no railings holding up the banister. Drips of paint careen downwards, creating a sense of precarity and temporariness, but also liveness and gesture. Splashes of yellow and blue have fallen on the body of the woman, both a reminder of her status as a painted person and providing a subtle sense of adornment.

Mulleady's nude on the staircase comes after Taylor and after Richter. The woman on the stairs here is young and slightly emaciated, gleaming with golden, copper paint. Her gender is somewhat indeterminate; the breasts from the paintings by male artists are gone in favor of a flat chest, and her skin seems stretched across her breastplate, collarbone, ribs. Unlike Richter and Taylor's paintings, where the subject looks demurely down, Mulleady's looks up defiantly, questioningly. Whilst vulnerable, this subject seems to burn with unresolved energy. It might be a stretch, but this painting seems to depict both the subject and their internal state. It conveys the feeling of being a naked person walking down the stairs, rather than that of watching someone else do it. (Mulleady is sometimes both the painter and its subject.) The girl's face is flushed pink and blue. A metallic painting effect disturbs the light around her. The overwhelming sense is one of risk. But she is also in a different type of space than both Ema and the subject of Taylor's painting. An old wooden staircase of a more traditional kind, it is painted so that it resembles a Degas monotype: a washy monochromatic space of absences, smoke, and missing parts. It recalls a haunted house, ghosts hovering on the landing.

Both Taylor's and Mulleady's paintings of a nude descending a staircase open up space in a known genre, similarly to the two artists who handled the subject before them. Their new sets of stairs are like the secret rooms of a house discovered in a dream – some previously unlit back space of painting. While the individual paintings are best understood in connection to each artist's larger project, there are a few points that connect Taylor and Mulleady beyond even their artistic friendship and easy painterly discourse. Both artists make composite images of the world as they see it, including living, remembered, and imagined subjects who appear in scenes that reference art historical painting. Painting acts as a *lingua franca*. But here, borrowing freely from artists such as Munch, Degas, and Richter is not only the playful remix that we heard about in theories of postmodernism. It is also a form of address to the past. That which has been repressed by powerful historical systems is desublimated in these works, looking back at you like the group of shirtless men in a green clearing in Taylor's *Forest fever ain't nothing like "Jungle Fever"* (2023), their bodies arranged like the figures in Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862-63). Taylor's work gestures towards the colonial seizures that made European Modernity possible, as well as the role played by figures such as Josephine Baker, who might be seen kneeling in the background. However, the painting also, perhaps, offers a more wry vision of an alternative scene, with playful elements such as a football and a large animal. The black low-rider hovering in the background, however, adds an ominous atmosphere, as if a party is about to be broken up.

A second seam connecting the works of the two artists here is in their ambivalent relationship to the depiction of women as emblematic figures in the history of painting. Taylor's *Emelda* (2011), an expressionistic painting of a nude woman on a white sofa, has echoes of Gauguin's *Nevermore* (1897) which depicts a woman mourning the loss of her child. Yet the subject of Taylor's painting is turned inwards, her face unavailable to the viewer. In *Michelle* (2023), by contrast, the figure of Michelle Obama towers over a city like the goddess Isis, her symbolic significance reaching an unwieldy, extrahuman scale. Mulleady's paintings here claim an artistic agency over the depictions of violations against women's bodies in allegorical historical paintings. Her recent suite of works takes Degas' ominous 1868-69 painting *Interior* (also known as *La Viol*, *The Rape*) and breaks it up prismatically into multiple alternative images. Across several canvases the threat of the implied event seen in this painting is exploded in scenes that often employ a mirror as a visual device. Surfaces are disturbed by drips of condensation, fogs of steam, fragments of bodies, and flashes of luminosity. The violence bounces across bedsheets disturbed by licks of orange light, and onto the drips of water themselves, which seems to contain red reflections of blood or crimson light.

While Taylor's paintings more often put the artist and the viewer in the position of witness, Mulleady's are more likely to implicate the viewer of the painting as complicit in the scene. Yet they both are occasionally inclined to create a broken, doubled reflection which may include themselves, collapsing their roles as artists and subjects. In Taylor's *Me Me* (2023) for example, the artist looks at his own father on a mortuary slab, reflecting on the uncanny similarities between them. Using the device of the two-way mirror pavilion here, the artists have created the possibility to see both ways: through the portal and the reflection, we can see ourselves as onlooker or participant. Two opposed things can be true, anyway.