

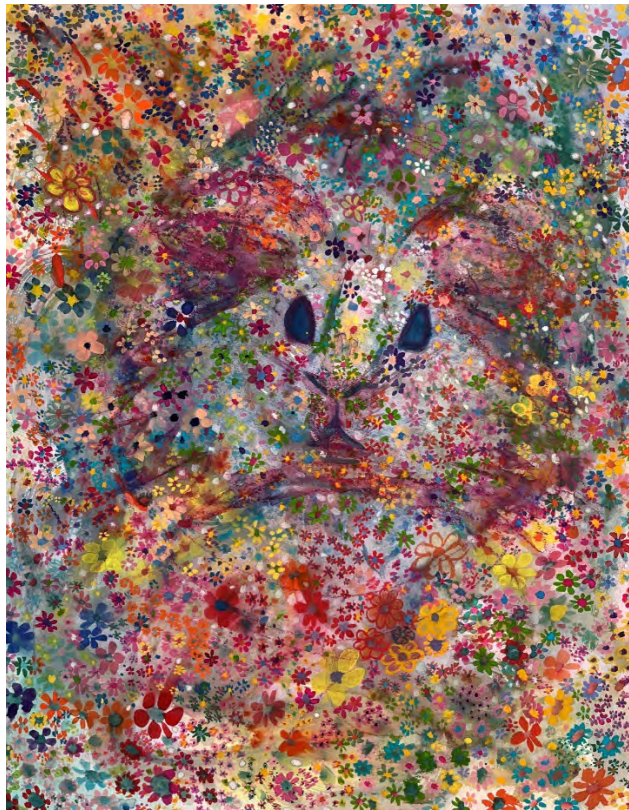
Bulk Glimmer, Slippery Glow

A Meditation on Louise Sheldon's *Daisy Dew-Diamond*

By Aude Jomini

Louise Sheldon's paintings stare back in their own way. While knowing some of Sheldon's personal history allows for more intimate glimpses into the context of her details, this knowledge fully recedes as I spend prolonged time with her works. The paintings transcend any individual dimension. Made of bits of imagery from recalled experience, scenes gleaned from long stashed, then unearthed family photos, they expose a border of spiritual discomfort; a dimension of inner space; strange, turning in on itself. Consciousness seeps into fluid holes expanding into manifest unraveling from every mundane and familiar object.

Sheldon's paintings conjure up an ethereal, hallucinatory space, one that brings to mind several threads of *unease* particular to my own areas of interest. The works transport me into territories of discomfort more familiar to Russian literature, or domestic haunting tropes hewing more closely to the uncanny filmic language of horror. More fungal than floral, more feral than figural; they are moldy, vulnerable, efflorescent. Floating features in lush optical reverberations refuse to be categorized. These apparitions hover between the language of figure, still life and abstraction, creating a fissure in understanding through their slippery manifestations. The optical mess and bountiful glory of Sheldon's "*The Animal Branch*," for instance, leaves recognition up to anyone's guess.



Louise Sheldon, *The Animal Branch*, 2023

Next to the smeared glitchscape of current digital image making, Sheldon's works appear as if a lost strand of traditional 19th century New England watercolor painting became infected by a related yet entirely analog disease, mutating just to keep pace. This zone of tradition is no longer safe, nor is the realm of home. The deceptiveness of watercolor as a Faux naïve medium, a return to safer past-times, only serves to lend these works subversive *creep* power, lest we forget that the uncanny dwells deepest in the mundane and the domestic.

While the pleasant glow of sunny yellow in “*Tablecloth Friend*” evokes good tidings and the appeasing promise of a tableside chat, the cheerfulness turns half-sour in “*Tablecloth Mother*”. The fabric smears and fades in my mind into the realm of Raskolnikov’s rank yellow wallpaper from Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*¹; or the seeping hallucinations of recurring yellow stains through the walls of Dudkin’s room in Andrei Bely’s *Petersburg*,² tied to garish visions of the menacing, ooze-like character of *Lippanchenko*³. These apparitions are sticky and distorting, unsteady smiles mask an *unknown* never far below the surface. Familiar patterns flex into nets, collapsing grids holding the fabric of skewed domesticity pushed to a breaking point. The fluid transmogrification stitched into “*Ideal State*”, with its near-parametric distortion, seems to ask coyly: *Is this a protective net, or a cage?*



Louise Sheldon: *Tablecloth Friend*, 2022 (left); *Tablecloth Mother*, 2022 (middle); *Ideal State*, 2023 (right)

There is no escaping the bonds of home and its familial links, or, as Donna Haraway would have it, *it matters what stories we tell other stories with*.⁴ Sheldon makes strange family out of the familiar indeed. Figural patterns fade into psychological ones, conjuring family meals with ruinous consequences, inner rages not expressed but held into spirals of discomfort.

While *Cold Seltzer* summons literal reminiscences of Ari Aster’s 2019 horror masterpiece *Midsommar*; the latter’s flowers signifying as evisceration of the eyes simultaneously taking away sight and giving vision onto another dimension of connectedness, memory, grief, and trauma; it also puts forth Sheldon’s recent encircling themes: that of a decorative floral tradition paired with bodily entanglement.

¹ **Dostoevsky (insert citation)** Dostoevsky uses the color yellow throughout the novel as a signifier of sickness and decay. He describes Raskolnikov’s room as having “yellow dusty wall-paper peeling off the walls that gave it a wretchedly shabby appearance.” The wallpaper at times seems to come alive and bubble with crawling insects.

² *Petersburg* by Andrei Bely, Pushkin Press, 2009, translation by John Elsworth

³ *Ibid.* In the novel, protagonist Nikolai Dudkin is constantly remembering a dark yellow stain on his wallpaper, “on which something fateful – is about to appear” which he associates with a menacing rival tied to a looming bomb threat.

⁴ “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.”, from *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, by Donna J. Haraway, **Insert pub, date**



Louise Sheldon, *Cold Seltzer*, 2022 (left); *Party Line*, 2022 (right)

Knowing Sheldon's deep love of interior spaces allows me to visualize a world adorned of floral patterns, likely of *Arts and Crafts* style: a decor that might hold prized *Voysey* rugs, well-worn and telegraphing from long use, alongside *William Morris*-style bootleg wallpapers; the real and the copies fully lived in, melded together in unison. We exist *in* these things, not amongst them. We deposit our marks into fibers and form liaisons with our objects. We may lose our intrinsic being in the decorations, just as Dostoyevsky's protagonist was absorbed into his yellow wall:

*"Raskolnikov turned to the wall, selected one of the white flowers, with little brown lines on them, on the yellowish paper, and began to count how many petals it had, how many serrations on each petal and how many little brown lines. He felt his arms and legs grow numb as if they were no longer there. He did not stir, but looked fixedly at the flower."*⁵

Vegetal wildness invades, proliferates and contaminates Sheldon's works. Flowers sprout eyeballs and eyeballs camouflage as flowers in "*Party Line*," evoking transmutation, transmittance, and unraveling through conversation. It presents a trifling richness, a torn lushness: the temporary abundance of summer gardens ripe with parties full of comical gossip. Winter will come, but that too seems a cosmic joke.

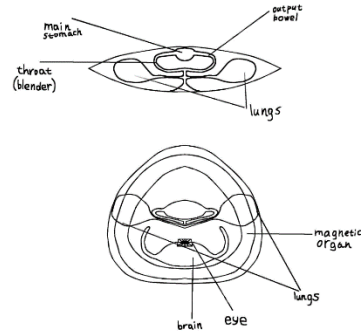


Charles Francis Annesley Voysey, *Textile design* circa 1888⁶(left)

⁵ (*Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment*)

⁶ Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

If Sheldon's renditions can transport bodies into vegetal alienation as tendrillous phone cords and body parts coalesce, they belie this feat in their deceptive flimsiness. Her means are the fluid dynamics of towels and sheets hung out to dry on summer afternoons in Rhode Island. Her aims are the pliable forms in gardens reshaped by seasons on the land. The medium itself is a play on viscosity and flow, and Sheldon knows how to tread lightly just as she can wield a muddle of paint. This mesmerizing tension between power and weightlessness is deftly represented in the character of the alien in Jordan Peele's 2022 film *Nope*, evoking the horror of the unknowable. In the delaminating sheets of *Nope*'s stalking, unfolding entity, vanishing into cloud atmospherics, something is revealed as a whole which is also nothing at all⁷. It is in truth a cloth simulation, a stringy elongation without interiority, wielding the evocation of tentacles⁸. Yet, it creeps, and it lands.



Still from film "Nope" (left); Fan art depicting anatomy of "Nope" alien entity (right) by simonralhleen on reddit⁹(right).

Sheldon's tentacular wall phone, flattened like a specimen in "*Slimline*," can be read simultaneously as vegetal, animal, or as *thing* more abject: entrails, bloody tampon on a bathroom floor. Its ambiguity is also its strength. Sheldon's work seems to interrogate an adjacent concept: *When is a thing no longer a whole? When does a part become autonomous enough to haunt?* In Sheldon's older coupon sheet or deli paintings, multitudes of objects exchanged roles with patterned wallpaper. In these more recent, prismatic hallucinations, beings fold in on themselves. Creepy fun lies in mundane, insidious repetition in "*Busy Signal*". An unruly flow of communication is at work, whether bodily and surreal, or symbolized as missed connection. It speaks of part-to-whole scrambling. Where parts escape the whole, or overrun it, Sheldon's hallucinatory optical tricks also become ways to enact a protective blanket of refusal.



Louise Sheldon: "Slimline", 2022 (left); "Busy Signal" (2022) (middle); "My, My, My" (2022)

⁷ In [this article](#) "Well, it's an entity that literally will be made entirely of cloth sims.' And it is literally just a whole cloth sim."

⁸ In [this article](#) "For example, at the very beginning, we had more of the idea of tentacles. But then toward the end, we actually fused everything together to really get that feeling of just a whole sheet that allows the creature to float around."

⁹ See post https://www.reddit.com/r/NopeMovie/comments/zp322q/a_new_take_on_jean_jackets_anatomy/ by simonralhleen

None of the severed hands of *“Busy Signal”* reach the handset. They taunt or they grasp, emerging from a field as one and as many. Meanwhile, the floating heads of *“My, My, My”* and *“Pie Man”* flirt more directly with familiar affect of dislocated, hovering body parts; the more typical embodiments of the uncanny. This is not the phosphorescent glow of hauntings in Scottish ghost story lore,¹⁰ however, but rather some scratched blot, a surface aberration, a dancing *afterimage*¹¹. There seems to be a whole lot of partying left in Sheldon’s ghosts. They are as absurd as the rebellious seceding nose of Nikolai Gogol’s story¹², or the parading chins of the *myriapod* described in Bely’s Petersburg:

“Beards, moustaches, chins: that abundance comprised the upper extremities of human torsos. Shoulders flowed by, shoulders and shoulders; all together, the shoulders formed a pitch-black porridge; all the shoulders formed a slow-flowing porridge of extreme viscosity; and Alexander Ivanovich’s shoulder immediately became attached to that porridge; stuck to it, ...”¹³

In Sheldon’s palinopsia¹⁴ of autonomous parts, a meditation on the fluidity of mind and body becomes a joyful dance. This wavering recalls the psychedelic, painterly upbeat mix of Nobuhiko Obayashi’s 1977’s experimental comedy horror film *“House,”* described as *“an unforgettable mixture of bubblegum teen melodrama and grisly phantasmagoria.”*¹⁵ The film’s central character is a house that dismembers and ingests its visitors, in step with a catchy musical theme. It is simultaneously funny, infectious, gorgeous and deranged.



Stills from Nobuhiko Obayashi's film "House"¹⁶

¹⁰ See for example X’s *The Floating Head of the Benratchett Inn, near the Perth Road, Dundee*, in X book

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afterimage> An afterimage may be a normal phenomenon (physiological afterimage) or may be pathological (palinopsia). Illusory palinopsia may be a pathological exaggeration of physiological afterimages.”

¹² In “the nose” by Nikolai Gogol¹², Kovalyov wakes up to discover his nose has left his face. Horrified, he goes looking for it and finds it parading around the city wearing the clothes of a higher-ranking bureaucrat.

¹³ *Petersburg* by Andrei Bely, Pushkin Press, 2009, translation by John Elsworth

¹⁴ Bender, MB; Feldman, M; Sobin, AJ (Jun 1968). "Palinopsia". *Brain: A Journal of Neurology*. **91** (2): 321–38.

¹⁵ see iMDB

¹⁶ REF for stills



Louise Sheldon: "Pie Man", 2022 (left); "Nerd Wave", 2019 (right)

Maybe this sense of play is intimately tied to the fluidity of Sheldon's medium. Watercolor is often known as being unforgiving, yet Sheldon often works with the unruly will of the mixed-up paint rivulets, rather than attempting to rigidly control them. She lets in a whole universe of oddities. It is the universe arising on the brink of sleep, forming a gurgling vortex. The wall of "Nerd Wave" beckons. We go with the flow, and surf into ourselves. We dance back into life.