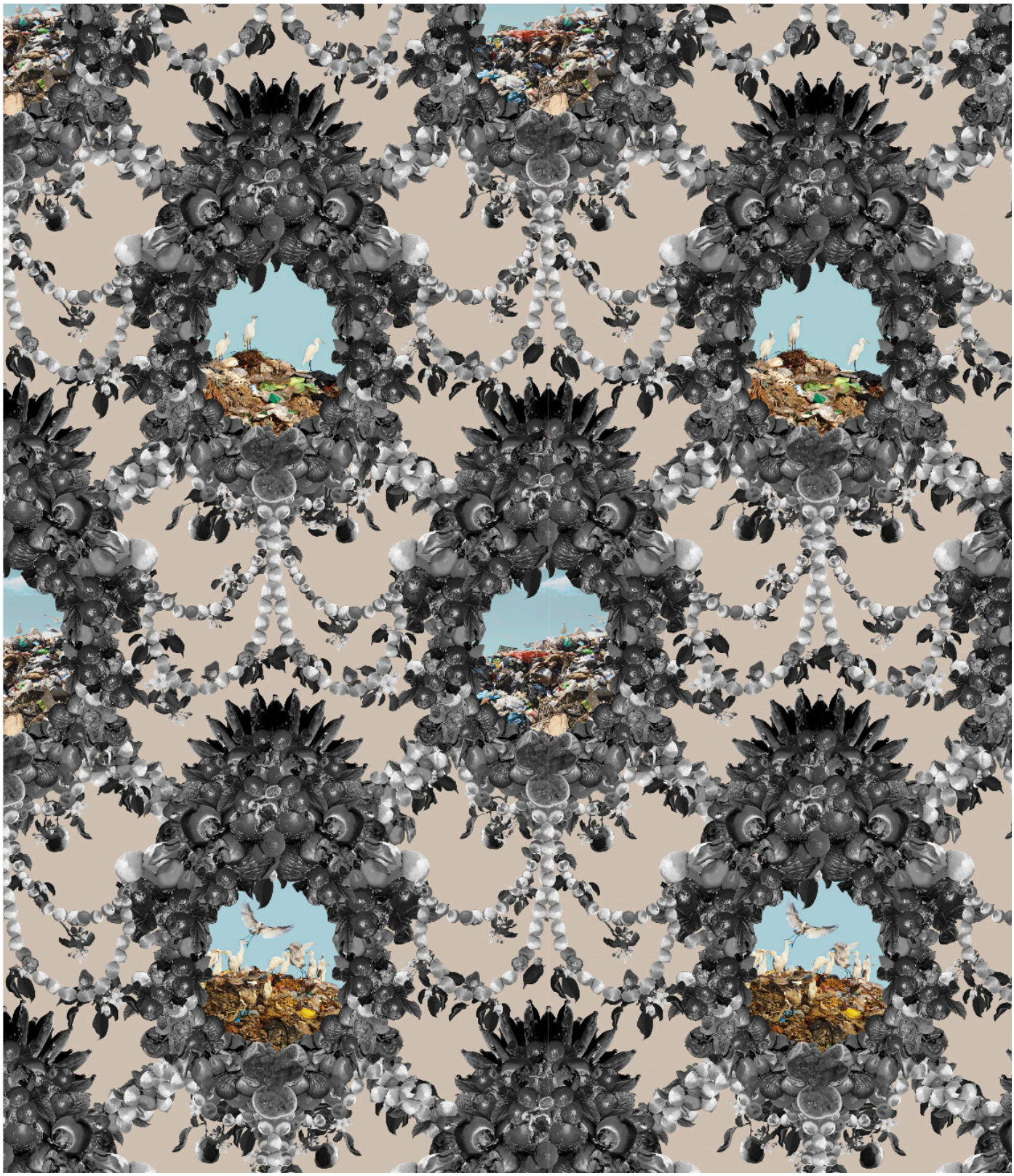
Baroque: Rotting yet Beautiful

Recent Work by Tina Tahir

Next to the door to her studio, Tina Tahir has hung two postcards. One depicts Mary Cassatt's *In the Lodge* (1878): in the foreground, we see the profile of a woman who is sitting in a theater lodge looking through her binoculars. The woman's gaze is directed at the stage that is off-frame, while in the distance, it appears, others in the audience are gazing at her. A spectacle unfolds of looking and being looked at. The other postcard depicts an illustration of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. The emperor is looking through his binoculars while two con artists deceive him into seeing his new clothes where, in reality, nothing can be seen. The first picture questions what we see beyond the visible and whether we can complete an image beyond the frame. The second, far blunter picture, suggests that there is nothing to see. It is all in the imagination, as the emperor's gaze at his invisible garments alerts us. Tahir questions the visual in much the same way as these two images. What is imagination and delusion? What is revealed or concealed? Is there beauty to be found in decay or profundity in the superficial?

Tahir's ornamented *Paradise Wallpaper* series presents a kind of baroque Warhol, full of saturated colors and infused with political issues. The opulence of the images suggest work that is exuberant, sanguine, and nonchalant. From a distance, the wallpaper appears to be an image of paradise, appetizing, gleeful, majestic, yet for the perceptive viewer, the ornaments are disturbing and unsettling. As we approach, we notice that the colorful fruit likely has a nauseating smell; it is half-eaten or unharvested, quietly rotting on the branch, caught in its never-changing cycle of blossom, fruit, ripening, and rot. Nature here takes the role of a disquieting netherworld governed by uncontrollable, dark forces. They are hovering in the sense of irresolution: in a life of abundant surplus and lavish luxury, on the one hand, and capitalist ruin, global poverty, and nostalgia, on the other. The motif addresses both the Western world's immeasurable over-consumption and its ensuing mind-numbing waste production. [1]

Tahir's work fuses the artistic and the everyday; if photography has entered the canon of high art, then the photographic wallpaper represents the collective consciousness at its most self-indulgent and over-consuming excess, as a paradigm of universal sameness. The majority of the wallpaper was made using found photography. The design appears inspired by baroque wallpaper: a wreath of fruit, blossoms, and leaves, with golden cords composed of oranges and lemons. Traditionally, wallpaper is used to decorate and beautify one's home, to clad one's four walls with a pattern that cradles the soul in the cushioned comfort of visual pleasure, or with what Duchamp called "retinal art." But her work is not designed merely to please the eye. Rather the opposite is true: it causes a retinal shudder. Making us look at garbage dumps and decaying fruits, Tahir tears down the sense of home, ripping the comfortable rug from underneath our feet. In such a setting, one's own four walls bear the marks of alienation, discomfort, even hostility. This fusion of attraction and repulsion is mirrored by several dilemmas her work confronts us with. How can art be reconciled with the everyday and domestic? How can it be anti-commercial and commercial at the same time? Is her work conceptual art, anti-photography, or photography?



Tahir's art seems infused with the high art/low art paradox, from its division through its eventual fusion, in her seemingly easy transition from one stage to the next. As a commercial fashion photographer, Tahir's success depended mainly on her 'artistic' performance, on her illustration/photography hybrids that appeared all the more exclusive in a milieu whose every impulse was geared toward commercialization. Advertising design is the most sophisticated professional production of desire and alienation. Yet, Tahir introduced noncommercial elements such as false naiveté, the charm of the uneducated and unskilled, and digital bricolage. The transition from Tina Tahir, fashion photographer, to Tina Tahir, artist, while perhaps inevitable, was not at all turbulent. Like the work of many of her contemporaries, who delight in artistic repetition, hers is a sustained engagement with an art that does not have its proper place yet, and a discourse yet to begin.

Ornament has long been scorned. Adolf Loos said it most bluntly in his famous essay "Ornament and Crime" (1908), in which he related ornament to an intellectual deficit that he ascribed to children, the indigenous, and criminals ("the tattoo" on "the criminal skin"). In Loos's world, cultural progress meant the absence of ornament from everyday objects. Ornamented objects represented "rubbish" or kitsch collected and displayed to exhibit bad or common taste, "only bearable if shabbily produced." [2] The pattern and decoration movement that emerged in the mid to late 1970s represents a now largely forgotten chapter in postmodern art. Both in modernist and traditional art, wallpaper, pattern, and craft have had, perhaps unfairly, low standing due to their generally perceived superficiality or lack of conceptual rigor. For wallpaper to be art, we must accept the collapse of high culture into the industry of culture commodities, of which Warhol is the most notable example.

Tahir's work seeks to break this boundary between vernacular and high art. Located between questions of production and reception, it has a clear conceptual starting point that bears no reference to photographic theory and could be seen as antithetical to many people's notion of photography as art, or art as photography. Her way of working with 'ready-mades' is methodical and controlled. Certainly, there is a consistent conceptual program here with carefully sourced images from the Internet, cut and pasted into an ornamental pattern. In the process, details are absorbed into the whole. Tahir's technique resembles Dadaist montage as well as fragment collage. One thinks of simultaneous "formation" and "destruction," where details are held together by the composition alone, as for example in Hannah Höch's cut-outs from mass-produced magazines. Tahir's montages, like Höch's, are assemblages of ready-made materials that are either widely disseminated or destined to be. Both reappropriate facts caught on photographic film, or in the digital camera, splice them at personal discretion, and reassemble them. In both cases, the artificial seams are clearly visible. Höch, like all Dadaists, critiqued the institutionally accepted standards of high art, capitalism, and society's idea of progress. In spirit, Tahir's work follows the 1960s avant-garde artists who attempted to remove any trace of the artist's hand, precursors to pop art and digital art.

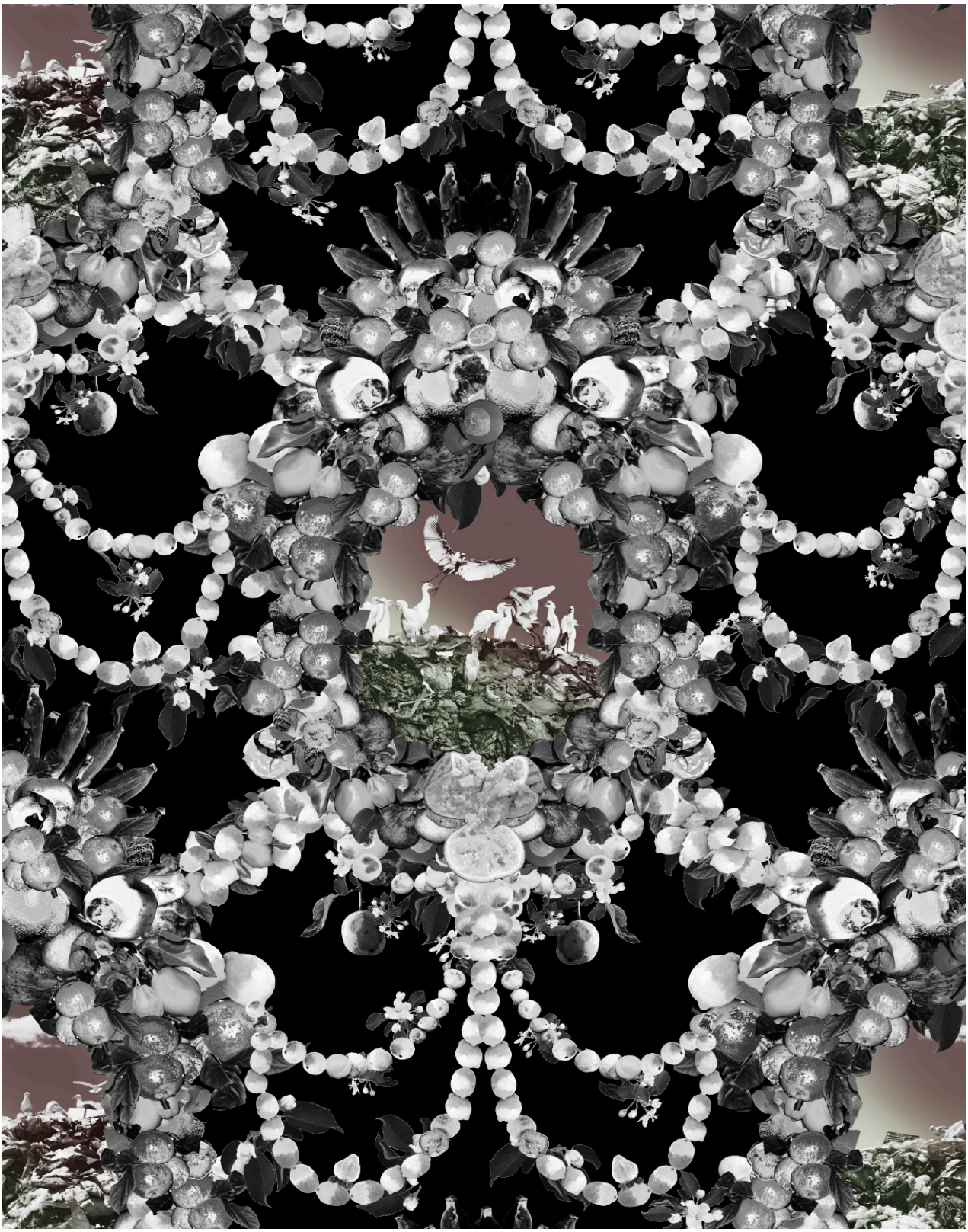
Akin to Warhol's philosophy, "paint what we are," Tahir creates works that portray our modern-day deficiencies and hopes. If Tahir's meticulous cutting and pasting should seem repetitive and mechanical, we should remember Andy Warhol's riposte: "In my artwork hand painting would take much too long, and anyway, that's not the age we live in. [Digital] means are today, and using them, I can get more art to more people. Art should be for everyone." [3] Just as the beginnings of pop

art condemned anything that belonged to high art, hanging a comic strip painting on a gallery wall overstepped institutionally deadlocked boundaries and "revolutioniz[ed] the concept of art"(Danto). [4] Warhol made the ordinary extraordinary while turning the sensational into banality through serial repetition. If Tahir creates an image of what we are in her *Paradise Wallpaper*, then the superficial utopian promises of inexhaustible wealth or abundance are lined by the gloom of waste and decay.

According to Ernst H. Gombrich, *Horror vacui*, or the "fear of empty spaces," is the "urge which drives the decorator to go on filling any resultant void." [5] Perhaps here we should disagree with Gombrich's stance that ornament—he refers to it as "the unregarded art"—does not impart information and therefore rarely invites conscious scrutiny. Decoration is not meant to be noticed and contemplated like a painting which demands, Gombrich says, "attention, whether or not it receives it. Decoration cannot make this demand." [6] If we agree with Gombrich's notion that we usually walk through life without paying much attention to the enormous variety of patterns and decorative motifs all around us, on fabrics and wallpaper, on buildings and furniture, then Tahir's *Paradise Wallpaper* is both decorative and not decorative, it is used decoratively and as an art display; it exists physically and digitally. Its execution may be a monotonous repeated pattern, but it is never passive or docile. It emerges from that impulse, but exceeds it by presenting a critique of the present. If they play on art and kitsch, then, what makes these pieces art? The banal decorates daily life while breaking it apart at the same time. The gestures here are not radical, but nor are they placid and undemanding. It would be impossible to think of this wallpaper as mere décor filling an empty space. These are images that place our present-day political life in motifs while toying with the conflict between utopia and dystopia, ornament and distaste.

In Northern Europe, wallpaper traditionally beautified and adorned the home. Wallpapers have been described as man's "third skin." [7] It was associated with an uplifting, often exotic appeal to nature, foliage, or travel, not the wilted, dead, or fallen. It reflected "the New Interiority," the desires and dreams of the middle and upper classes of 18th and 19th century Northern Europe. The elaboration of ornament, color, motif, material, and print quality would flaunt not only one's social standing but also one's nationality and political affiliation. A wallpaper ought to guide the eye from one piece of furniture to another. More often than not, wallpaper would mimic other materials, as a "Vortäuschung falscher Tatsachen," or deceive the eye by its "schöner Schein." [8] Throughout the last century, it seems that wallpapers emerged especially in times of crises, such as the fin-de-siècle, 1970s, and early 21st century. We may ask of all of Tahir's work whether it is poised between high art and décor, between the off-the-wall and the mundane. Who has not felt silent terror when enclosed in a Victorian room papered in a William Morris design or discovered creatures while staring at an ornamented wallpaper in the twilight in some unfamiliar bedroom? Oscar Wilde famously struggled on his deathbed with a wallpaper: "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go." [9] In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the female Victorian protagonist disgustedly cries out that the wallpaper's yellow hues remind her not of beauty and buttercups but rotten, "old foul," reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's description of the bourgeois interior as a home with dark, morbid, and horrific undertones. [10]

Hybridization—the fusion of two or more otherwise unrelated elements—is another theme that runs



through much of Tahir's work. She has long been drawn to photography as a medium because of its versatility and pictorialism. Just as Tahir troubles to hold photography in a state between fact and fiction, so she seeks to fuse photography and non-photography in montage. As in traditional photography, the wallpaper offers a glimpse into a world that lies behind the shutter, waiting to be constructed, framed, and labeled. Photography has been rethought since the emergence of digital postproduction. There, seamless stitching together of otherwise unrelated objects, places, and events affords to see, or think, the world from multiple perspectives, all collapsed into one plane.

The *Paradise Wallpaper* series conjures the European Union's growing problem with illegal waste, as Great Britain, Italy, Austria, and Germany are exporting their refuse to neighboring European countries. [11] We live in a world where "between a third and a half of the food produced for human consumption is wasted."[12] *Paradise Wallpaper* is a beautifully rendered yet befouled image of such scenarios. It presents a candy-colored allure but with a *Dorian Gray* sub-aesthetic. The befouling occurs when beauty has turned destructive and toxic. Tahir's wallpaper emerges from photographic imitations of the 16th and 17th century still lifes in European paintings that sought to capture decaying, fleeting beauty to remind us of our evanescence and mortality. It is also clear evidence of vanitas, fear, and the inevitability of change. If the wallpaper is befouled, though, it also has the potential to flourish. Wallpapers are cloned and static, lacking uniqueness, lacking soul. They are prone to endless replication. The verve of Tahir's work lies in her unleashing the destructive side of beauty.

In another of her recent series of wallpapers, *Beautiful Decay*, the pattern of fragments from waste disposal sites has been cropped, mirrored, and repeated, in the vein of Gerhard Richter's pattern paintings, Rudolf Stingel's ornamented paintings, and Timorous Beasties's wallpapers. They are subsumed into a kind of disproportionate representation of infinity and hallucination. They generate the "illusion of immortality," like a fatal fence "against radical change." [13] But when we espy the traces of the details hiding in the overall pattern, like a chameleon blending in with its surroundings, the kaleidoscopic effect is dispelled. Here, too, it is not iridescence and glimmer but gloom and dirt, a spectrum of various tones that tarnish/besmirch/sully one another. Can we detect the objects in the profusion? As with a Rorschach blot, we can dig out shapes, but we are uncertain as to whether we are projecting onto them or disclosing/uncovering them. Tahir is interested in the underlying beauty beneath this banal confusion. Rather than appropriating existing decorative patterns, she seeks to recreate patterns with things surrounding her in everyday life.

The confluence of the beautiful and ugly, alluring and toxic, appears in literary and artistic predecessors. In *Dorian Gray*, for instance, an artist tries to capture the youthful beauty of a young man. Upon the portrait's unveiling, he makes a frivolous pledge: he would sell his soul if he could live a life of sensual pleasure, staying forever as beautiful as in the painting. His hideous actions and moral corruption are eventually registered in the picture. The portrait's increasing decay reveals the ugly truth about Dorian Gray's corrupt nature. We all share the fear of being lured by life's dark temptations; think of that moment in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) when the queen poisons an apple by dipping it into an elixir. As she pulls it out of the gray-bluish bubbly mixture, a skull seems to smile at her malevolently, in a foreboding gray color, slowly blending into a lush, alluring toxic red and foreshadowing the kiss of death. There is something uncanny about these red

apples Tahir assembles; they are perfectly ripe and dotted with water droplets as if for an advertising campaign, their first signs of mold barely visible.

The *Paradise Wallpaper* series could be described as the opulent offspring of the high baroque, with deep colors, exuberant detail, and splendor that prompts a sense of awe. The term "baroque," in its literal meaning of an imperfectly shaped pearl initially had a negative connotation. Heinrich Wölfflin used the term to describe a distinct artistic style that was often deemed ostentatious and grotesque. [14] Tahir's *Paradise Wallpaper* can be described in yet another way. One assumes that it depicts beauty in the arrangement of color and composition, but it does not. These may not even be real fruits but rather generic ones from some genetically modified crop, or from the *Garden of Eden*, or mythology, or an heirloom garden. They are quintessentially fruity, but somehow not. They are too composed, decorative, adorned, as if they had come out of a jewel box, attractive and repulsive at the same time.

Likewise, the waste itself is generic. Whose waste is it? Where was it made? Where did it end up? What happens to it? Who is looking? What are we actually looking at? What do we see? Who is talking? Who is being interpellated? Are we involved in this imagined dialogue? These questions complicate the relationship between artwork and viewer. We know what waste looks like, but what is an artwork depicting waste? Can a wallpaper only aspire to be generically beautiful?

Perhaps because of this uncertainty of address, the wallpapers seem beautiful. They also seem attractive because of how life is enshrouded in death, surrounded by nothingness, illusion submerged in delusion. Perhaps, it is because of the way a sensual allure emanates from the decaying surface. The surface is seductive, but what it depicts is not. The wallpapers refuse to be "retinal art," to beautify comfortable bourgeois homes. They work through an invitation or a promise rather than its fulfillment. They shun resolution.

So, is the wallpaper we are looking at art? Yes, but insofar as it has differing, perhaps conflicting, notions of beauty: images of beauty that are potentially repulsive or unsafe. We cannot reconcile these ideas even though we find them alluring. Are these harbingers of promising futures? Of apocalyptic dystopias? Hovering in suspicion, we are poised waiting. If we wait, is not the little child to cry out that the emperor wears no clothes, or that paradise is lost indeed? And what we see, we realize, is all a matter of how we look at it, or in the words of John Milton: "The mind is its own place, [it] can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."

Chloé Schwartz, 2021