



Cynthia Dinan Mitchell

Étrange familiarité

(Strange Familiarity)

February 8 to September 6, 2020

Guest author: Ève De Garie-Lamanque

Étrange familiarité is an exploration of the still life genre. Here, Cynthia Dinan-Mitchell adopts and updates this historically pictorial practice, breaking it down into various states and scales. From surface prepping to installation, Dinan-Mitchell repurposes the codes and compositional rules of the traditional vanitas—centralized point of view, tight framing and closed composition—, while also using many of her trademark objects of predilection. Jewels, silverware, porcelain, books, skulls, flowers, insects, fruit and coral are indeed all very present, symbolizing at times the vanity of wealth, power and knowledge, and, at other times, the inevitable nature of human mortality. Taking existing classical still life conventions as her starting-point, Dinan-Mitchell overlays her own visual vocabulary, ideas, and ways of considering space inspired by patterns, those decorative structures whose repetitions are at the heart of textile and wallpaper design, among other things.



Dinan-Mitchell's fondness for patterns is obvious from the beginning of the visit, with a new two-part series of black-and-white screenprints. These works are structured according to vertical symmetry, and their primary patterns and components are also reproduced elsewhere in the exhibition on various surfaces: printed cushions, hand-painted porcelain pieces, sheets of acetate, synthetic leaves and found objects that she carefully places around the space, forming independent tableaux. Dinan-Mitchell clearly takes particular care in designing her wall coverings and presentation systems, covering them as she does with luxuriant draperies and bright red or velvety black hand-painted wallpaper. She indeed uses all means necessary to create a surrealist and theatrical atmosphere conducive to flights of fancy and total immersion. As visitors, we are constantly caught up in a back-and-forth movement between wall-mounted works, staged objects, and porcelain assemblages behind glass. Here, the artwork and its surroundings are in constant dialogue. However, the line separating them is anything but clear.

Dinan-Mitchell's approach brings to mind the Aesthetic Movement and Art Nouveau, two artistic schools from the late 19th century both having John Ruskin and William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement as a common ancestor. Not unlike painter, architect, interior designer and art theorist Henry Van de Velde (1863–1957) Dinan-Mitchell considers the domestic space and fosters a decompartmentalized approach to art-making. With a background in studio arts and printmaking, she has over the years



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acquired considerable technical knowledge, providing her with creative latitude that enables her to personally produce all the components of her installations, within a perspective of the total artwork. Dinan-Mitchell's nonconformity and hunger for freedom are palpable even in the selection and arrangement of the eclectic elements that make up her vanitas. Not unlike anachronistic, irreverent poems, they are incongruously juxtaposed with both artifacts from the oil industry, and garments and accessories from the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Dinan-Mitchell subverts the still-life genre to the point of integrating live animals, while also referencing car mechanics and the high-society practice of falconry. The candles and oil lamps of traditional still lifes have here been replaced with flashlights, lanterns, or LEDs, while watches and alarm clocks stand in for the hourglasses of yesteryear. Indeed, symbols of refinement and prestige from all eras rub shoulders with ubiquitous everyday objects whose uniqueness and beauty we aren't usually able to recognize.



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In designing these unorthodox clusters of elements, Dinan-Mitchell pays particular attention to pattern design, the quality of her glazes, the rich and saturated colours of her washes, and to the skillful unbalance of her compositions and arrangements. Caravaggio-like chiaroscuros add to the theatrical tension in these works, while her constant repetition of shapes, textures, and hues—as well as the flowing transitions between these elements—all lend rhythm to the narrative of the exhibition, and to the movement of the visitors within it. In sum, *Étrange familiarité* offers us a foray into an enticing and sensual parallel universe where Dinan-Mitchell skillfully deconstructs and critiques the very idea of hierarchy itself.



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Credits

- 1** © *Late evening talks*, 2017, mixed media on museum board, 25 x 33 in.
Photo: Charles-Frédéric Ouellet
- 2-3** © Partial view of the exhibition *Étrange familiarité*, EXPRESSION, 2020.
Photo: Danielle Roussel
- 4** © *Crâne noir*, 2019, ropes, can of gasoline, ceramics, matchbooks and other items.
Photo: Daniel Roussel
- 5** © *Étrange familiarité*, 2020, mixed media on museum board, 40 x 60 in.
Photo: Daniel Roussel
- 6** © *Dark Yellow*, 2019, mixed media on museum board, 40 x 60 in.
Photo: Charles-Frédéric Ouellet

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