# Neo-Victorian Art:
# Review of Isobel Elstob, *Reimag(in)ing the Victorians in Contemporary Art: Britain and Beyond*

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**Isobel Elstob, *Reimag(in)ing the Victorians in Contemporary Art: Britain and Beyond*.**
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When the National Portrait Gallery in London reopened in June 2023 after an extensive three-year-long renovation, many people expected that there would be changes to more than just the architecture. They were not disappointed. The emphasis throughout a number of the exhibition spaces was on fresh ways of organising the items on display, moving away from strict chronology into more thematically focussed linkages. But even those who anticipated seeing something new might not have imagined that there would also be something *neo*.

Yet there it was. Next to Jillian Edelstein's 2008 photograph of the actor Dame Vanessa Redgrave hung an image by the photographer Gillian Wearing titled *Me as Julia Margaret Cameron and Two Muses* (2019). As the text of the wall label accompanying the gelatin silver print helpfully confirmed – it read, "The Turner Prize-winning artist transforms herself into the 19th-century photographer as well as her muses" – this was indeed Wearing's tongue-in-cheek composite self-portrait in a form of Victorian drag. The photo-artist had posed for all three of the figures: a version of the pioneering Julia Margaret Cameron, seated and clutching her shawl while gazing austerely and somewhat confrontationally at the spectator, flanked by two standing women with flowing dresses, loosened long hair, and garlands of flowers encircling their heads, both in 'aesthetic' attitudes reminiscent of

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Cameron's real-life models, such as Julia Jackson ('Mrs. Herbert Duckworth'), later to become the mother of Virginia Woolf.

By carefully reproducing the costumes and other elements from Cameron's historic photographs, Gillian Wearing composed and produced a visual image meant to invite a double or even a triple-take. In the absence of assistance from the title or from the accompanying exhibition label, viewers would need to study very closely the faces of the three women to determine that this was not actually a nineteenth-century artifact. Only then might it be clear that a sly joke was being played on them. Each figure was Wearing herself, sharp-featured and unglamourous, unlike Cameron's originals (although anyone unfamiliar with portraits of Cameron and of her other-worldly, angelic female 'muses', or unable to recognise Wearing's own face, might still have been left, so to speak, in the darkroom). The differences between idealised Victorian views of femininity and these un-prettified representations of Wearing, a modern woman and a professional photographer, were what turned this from a simple tribute offered to an important predecessor into something more complex and critical – that is, into a work of neo-Victorian art with subtle feminist resonance.

The National Portrait Gallery was no outlier when it came to endorsing the significance of such 'neo' re-visions. At the very same moment in summer 2023 that Wearing's work was on display, so too was another reinterpretation of the past in an equally revered arts institution – London's Tate Britain. There, the exhibition titled *The Rossettis* employed nine rooms to celebrate the achievements of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, his relations (especially the poet Christina Rossetti, the more famous of his two sisters), his friends and associates and, in particular, his wife/model/muse, the artist Elizabeth Siddal. The ninth room, however, moved into a twenty-first-century framework and into the issue of Rossetti's ongoing legacy with a 2008 photograph, *Untitled #2*, from the series *The New Pre-Raphaelites* by Sunil Gupta. This was part of a set of thirteen images both referencing and commenting upon queer life in contemporary India, while likening its subjects to the revolutionary band of painters who so radically shook up Victorian conventions.

Taking as its starting point Dante Gabriel Rossetti's triptych *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* (1855), Gupta's *Untitled #2* substituted two men of South Asian appearance, with their lips about to meet in a passionate kiss, for the adulterous heterosexual white couple locked in an embrace in the original


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Victorian watercolour. Gupta crafted a commentary on the legal, political, and cultural status of 'forbidden' love across time and nations, expressed through the visual relationship between nineteenth-century artistic conventions and those of the present; thus his photograph was a work both new and 'neo'. At the same time, the spectacle of these non-white faces and bodies interacted synergistically with Victorian-era artworks earlier in the exhibition – including Rossetti's painting *The Beloved* (1865-1866), which is notable for its representations of models of colour – and highlighted the question of race. Like much neo-Victorian art, Gupta's *Untitled #2* used identifiable echoes of nineteenth-century works to interrogate not only the aesthetics of both the past and the present but also the social conditions and ideologies that these have reflected and supported. For viewers, this turned the experience of museum-going, which can sometimes devolve into an attitude of simple appreciation, toward something more intellectually and politically confrontational.

That sort of lively intellectual engagement might happen more often, however, if guides to the subject of neo-Victorian art in general were made widely available – if there were more discussions in circulation offering ways of looking at it and suggestions regarding what to look for, as well as what to learn from it (whether about the Victorians or about ourselves in relation to them). Many published studies of neo-Victorianism have done an excellent job of helping audiences to understand its manifestations in fiction and in film; few, though, have concentrated on the sorts of visual works that turn up on the walls of galleries. It is, therefore, highly laudable whenever an account of neo-Victorian artists and their art does appear. For that reason alone, Isobel Elstob's ambitious and admirable monograph, *Reimag(in)ing the Victorians in Contemporary Art: Britain and Beyond*, would be cause for celebration. Here at last is a book that places neo-Victorian installations, photographs, paintings, and other visual forms side-by-side and, so to speak, in a set of frames.

Elstob's critical analysis comes, in fact, not a moment too soon, for neo-Victorianism is certainly proliferating in the art world. Even as neo-Victorian art seems to have been making its way into major exhibitions such as those at the National Portrait Gallery and at Tate Britain one item at a time, entire shows have also been devoted to it, though fewer than might have been expected. One of the most extensive and wide-ranging opened in February 2018, not in a metropolitan venue, but in a small museum outside of New


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York City. Unfortunately, it did not travel elsewhere and had only a three-month-long run, limiting the number of people able to enjoy and learn from it. Nonetheless, a memorable experience awaited visitors who were able to make the pilgrimage, as the setting itself was an example of grand Victorian architecture at its best: Glenview Mansion, completed in 1877 and now the home of the Hudson River Museum. There, Bartholomew F. Bland served as curator of the aptly titled *The Neo Victorians: Contemporary Artists Revive Gilded-Age Glamor* [*sic*]. The works on display both partook of and fiercely critiqued the splendour of the surroundings to offer viewers something complex – i.e., an experience that awakened them to the aesthetic beauty of nineteenth-century taste, while simultaneously challenging the sexism, racism, imperialism, and classism of its political undergirding. *The Neo Victorians* exhibition did so in a variety of media, utilising everything from ceramic sculpture to photography to painting to fashion to film, and it sometimes engaged in mashing up several of these at once.

Among the most notable works partaking of and also casting a cold eye on the idea of 'Gilded-Age Glamor' was Catherine Latson's *The Birch Corset* (2015) – copying a woman's undergarment in its shape but constructed of thin strips of wood to evoke the confinements of femininity and the pornographic underpinnings (literally) of Victorian respectability, given the nineteenth-century sexual subculture of flagellation in which figures such as the poet Algernon Swinburne famously participated. Victorian proprietary attitudes toward the natural world were interrogated, too. Troy Abbott's mixed media *Gothic* (2014) populated antique metal cages with digital birds, while Jennifer Angus's site-specific installation, *Dying of Curiosity* (2018), sprawled across a wall with its lovely patterns mimicking Victorian wallpaper design, though made up entirely of insect corpses. (The Victorians were, of course, known for such oddities as dresses decorated with beetle wings, as in the costume immortalised by John Singer Sargent's 1889 portrait of Ellen Terry in the role of Lady Macbeth.)

Interestingly, some of these works partook of the same spirit found in quirky and imaginative creations by the Victorians themselves. Such was the case with Chet Morrison's series of photomontages, combining human images and fantastic elements in a way that recalled directly the comical visual pastiches by Victorian women – in particular, those that they pasted into albums. (Many of these had already received new attention in the exhibition *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, which


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opened at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2009 and later travelled to New York and Ontario, turning what were once private amusements involving human-headed beasts and animal-headed people into public spectacles.)

If the majority of the items at the Hudson River Museum responded to a rather generalised sense of 'Victorianism' as a political and cultural entity, identifying and critiquing tropes – i.e., women as caged birds or as bodies bound by corsetry – that spanned the nineteenth century and utilising these as the basis for conceptual art, some exhibitions have also involved a more focussed conversation with the past. This was especially true of *Kehinde Wiley: The Yellow Wallpaper Exhibition* at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, London, in spring 2020. Indeed, it was only fitting that this was staged at a museum dedicated to the work of the late-Victorian socialist artist and designer William Morris, for Kehinde Wiley, an African American painter who has specialised in portraiture of Black subjects, has long adopted and adapted Morris's textile designs. In Wiley's paintings, these floral patterns act as decorative background – literally, as wallpaper (which was one of their original functions in late-nineteenth-century aesthetic interiors) – that serves to glamourise and dignify the faces and bodies of the Black models in the foreground, emphasising their innate but (still) too rarely celebrated beauty. Nevertheless, as the subtitle of the exhibition indicated, with its reference to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 story about a woman driven mad by postpartum confinement, Wiley's works in the William Morris Gallery had an additional critical edge, insisting upon the rights of women to self-determination – a viewpoint that would have been radical in the late-nineteenth century, though in line with the revolutionary opinions of Morris himself. Thus, Wiley's paintings were clearly neo-Victorian in their feminism and in their protest against the racism that excluded Blackness from nineteenth-century definitions of beauty.

Along with these formal presentations, however, examples of neo-Victorian art have been and continue to be all around us in broader contexts, including in mass market entertainment. No one need frequent museums and galleries to encounter them. The year 2023 saw the release, for instance, of the award-winning film *Poor Things*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos and starring Emma Stone, adapted from Alisdair Gray's 1992 novel of the same title. Although set in the nineteenth century and lampooning notions of passive femininity and female asexuality associated with that period, the film's visual style owed much not only to Victorian photographs and paintings


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but to Hollywood Gothic horror films of the early twentieth century, such as James Whale's High Camp classic, *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Lanthimos's film was hybrid in its evocations and inspirations – its final scene included the image of a chicken with the head of a bulldog, recalling both the imaginary creatures in nineteenth-century photocollage albums and Chet Morrison's photographic tributes to these – while presenting itself as a witty and anarchic version of neo-Victorianism.

The commercial and critical success of *Poor Things* also brought renewed attention to Alisdair Gray's source text. This fictional work was patently neo-Victorian in textual terms, with a structure that deliberately undermined itself. By ending in a first-person narrator's explosive rejection of and retelling of the same story, it forced readers to question the entire 'historical' account that preceded it. As the first version of events was from the viewpoint of a supposedly authoritative male observer and the second, the revisionary one, proffered antithetical testimony from the woman at the centre of the action, the 'neo' aspect of Gray's novel also put a feminist twist on the *un*reliability of Victorian narratives, particularly those alleging to give accounts of women's lives. (Notably, this alternative story at the conclusion, casting doubt on everything that came before, was altogether absent from the film adaptation.)

But *Poor Things* was 'neo' in more than text alone. Alisdair Gray's novel, like many an actual nineteenth-century volume, was accompanied by illustrations, and these too were put to use as reflections and critiques of Victorian life and politics. In some cases, this effect was achieved by deliberately misidentifying aspects of existing works of the period. One example was an illustration by William Small, originally published in the British periodical *The Graphic*, that Gray reproduced in a section titled 'Notes Critical and Historical' in the final pages of *Poor Things*. Small's 1896 drawing, *The Submission of King Prempeh*, depicted a scene of imperialism and triumphalism at its most appalling, with three white men in military or other official garb seated on a makeshift platform of biscuit boxes as the Ashanti King and his mother knelt on the ground before them, signalling the defeat of their uprising against British forces and their abject surrender. Retitling this *King Prempeh's Humiliation* for its appearance in *Poor Things* and giving it a new caption, Gray substituted for one of the names of the actual British victors ('Colonel Kempster') the name of his own fictional character, 'General Blessington'. In Gray's narrative, Blessington was a villain through-


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and-through, out to possess and control Englishwomen much as British imperialists had dominated African peoples. Placing him in this offensive visual scenario drove home the author's critical view of Victorian men's illegitimate exercise of power.

Accompanying actual period illustrations treated to such neo-Victorian intervention were Alasdair Gray's own pseudo-Victorian drawings. *Poor Things* featured two title-pages. One was for the volume itself, while a second preceded the (fictional) narrative within it – a first-person narrative titled *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer* and attributed to a physician named 'Archibald McCandless' that was supposedly published in 1909. The title-page of this fictitious memoir trumpeted the inclusion of 'Etchings by William Strang'. Strang (1859-1921) was, of course, no invention of Gray's; he was a distinguished painter, illustrator, and engraver known, in particular, for his portrait drawings. These were what Alisdair Gray parodied in imaginary portraits of his own – black-and-white images of the faces of McCandless and of his other characters, such as General Blessington – all done in a style reminiscent of Strang's and signed 'W. S.', but with an additional dollop of caricature and exaggeration to render them slightly risible, rather than distinguished-looking. Like the works of art displayed at the Hudson River Museum, these illustrations were neo-Victorian, commenting critically upon Victorian conventions of representation, upon the society that produced them, and also upon some of the sorts of people who would have been the subjects of Strang's portraits.

Book illustration has been, in general, among the most widely disseminated forms of neo-Victorian art. It is certainly the one familiar to the greatest number of people, even if they are unacquainted with the neo-Victorian as a theoretical concept. Of the artists associated with neo-Victorian illustration, no one has produced works seen by so large a public as the late Edward Gorey (1925-2000), who was both a creator of visual images and a comic author, pointedly making fun of (and having fun with) Victorian and Edwardian subjects in prose and verse, as well. Not only have his books been bestsellers for generations, but his pen-and-ink drawings have been recycled profitably as commercial merchandise – as everything from greeting cards to calendars to t-shirts to jewellery. As Gorey's biographer, Mark Dery, remarks in *Born to Be Posthumous*, Gorey's influence has long been "percolating out of the goth, neo-Victorian, and dark-fantasy subcultures into pop culture at large" (Dery 2018: 5); indeed, the adjective "Goreyesque" has "become


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shorthand for a postmodern twist on the gothic" (Dery 2018: 5). But other artists have also been prominent and important practitioners of neo-Victorian illustration, including Ralph Steadman in his 1968 edition of *Alice in Wonderland* and Paula Rego in her 2002 series of lithographs for *Jane Eyre*. Audrey Niffenegger, too, has been both a celebrated writer of her own neo-Victorian texts and the illustrator of them in works such as *The Three Incestuous Sisters* (2005).

Given the proliferation over many decades of neo-Victorian art in so many genres and modes, the dearth – at least until recently – of critical assessments of it has been striking. This phenomenon was noted, for instance, by Saverio Tomaiuolo in 2018, in his *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture*:

> Despite the fact that much critical interest has focused on neo-Victorian novels, TV series and movies, the reflection on twenty-first century visual artists that have re-viewed nineteenth-century history and culture through a contemporary perspective is still limited [… and] there is still a form of critical neglect regarding neo-Victorian visual art. (Tomaiuolo 2018: 181-182)

Among the few exceptions cited by Tomaiuolo is the 2017 volume *Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, edited by Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell. There, neo-Victorian photography is addressed briefly by Kate Flint in an 'Afterword' titled 'Photography, Palimpsests, and the Neo-Victorian'. In particular, Flint discusses Tracey Moffatt's 1998 *Laudanum* series, a visual commentary by an Australian "half-Aboriginal" artist on "aspects of colonial, women's, and native history" (Flint 2017: 338-339).

Flint's short contribution, however, proves to be the exception, as most of this important volume is devoted to graphic art alone. Hence provocative neo-Victorian mixed-media installations such as David Mabb's *A Provisional Memorial to Nuclear Disarmament*, which was displayed at the Bildmuseet in Umea, Sweden, in October 2016, putting designs by William Morris in conversation with screens and placards bearing texts that addressed present-day issues of peace and violence, were no part of the volume's critical scrutiny. Absent, too, were works executed in sculptural media, such as the ceramicist Joan Bankemper's *Suzanna's Garden of Earthly Delights* (2009-


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2010), seen at the Hudson River Museum in 2018, which responded ironically to the Victorian craze for painting on china with an explosion of flora and fauna, including Alice-in-Wonderland-inspired white rabbits.

A more comprehensive view of the possibilities of neo-Victorian art across a variety of material forms was present in the earlier *Victoriana: A Miscellany* (2013), edited by Sonia Solicari. This was the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Victoriana: The Art of Revival*, on view from only 7 September to 8 December 2013 at London's Guildhall Art Gallery. Many of the short commentaries that it contained, however, tended more toward the descriptive than the theoretical or critical.

Also something of a lost opportunity, though in terms of coverage rather than paucity of theoretical underpinnings, was the more recently published *The Palgrave Handbook of Neo-Victorianism* (2024), edited by Brenda Ayres and Sarah E. Maier. While excellent in dealing with neo-Victorian texts, this volume proved to be less helpful in the wider sphere of the visual, as it confined itself largely to graphic novels, film and television, with a brief sidenote on the material culture of Steampunk. There was little in it, for instance, about ceramics, photography, painting or, indeed, about another frequently deployed nineteenth-century medium that turns up in neo-Victorian art: namely, taxidermy. The importance of the latter was represented dramatically in the 2013 *Victoriana* exhibition by Miss Pokeno's [the artist Alannah Currie's] *Trophy Chair* (2009) and in the 2018 Hudson River Museum exhibition with two works by Deborah Simon: *Ursus Americanus* (2013) and *Flayed Rabbit, Albino with Nerves* (2017). Both of the latter artist's works involved faux-taxidermy that substituted clay, artificial fur, and other non-corporeal materials for the dead bodies of animals that the Victorians stuffed and sometimes even dressed in humanlike clothing to create comic dioramas, as a fantastical way of asserting their dominance over the natural world.

As a study that, unlike these other volumes, centres wholly on visual art of many kinds, Elstob's *Reimag(in)ing the Victorians in Contemporary Art* performs an invaluable service. The case that it makes for looking more closely and analytically at the visual manifestations of neo-Victorianism is both a strong and an overdue one, although Elstob's heavy reliance throughout on theoretical jargon may, unfortunately, limit its appeal to academic audiences alone. Nonetheless, the study's six chapters present convincing (as well as sometimes startling) evidence taken from a variety of


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media and materials, ranging from photographs to installations that involve natural forms and animal remains. Anyone familiar with neo-Victorian works in general knows that they embrace the unexpected and can sometimes register as eccentric. This is appropriate, as they frequently flag characteristics of the past that were themselves unexpected and eccentric, such as the taste for filling middle-class and upper-class domestic interiors with preserved animal corpses, creating assemblages of the shells of sea creatures, or decorating ladies' hats with entire dead birds. Therefore, it only seems fitting that Elstob's study of neo-Victorian art would itself contain chapters with unexpected, occasionally even eccentric choices and juxtapositions.

Perhaps the most surprising chapter of *Reimag(in)ing the Victorians in Contemporary Art*, however, is its second (which is technically the first, following the author's 'Introduction'), because of the artist whom it includes. In 'Seeing Is (Not) Believing: Photography, Magic Lanterns and Virtual Realities', Elstob appears to contradict her own preliminary statement about the volume: "But whilst the periodization of 'Victorian' is at least Transatlantic, if not global, almost all the artists considered here are British or British nationals, raised during Margaret Thatcher's premiership" (p. 4). Despite that, Chapter Two foregrounds a discussion of the work of Sally Mann. So far as I know, Mann, an American from the state of Virginia, has never lived in Britain and, as she was born in 1951, came of age long before Thatcher took office as Prime Minister in 1979. But even more eyebrow-raising is the connection that Elstob claims to discover between Mann's very controversial erotic images (many of them nudes) of children, including her own, and the mid-nineteenth-century photographs by Lady Clementina Hawarden (1822-1865) of her own (clothed) daughters: "Like Hawarden's daughters, Mann's young children are undoubtedly beautiful. And it is perhaps this, rather than each photographer's intention, that invest [*sic*] both sets of images with a disquieting sense of allure" (p. 21). Is that a sufficient linkage, and are the differing sources of that disquiet really so closely related? A more obvious and convincing analogy might have been made between Mann's photographs of very young girls and those notorious ones, both clothed and nude, done by Charles Dodgson (1832-1898), a.k.a. Lewis Carroll.

While pairings across time can be compelling and potentially illuminating, as they were in the National Portrait Gallery's 2024 exhibition


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*Francesca Woodman and Julia Margaret Cameron: Portraits to Dream In*, which brought together a lesser-known American photo-artist of the 1970s with Cameron, they can also seem forced. Unfortunately, that is the case with Mann and Hawarden. Elstob's inability, moreover, to obtain permission to reproduce any relevant works from Mann's *oeuvre* also means that she could not juxtapose images that might have helped to make more persuasive her argument about Mann as a neo-Victorian artist, working in conversation with a nineteenth-century woman predecessor; readers are asked to trust the author's interpretations alone, without visual evidence. On learning that permission was denied, it might have been wiser to delete a figure such as Mann from the volume, especially as the artist does not fit well anyway in terms of nationality or cultural background, and this image-less argument stands out uncomfortably from the rest of a monograph that is otherwise generously illustrated throughout.

If that single section of 'Seeing Is (Not) Believing' is a low point in *Reimag(in)ing the Victorians in Contemporary Art*, there are numerous high points to make up for it. Among the very welcome features of Elstob's study is its breadth. It encompasses not only photography, but videos and virtual reality installations, along with displays both small and large built of mixed materials ranging from mirrors, wood, wire, and brass to feathers, cloth, and even the skulls of mice as in the case of Alastair Mackie's *Untitled (sphere)* (2009). The emphasis throughout the study seems to be on works with a strong material component, as when painting is discussed, for instance through Mark Fairnington's *Mantidae* series from 2000. Fairnington's images have been created not only with paint, but with photographs of insect bodies that have been cut up and assembled on the canvas to form what Elstob calls "richly detailed but entirely imaginary re-presentations of the natural world-made-cultural" in response to Victorian ideas regarding Nature (p. 150).

Among the themes running throughout *Reimag(in)ing the Victorians in Contemporary Art* is the intent of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century British artists to comment critically upon several characteristic nineteenth-century ideas and preoccupations. These include Darwinian understandings of evolutionary hierarchies; Pre-Raphaelite ideals of realism and verisimilitude (especially as filtered through the writings of John Ruskin); and the obsession with taxonomy, which was closely allied with the mania for collecting, whether by scientists or by amateur naturalists, often driven by the desire to gather specimens for the purpose of classification. The last of these


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is sometimes an occasion for ridicule today, as it was even for the Victorians themselves, who made fun of such pursuits – though the heartiest laughter was reserved for *women* engaged in such activities.

Elstob productively explores the misogynist underpinnings of Victorian masculine attitudes and the determination of neo-Victorian artists to expose these. She does this very effectively when discoursing upon Mark Dion's suite of staged photographs, *The Ladies' Field Club of York* (1998-1999), and on Dorothy Cross's film *Medusae* (2003), which was inspired by the real-life Irish marine biologist, Maude Delap (1866-1953). Elstob's conclusion to the chapter titled 'Unnatural Histories: Forgotten Objects, Narratives and Lives' offers this deft analysis of what is at stake in such 'reimag(in)ings': "the contemporary visualizations of Victorian natural history discussed here comment on more than the wonders of the natural world and its histories of collection", since also intent on "draw[ing] attention to the very *un*natural forms through which such worlds and such histories have been circulated" (p. 187, original emphasis).

Elstob's arguments seem to grow stronger and more confident (and thus more convincing) as the volume continues. The fifth chapter, 'Colonial Afterlives: Communicating Our Transnational Past', may not be the most original in its focus – after all, a large body of scholarship already exists on how neo-Victorianism has addressed the topics of historical racism and imperialism across a great swath of genres – but it is nevertheless an impressive section with a wide variety of works brought in as examples. Some of these are well-known, but others are not, and Elstob deserves praise for achieving this balance

In the academic sphere of art history, there is no dearth, for instance, of critical examinations of the staged photographs of Yinka Shonibare, a British artist of Nigerian heritage who has a disability. His *Dorian Gray* series from 2001 has garnered a huge amount of attention and not solely in the world of Oscar Wilde studies. Elstob, however, turns instead to the 1998 *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* series, in which Shonibare takes on the role of the title figure, and offers the following astute commentary about it: "By inserting himself as dandy, Shonibare thus challenges viewers to question their own response when faced with images that position him, a Black man, at the centre of archetypal scenes of Victorian high life" (p. 204). Her judgement is equally penetrating and accurate, as she pinpoints the larger political framework – "In Shonibare's tableaux, the primary metaphor is an implicit relationship


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between historical European actions and West African identity today" (p. 199) – and as she identifies the artist's intent to bring "attention to how the […] technological brilliance of the Industrial Revolution" is "synonymous with the enslavement and subsequent colonization of African peoples and land" (p. 200).

Positioning his art as an act of "cultural cross-dressing" (p. 211), where the "discord between the familiar and unfamiliar" results in "a distinct sense of the uncanny" (p. 215), allows Elstob to make a bridge between "Shonibare's theatrical, but in many ways, frightening representations of our complex and collective transnational past" (p. 216) and the work of another contemporary (but lesser-known) photo-artist, Ingrid Pollard. Like many neo-Victorian British practitioners, Pollard, whose family heritage is Guyanese, "is deeply interested in the histories of photography" (p. 217) and frequently employs nineteenth-century techniques such as the hand-tinting of images. Elstob's discussion of Pollard's 1988 series titled *Pastoral Interlude* illuminates its uncanniness, as through "five hand-tinted silver gelatin prints" it "combines photographic images with textual captions that interrogate cultural assumptions about who 'belongs' to the English landscape" (p. 218).

Elstob then shrewdly links the ethnic and racial politics of this early project to Pollard's more recent *Valentine Days* series from 2017. There, Pollard has hand-tinted and quite literally reframed photographs of Black Jamaicans found in the privately owned Caribbean Photo Archive "in a way that contemporizes their historical subjects", so that the "prints invert time" (p. 220) and make visible "the interstices and overlaps between Jamaican and British national identities in relation to space, time and situation" (p. 225). Elstob's understanding is acute, not only when it comes to the political significance of the human subjects and landscapes in these images, but to the "hand-colouring process" that Pollard employs, which "serves to collapse the temporal distancing that black-and-white albumen photography produces in the eyes of the viewer: a deliberated anachronism that is as recuperative as it is disquieting" (p. 227). She brings this same keen vision to her analyses of other works by Pollard, including the *Seaside Series* and *Oceans Apart* (both from 1989), along with the slyly mocking *Wordsworth's Heritage* (1992) – a "sardonic riposte" with a postcard-like format and "wry subversion of the visual motifs of English tourism and landscape conventions" that have persisted from the nineteenth century until now (p. 231), reinforcing nostalgia


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and discouraging political interrogation regarding who is and who is not welcome, even today, in 'English' history and setting.

The chapter devoted to Shonibare and Pollard is outstanding. It brings the monograph to a very satisfying close, before the brief overview titled 'Conclusions: The *Present Past* in Contemporary Art', in which Elstob expresses her belief that "the historiographical art examined here […] reimag(in)es Victorian processes, lives and narratives in ways that go beyond critique" (p. 253). In Elstob's opinion, at least, it also "summons the ghosts of our shared historical past so that they might communicate with the spectres of our 'present'" (p. 253). Behind this lies an important double purpose – indeed, a double mirroring – with neo-Victorian art holding out the prospect "of expanding collective understandings of who we *were* whilst probing the nature of who we *are*" (p. 255, original emphasis). How can any art form with so worthy a goal not deserve a full-length study such as this fine and probing one? And when will there be further scholarly examinations of the numerous works produced by this neo-Victorian visual movement flourishing all around us in diverse forms and in so many kinds of spaces?

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