'A Woman's Place'
Knole House, Sevenoaks
*Art Monthly*, Sept 2018

Is the English country home a battlefield? Knole House, the fortress-like ancestral seat in Kent of the noble Sackville-West family, has witnessed countless battles since the 1400s, when the building's massive construction began. In 1884 an angry mob stormed the locked gates of Knole to protest the closure of the vast house and deer park to the public. Knole was eventually re-opened to visitors—who still flock to this popular National Trust property, these days squabbling over limited-number visitor-parking spaces.

As documented in 'A Woman's Place', a six-person exhibition of newly commissioned artworks, generations of Knole-based females have waged a quiet but desperate battle since at least the early 1600s, when resident Lady Anne Clifford penned her mournful diary. As chronicled in artist Melanie Wilson's evocative audiotour *Women of Record* (all works, 2018), Lady Anne was perpetually ignored by husband Lord Richard, who left her feeling stranded in the lonely English countryside. Anne's lamentations are combined in Wilson's piece with the voices of contemporary British women despairing over their menfolk—the emotional neglect, gambling debts, infidelities, looming creditors—with striking similarity to their historic predecessors. An unwritten female history emerges in *Women of Record* as an uninterrupted march of punishing marriages, stretching with remarkable uniformity from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first.

Women were treated to special inequality at Knole, where an ancient family law decreed that house and title could only be passed down the male line. Famously, the writer Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962) was prevented from inheriting her beloved childhood home because she was a woman. The novel *Orlando* (1928) was 'a love letter' to Vita, as author Virginia Woolf described the multi-gendered fictional biography of her longtime friend and lover. *Orlando*'s original manuscript is held in the house archives, and in it Vita/Orlando survives miraculously intact across centuries—just like Knole itself. Impossible leaps in time also feature in Lindsay Seers's beautifully shot films *2052 selves (a biography)*, viewable only online. Presented across three principal chapters, and often splitting the screen into a triptych, Seers's films are obliquely based on the 'three V's' haunting Knole—Virginia, Vita and her mother, Victoria—intertwined with the gender-shifting autobiogaphy of actress Sara Sugarman, who offers a candid and mesmerizing performance. Emily Speed's tiled, working fountain (titled *Innards*) focuses on Lady Victoria, and the rituals conjoining a wealthy woman's toilette and her gardening: the watery care of a woman's body (at the dressing table) and her flowers (in the garden), both expected somehow to remain perpetually in bloom. Lubaina Himid examines one of the house's least leisured inhabitants, the seventeenth-century black maidservant Grace Robinson; *Collars and Cuffs* are tiny, highly stylised paintings concealed within a courtyard where 'the blackamoor' Grace laboured for years. Alice May Williams' video *By the Accident of Your Birth*, tucked away in a side-turret, considers the ongoing impact of the 'faults' or incidents of birth —gender, class, geography—so vividly played out at Knole.

In sum, Knole's centuries-long story is unusually fraught with struggles centring on women, class, sexuality, and power, and for good reason curators Lucy Day and Eliza Gluckman have sited 'A Woman's Place' here as part of the National Trust's 'Women and Power' programme this year. Idyllic Knole—where in 1967 the Beatles were filmed singing *Strawberry Fields Forever*—conceals a conflicted history that merits critical scrutiny, and to this end the selected artists have produced sensitive and informed works. No doubt curating duo Day+Gluckman jumped through countless bureaucratic hoops in order to realise new artworks adhering to the heavy restrictions surrounding a bonafide Grade-I architectural treasure, plus the abiding demands of heritage tourism.

Their curatorial solution was to literalise women's historic near-invisibility by hiding artworks in alcoves (Williams) and behind drain pipes (Himid), or dematerializing them in a soundwork (Wilson) or online films (Seers). In practice, the unfortunate impression is that women—whether as artists, or the subject of art—remain as banished to the backstairs and recesses of Knole as ever. This uneasy sensation worsened as I discovered that Williams' video was not working and Speed's fountain had been switched

off. I'm guessing that I was the rare Knole visitor that morning to request Wilson's actually quite moving soundwork, judging from the blank register when I returned my borrowed headphones and audiogear.

Sevenoaks is better known for its banker-belt conservativism—the town overwhelmingly voted Leave in the Brexit referendum—than an affiliation with cutting-edge art, and the effect of hitching the 'women's cause' to contemporary art here seems to yoke together two equally uncertain houseguests: assertive women and new art. Certainly contemporary art fared better at Knole in the distant past, judging from the position of pride enjoyed by nine Sir Joshua Reynolds' paintings collected by then-contemporary art patron John Sackville—including an immense commissioned portrait of the dashing Duke, lording over the grand Reynolds Gallery. The unintended message is that historic artworks created for and by men command far greater attention than artworks made and commissioned today by women, sequestered to the house's edges and concealed corners.

In her performance-essay 'Is the Museum a Battlefield?' (2013), artist Hito Steyerl noted a near-perfect match between the shape of a military-use ammo-cartridge and the missile-shaped floorplan of the Berlin building where those very bullets are manufactured. Knole's courtyard-filled floorplan looks like a cluster of isolated enclosures, like thick-walled cells—perhaps to hide women and their art? In *Orlando*, Woolf reversed Vita's fate and allowed the lead character to win the family estate: the art of fiction was enlisted to overcome an injustice endured in real life. In this spirit, Himid's second work *Flag for Grace*—planted atop the Gatehouse tower in tribute to the house's long-ago servant—seems the most successful artwork here. Where CJ Mahony's *Still Life, Still Waitin*g is a stained-glass-based image that merely represents Knole in a woman's hands, Himid has seemingly staged a silent coup and declared that women of any age, class and race have finally captured the castle. A gesture small in scale but symbolically huge, Grace's proudly waving flag displays a spirit of triumph and reversal that otherwise feels absent here, despite good work and good intentions.

**—Gilda Williams**