

# MADELINE KIDD

## PAINTED GARDENS

### ESSAY BY JAN BRYANT

In 1909, G.K. Chesterton wrote a short essay on the value of lying in bed, which he believed should be carried out “without reason or justification.”<sup>1</sup> We should bracket all connotations of idle frivolousness, or slatternly laziness. Lying in bed he argued is part of a person’s “minor actions and arrangements [which] ought to be free, flexible, creative”.<sup>2</sup> What interests me in this piece is the importance Chesterton places on the bed as the pivot for liberating the creative act. It is here, on this most private of spaces that the thinker, the writer, the painter may begin again, freed from the Gulag of existing or dominant aesthetic regimes.

*But for the beautiful experiment of lying in bed, I might never have discovered it. For years I have been looking for some blank spaces in a modern house to draw on ... but when I tried to find these fine clear spaces in the modern rooms such as we all live in, I was continually disappointed. I found an endless pattern and complication of small objects hung like a curtain of fine links between me and my desire. I examined the walls; I found them to my surprise to be already covered with wallpaper, and I found the wallpaper to be already covered with uninteresting images, all bearing a ridiculous resemblance to each other. I could not understand why one arbitrary symbol (a symbol apparently entirely devoid of any religious or philosophical significance) should thus be sprinkled all over my nice walls like a sort of smallpox.*<sup>3</sup>

The bed becomes the point from which all perspective emanates, finally disappearing into the infinite vanishing point of the room’s “white paradise”—the ceiling.<sup>4</sup> This space, unhindered by the banality of pre-ordained aesthetics—also untouchable I think Chesterton is suggesting, for “Lying in bed would be an altogether perfect and

*supreme experience if only one had a coloured pencil long enough to draw on the ceiling*<sup>5</sup> —is thereby an ideal space. It may be painted with a “broom and pails” of colourful paint, “only if one worked in a really sweeping and masterly way, and laid on the colour in great washes [so] it might drip down again on one’s face in floods of rich and mingled colour like some strange fairy rain.”<sup>6</sup> Emanating from the genesis of the white space, this utopia (in its truest sense as no-place) is the projection of the painter’s dream.

Madeline Kidd’s current work, *Painted Gardens*, is an arrangement of three and two-dimensional objects in space. These objects are not selected as the best possible selection from a dull and mute world of objects, just as the space is not an approximation of an everyday room, or a room cordoned off from the messiness of an everyday life. Rather, from the very blankness of a blank space, an ideal emerges, becoming now a small utopia produced under the watch of the painter. Objects freely circulate as colourful projections for the possibility of a perfect space, for this space and these objects, conceived as ideal-décor, have been wrenched from the dream of all possible dream-like arrangements.

There is a strange sense that this ideal space falls somewhere between a picture and a room, between two and three-dimensionality. Our painter brings her painterly ways to the process of making, “balancing colours, painting and re-painting until a work feels finished.”<sup>7</sup> Her object-making begins too with an initial design (designation) from which planes and colours are positioned and repositioned. As with her pictures, her objects are conceived very much as *tableaux*... and her pictures very much as *décor*.

Guests are welcome to activate this tableau by sitting on the bench, or the chair... survey the décor and its many, colourful perspectives. This *tableau*, now with the addition of your own body, is made into *tableau-vivant*... move around, feel the space. And yet, be warned, for this will be a highly disorientating affair. What you have done, dear guest, is invade the very image itself. And yet, in this wonderful process of getting lost in the image (and I'm reminded now of the Situationists' plea for disorientation as a method to oppose capitalist alienation), you will have fulfilled the intent of the work itself. For there are traps, and false perspectives, images of images and a mirror to cunningly catch the objects in the room. Can you discern whether this is a mirror, or a painting of a mirror, or the reflection of objects falling away into the infinite space of a mirror, a sort of non-painting-painting?<sup>8</sup>

*Ceci n'est pas un jardin*. This is not a garden. As with Foucault's reading of Magritte's *Treachery of Images*, 1928-29 (his *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*),<sup>9</sup> Foucault reveals the infinite abyss of signification that falls between a 'pipe', and the painting of a pipe. "It is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say."<sup>10</sup> Madeline's *Painted Gardens* will also exceed the very terms of the title; to become not 'gardens', but 'like' gardens, to be gardens' likenesses. And this is to say much more than a garden and a painting of a garden cannot be folded one over the other as a

form of equivalence.<sup>11</sup> It also recognises the chasm of difference that falls under the word 'like'. As such, Madeline defies the mimetic dreams of the nature painter by moving her garden further into the wilderness of non-equivalence. This stylised garden, with its slathers of coloured paint, satisfies the painter's synthetic dreams for *décor*, for an interior paradise, a long way from the garden itself.

<sup>1</sup> G.K. Chesterton, "On Lying in Bed, Tremendous Trifles", In *Defense of Sanity: The Best Essays of G.K Chesterton* (eds.) Dale Ahlquist, Joseph Pearce, Aiden Mackey, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011, p.42

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.41

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.39

<sup>4</sup> "Then the light of that white heaven broke upon my vision, that breadth of mere white which is indeed almost the definition of Paradise, since it means purity and also means freedom." Chesterton, p.40

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.39

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with artist.

<sup>8</sup> Madeline Kidd, *Mirror with Coloured Pieces*, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *This is not a Pipe* (trans. James Harkness), Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> "The relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax." Foucault, p.9

<sup>11</sup> Foucault