

# Spiralling with Alexandra Metcalf

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19/06/24 Words: [Izzy Bilkus](#)

**The artist's latest exhibition is a monument to madness, nostalgia and rebellious girlhood**

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Alexandra Metcalf photographed by Constantine // Spence

“It’s like an insanity spiral,” Alexandra Metcalf explains about the staircase centrepiece in her latest show at Ginny on Frederick. The antique sculpture curls down from a custom-built hole in the ceiling, serpentine and sinister as it sets the stage for some strange encounter. Are we invited upstairs or anxiously awaiting someone’s descent? “There’s movement. It’s not just an antique fetish of an object in the centre of the room,” Metcalf tells me. “It’s actually going somewhere.” If you look closer, the wooden stairs are punctured with an array of buttons. “They’re the strange droppings of the woman in the attic. I was interested in this character from *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.” The book examines Victorian literature from a feminist perspective, drawing its title from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, in which Rochester’s wife is declared insane and locked secretly in an attic by her husband.



Installation view of Alexandra Metcalf's '1st Edition' at Ginny on Frederick





Alexandra Metcalf, 'My Mind is Maya', 2024, wooden staircase, buttons



Alexandra Metcalf photographed by Constantine // Spence





Left: Alexandra Metcalf, 'P.O.P', 2024. Right: Alexandra Metcalf, 'Maladjustments' (detail), 2024.  
Photo: Constantine // Spence

Metcalf has built a captivating world from this trope. A blend of painting and sculpture, her show transforms the gallery into a time capsule and beguiling *mise en scène* that maps her character's journey through teenagehood and through the anxieties of domesticity as she evolves into the frantic woman cast away upstairs. The exhibition's title, '1st Edition' is taken from the the packaging of artist Harry Gordon's *Poster Dress* series from the 1960s. "It was the beginning of Mod culture and fast fashion," she says "They were like posters. I wanted to base the show around that. I then thought about a girl in the '60s putting them on her bedroom wall and how there was a fashion of rebellion at the time. I'm really interested in the aesthetics of rebellion and rebellious girlhood."

Metcalf's interest in rebellious girlhood takes multiple forms throughout the show. The psychosocial force of her work is revealed through subtle references like the staircase buttons and striped leg warmers in her paintings. "I like using buttons for their decorative elements and their history. Sewing and doing crafts were historically seen as a woman's role in the home. Here, the buttons are aggressively inlaid and hammered into wood – it's a rebellious act in contrast to the delicacy of sewing," Metcalf explains. "The first painting I made that featured these leg warmers was at Liste Art Fair with Ginny of Frederick. It felt like autofiction in a way. I like how the leg warmers' emo/alternative aesthetic ties into girlhood and teenagehood. With a lot of these works, I'm interested in the cycles of womanhood and the time when you start dressing yourself. That anxiety is what I'm interested in with image making and a girl's autonomy and how that looks aesthetically."





Photography by Constantine // Spence

Haunting, larger-than-life paintings of floating dresses, anonymous figures lurking under veils of paint, disconnected limbs suspended in space and murky patches of canvas that appear stained with rusty water – all set against kitschy pastel wallpaper – feed into this “anxiety” that Metcalf is interested in. “I initially wanted to layer lots of wallpaper and then peel it and stain the walls so it felt more eroded, like a fallout shelter. I like the muted colours of this paper. It has similar decorative motifs to the circles and stars that I’ve used in previous work. It gives the impression of a shade of blue even though there’s none in it. It’s moody and sad, but still reflective of the period. I was a stickler for it being actual vintage and not a reproduction. It’s from the ‘60s or ‘70s. The staircase is much older, probably from the 18th or 19th century, so that’s another note of spiralling back in time.”

“The hole in the ceiling above the staircase was a huge undertaking,” adds gallerist Freddie Powell, who has been friends with Metcalf since they met at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 2012. The pair began working together in 2016 when they set up an exhibition in a medieval-themed hotel room during their final year at university. “Half the ceiling was made in Berlin, the staircase comes from the south of France, the room is fully carpeted. It’s an important moment for Alex to show her works in a context that she’s built.” Metcalf notes the importance of having a supportive gallerist to cope with the demands of deadlines. “That’s the benefit of having a best friend as your gallerist because I’m allowed to text him at 4 am like, ‘pink or green!’”

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Alexandra Metcalf





Alexandra Metcalf, 'silent forms of interspecies panic', 2024





Alexandra Metcalf, 'blitzed, again', 2024

Nostalgia is a key component in '1st Edition' and Metcalf's work as a whole. Metcalf's interest in sentimentality, ornamentation and acts of female rebellion run throughout the show. "I get most of my inspiration from archiving old images and magazines" she says,

referencing sources like *Teen Vogue*'s 'A Room of My Own' series and Abigail Lane's 1995 *Bloody Wallpaper* installation "I'm also a huge trinket hoarder. I have a room full of broken pieces of things. I use a lot of found objects, so when I'm starting a sculpture I'll go to that room and play with things. Bigger ideas come from that. If an object hits me with interest then I keep it. I got really into collecting baby shoes from the '80s and '90s. I have a bin just of shoes and shoe horns. I also store a lot of rubber nipples and parts of chandeliers. Things that expand and explode; little nodules and curved fragments can all be used as a connector in a larger sculpture."

Metcalf has a gift for putting the pieces together, whether literally, in her sculptures, or figuratively through the carefully constructed world of the woman in the attic. Her invisible character haunts the gallery as she cycles through frenzied stages of womanhood and domestic angst. Madness, myth, history and horror intertwine to create an unnerving and nostalgic monument to female autonomy.





Alexandra Metcalf setting up her exhibition at Ginny on Frederick. Photography by Constantine // Spence

### Information

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'1st Edition' is on view at Ginny on Frederick until 20th July 2024. [@ginnyonfrederick](https://www.instagram.com/ginnyonfrederick)