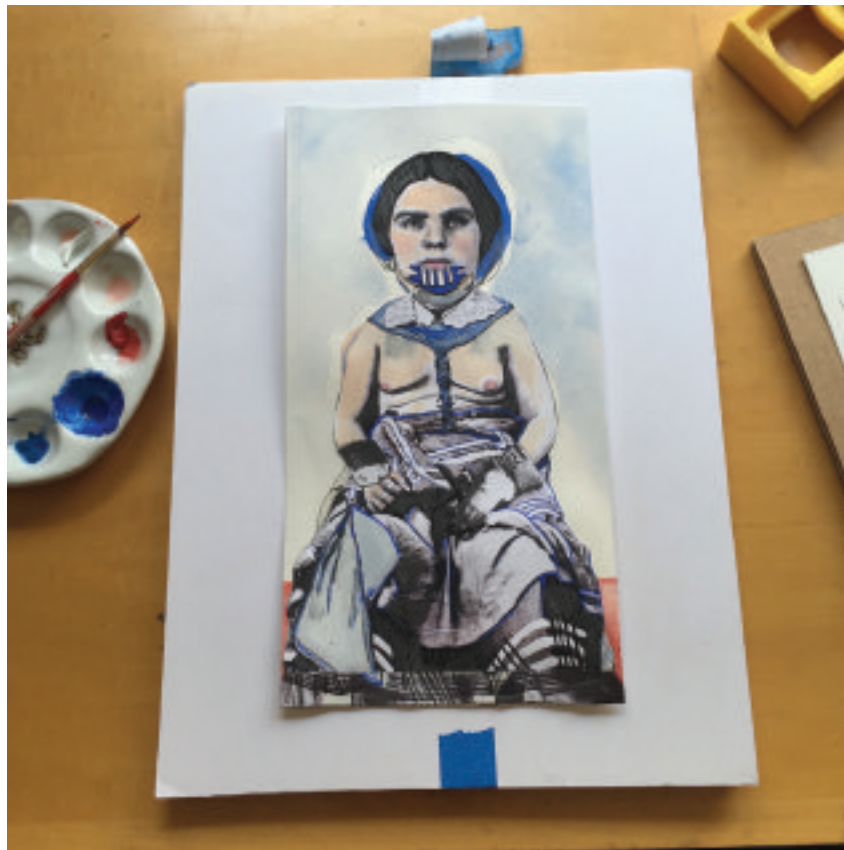


# THIN BLUE LINES

Margaret Meehan's works echo human history where the intimate collides with the monstrous, elucidating the systemic nature of otherness.



Margaret Meehan, *The Lawless Have Laws*, in progress. Archival photo collage, graphite, gouache, latex paint, wood, and Plexiglas.

Margaret Meehan uses the past to examine both the present and the future. Addressing politicized bodies that directly contest societal homogeneity through medical conditions, race, gender, or sexuality, she creates a tension between center and periphery. In the past she has drawn inspiration from female Civil War soldiers who presented as men in order to fight for their beliefs. Another body of work draws influence from the tale of a woman born with an atypical version of an atypical condition called Hypertrichosis that caused her to be completely covered in snow-white hair. In exploring the lives of these women, Meehan taps into the common fear of that which defies classification.

The majority of Meehan's different series addresses the stories of individuals—focusing on their humanity. She investigates the lives

they led, often uncovering forgotten narratives through meticulous research. On her blog (<http://upliketoast.blogspot.com>), one gains access to her methodology. Text, images, and videos co-mingle. We see the inspiration for multiple projects scattered across each page. Present in the most recent posts are accumulations of blues, including Elvis's rendition of "Blue Moon" and Agnes Martin's delicate blue-line work. In other posts she catalogues manifestations of the romantic/erotic narrative of being held captive by savages as seen in No Doubt's video for their song "Looking Hot" and in Erastus Dow Palmer's painting, *The White Captive*. These two lines of inquiry elaborate on her exhibition *Bye Bye Blue* at the Old Jail Art Center in Albany, Texas, and connect the project to different manifestations throughout time. Meehan is presenting the echoes of human history.

*Bye bye blues...bye bye blues*  
*Bells ring...birds sing*  
*Sun is shin-in'...no more pin-in'*  
*Just we two...smil-in' through*  
*Don't sigh...don't cry*  
*Bye bye blues*

Like a siren singing sailors to shipwreck, these haunting words drift through the Old Jail Arts Center, pulling you into Meehan's exhibition (though admittedly to a more positive end). Here, implementing ceramics, altered photographs, text, and sculpture, the artist explores the life of Olive Oatman. Oatman led an extraordinary life. Born in 1837 in Illinois, at the age of 14 her family was murdered by a Native American tribe. The only individuals to escape this fate were herself and her sister, who were enslaved, and one brother who was left for dead, but survived. Oatman was later sold to the Mojave tribe, and conflicting stories arise here, some stating she continued to be a slave, while others posit that she was a respected member of the tribe's society. A few years later she was ransomed back to white society, full of unusual stories and marked by a bright blue tattoo on her chin.

Meehan weaves disparate aspects of Oatman's life into her work. An elegant black branch with blue-dyed horsehairs cascading from it evokes her time living among the Mojave. On the facing wall, a series of altered vintage photographs of women with blue patterns painted on them speaks to a later stage in her life. Each piece is intimate. They lack the trappings of societal oddity that made Oatman a celebrity. Meehan's objects and images create a dialogue with the space they are housed in—a jail cell and the namesake of the institution. It is as if Oatman herself is imprisoned for her inability to be labeled, thus confining her legacy.

In all of Meehan's works, her curiosities are always deeply human. Her subjects do not quite fit the framework of what is expected in society. She recreates the worlds of these individuals through personal narratives. As a result, we become more aware of the dictates of society and the codified system of Othering.

In Meehan's studio, walls are covered in images—ranging from Gloria Steinem holding a poster bearing the words “we shall overcome,” to prominent New York architects in the 1930s dressed as their most iconic creations. Her inspirational images evoke the avant-garde and historical moments that still appear fresh and relevant today. The struggles and passions of generations past still resonate. Nearby sit numerous stacks of books. Recent reads include *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* and *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*.

Meehan's works do not function as historical record. For the artist, history is suspect—written by those in positions of power and distorted over time. She sees history as victim to the same pitfalls as human memory. We adapt these narratives to reflect our current context. As a result, for all of her historical research, the work remains open and intentionally mutable, as if to say what happened in the past could similarly happen today. **P**



Above: Margaret Meehan, *Bye Bye Blue*, 2016, in progress, studio detail.  
 Below: Margaret Meehan's studio, 2016.