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## W is for Wallpaper

Wallpaper is understood by everyone. Bar the mini-generation of the mid-90's (when neutral tones and make-over DIY stripped our walls of paper in favour of flat, quickly painted colour) we have all grown-up with wallpaper and are familiar with its place in interior decoration and its variety of character.

There is indeed a long and noble history to the field. Originally substituting tapestry, painted walls or panelling, wallpaper developed at the end 15th century. Earliest examples were hand painted or stencilled, with block printing and flocking arriving later. Trends have shifted from Chinese-made hand-painted papers of the 17th century (distinct in their absence of repetitive design and deliberately unique in detailing), through the heavy classical patterning of Williams Morris in the 19th century, to the bold, often garish, standards of the 1960s and 70s.

*W is for Wallpaper* is timely in marking a popular resurgence of interest in the capacity of wallpaper to transform our living (and increasingly, working) environments and the show brings together a rich variety of contemporary voices in the genre, some specialists, some purveyors of wider portfolio practices.

Curation is sophisticated with graceful lengths of unrolled paper grouped into gentle stories set against dramatic accents soaring up through the space. Just two of the designs, Mini Moderns' *Whitby*, 2015, and Jonny Hannah for St. Jude's *The Darktown Billet-Doux*, 2014, are hung in the traditional manner, pasted to the gallery walls, reminding us of the context of what we are seeing. There are small and large-scale repeats and single units, while mediums include a variety of papers and fabrics, and techniques ranging from direct screen-printing, digital print and embroidery, to laser cutting and appliqué.

Timorous Beasties do what they do best presenting us with clever subversion, perhaps the bravest challenge to the genre in *Omni Splatt*, 2015. Here a digital 'mirror print' of bruising reds, oranges and blues is layered with units of hand screen-printed drips in striking black and gold. This blends old and new technologies and plays with our optical understanding of what we see delivering painterly values that set it aside from the mass-produced vocabulary of part of its production. *Indie Wood*, 2015, meanwhile, is a charming and enticingly gilded 'Tree of Jove' filled with richly drawn flora and fauna, bold in its scale of 10metre repeat.

Playful character and voice are exemplified by Jon Burgerman's trademark doodle approach in *Burger Mash*, 2009, with carefully repeating comic drawing artfully part-filled with felt-tip colour out of repeat. Eley Kishimoto's *Monster Skin*, 2013, nods at childlike simplicity in its black scalloped scales on blue-grey, while *Sun Loving Bollards*, 2013, champions their hand in capturing our world in simple graphics and candy colour.

Process is very much a part of all we see. The visible overlap in the lino prints of octogenarian wallpaper legend, Marthe Armitage's *Geranium*, 1985, and *Jugs*, 2005, and newcomer Claire Florey-Hitchcox's *Town and Country*, 2014, play with the unique irregularities and tonal character of tools and technique. Discreet elements of surprise are also revealed in the light with Cuthom's digitally embroidered *New Cross*, 2015, employing matt thread material on a semi-gloss ground, while George Malycky's *Crystal* designs, 2014, exploit the visual contrast of print mediums in plain, foiled and flocked surfaces.

Physical texture also finds its way into this show with the classic *In the White Room*, 2001, from Tracy Kendall, pioneer of non-flat papers. The confidently stitched pieces of white on white, which work with light and shadow, speak of the 'hand' in making, and of the greater potentiality for surface on walls and beyond.

So what do we learn about contemporary values in wallpaper design? It is perhaps appropriate that in the accompanying catalogue essay, Teleri Lloyd-Jones references Dickens' satirical take on 19th century good taste, and the then established ideas of how we *should* decorate our homes. Things have certainly changed. In our postmodern world we dwell comfortably with a bricolage of surfaces and shapes, newly confident of colour and pattern, consciously offsetting with select pieces of furniture and degrees of pared-down aesthetic. While some might not want to live with many of the papers exhibited (at least not within expansive walls of coverage), we can and should delight in the welcome diversity of rethinking and making of what is hung on our walls.