

How I came to Morris

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As an artist I have been working with Morris wallpaper, fabric and more recently Kelmscott book design pretty consistently for eighteen years. I became aware of Morris by a fairly familiar route, or rather two routes. The first was through an awareness of Morris' designs through their popular if debased dissemination, what I have later called Morris Kitsch: tea towels, mugs, note paper, etc, as well as mass-produced wallpapers and fabrics. The second route was through reading EP Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, as I was interested in the history of the Left in Britain. Thompson's book gave me an understanding of the development and importance of Morris' political thought and activism. It was these two parallel routes or rather parts of Morris' work that I began to consider when I first started reworking his designs alongside doing some fairly extensive reading of the quite significant bibliography on Morris. At that point I didn't have an understanding of the relationship between Morris the designer and Morris' politics; they even seemed rather contradictory.

My interest in Morris' designs also stemmed from my earlier work on fabrics. I first bought fabrics to paint on as grounds during residencies in Nebraska and Alberta where the fabrics were particular to the place – Mid-West imagery and Canadian tourist tea towels, respectively. I found it helpful to work off a surface that already existed, as it provided a starting point. On returning to London I looked for materials which were English and articulated something of the context of where they were from. In John Lewis I bought one and a half metres of Morris' iconic Fruit or Pomegranate fabric. I stretched the fabric and pondered.

Morris' fabrics are everywhere in England, cloying, suffocating and fussy. In their mass-produced form they decorate the middle class semis of suburbia and country house alike, providing a cheap simulacra of Arts & Crafts living. Although in his own time Morris'



Left: David Mabb, *Pomegranate*, mixed media on fabric, 48" x 66" 1998

design represented a radical break with Empire Style and Neo-Gothic interior design, to me, as a modernist with an interest in Russian Constructivism and Bauhaus design, it seemed very conservative. In a struggle to make sense of it, I started to destroy the pattern with materials I had left in the studio, pouring resin, rubbing gold leaf, dripping varnish and smearing paint. The painting was lying flat on the floor; a bit like a Jackson Pollock drip painting, and like Pollock I walked on it, degrading it further. I was so successful in ruining Morris' design, wiping out its bourgeois stuffiness, that when I stood the painting up to look at it, the design had virtually disappeared. Realising that I had gone too far (to show that something has been taken away it's necessary to represent at least a

trace of what was there) I tried to get rid of some of the mess. But the paint and resin had dried and couldn't be wiped, scraped or sanded off or in any way easily removed. Now the Morris design needed rescuing from its obliteration. I started painting, with white oil, over the mess and around what was left of the shapes of the twigs, leaves, fruits and flowers, which enabled the pattern to become visible again, silhouetted against the white, but now filled with messy residue.

By accident, I had created the process of removing parts of Morris' designs and juxtaposing them with new elements to alter and change their meaning. This process of inclusion and exclusion, selection and deselection enabled a rethinking and transformation of

Morris' designs. In my subsequent work I have painted out elements of Morris' designs, bringing them into conjunction with other imagery to produce dialectical relationships with moments from the history of design, architecture and painting. These dialectical images (to paraphrase Walter Benjamin) allow the past to come together in a flash with the now to form new constellations, enabling us to reimagine the future. This possibility articulates the link between the two parts of Morris, his designs now often reproduced as kitsch and his later politics as discussed by EP Thompson.

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