

# THE DECORATING BUSINESS

DAVID MABB

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OAKVILLE GALLERIES

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*William Morris*

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DAVID MABB

October 7 – November 26, 2000

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## FOREWORD

Viewed in the context of Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, David Mabb's work is enriched by the architectural environment of Gairloch, a house built in the style of the Arts and Crafts period. With this installation, Mabb makes us look at the history of representation in painting and, through the particular associations he establishes, he provokes discussions that shed light on our own culture.

Oakville Galleries is indebted to David Mabb for this remarkable exhibition. The exhibition catalogue includes a sensitive introduction by Marnie Fleming, Oakville Galleries' Curator of Contemporary Art, a witty text by Steve Edwards and a thoughtful project by Matthew Higgs—all of whom make an important contribution to the interpretation of Mabb's oeuvre. I thank them warmly.

In addition, I wish to recognize the participation of all the staff at Oakville Galleries and, in particular, Shannon Anderson, who had to deal with the demands of an international exhibition in her new role as exhibition coordinator.

Oakville Galleries acknowledges the financial contribution of The Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, the Department of Visual Arts, Goldsmiths College, University of London and The British Council, without which this exhibition would not have been possible.

**Francine Périnet**

*Director*

## INTRODUCTION

### DAVID MABB: THE DECORATING BUSINESS

I know that William Morris (1834–1896) never came to Oakville, nor did he live long enough to see the patrician homes along Lakeshore Road. But I like to think that, if he had, and had glanced into the windows of such a home in the 1920s, he might well have glimpsed some wallpapers and textiles of his own design. He would, no doubt, have felt right at home with the pseudo Arts and Crafts estate and gardens of Gairloch and the carved grapevine frieze work of the “dining room.” After all, it was Morris who, some 50 years before Gairloch was built in 1922, had helped to lay the foundations for the Arts and Crafts Movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This aesthetic movement was intent on the re-creation of hand-made industry at the apex of the Industrial Revolution. For thinkers such as Morris and the theorist John Ruskin, a work of art had to be the result of a high moral intention and craft; since the machine had no conscience it was incapable of producing art. Morris would say, “like fire, machinery is a good servant and a bad master.”

Whether Morris would have felt equally at home in the company of the wealthy and conservative-minded owners of Gairloch (or they with him) is, however, less certain. Morris led protest marches, expounded socialism at street corner meetings, helped found the Socialist League and the Hammersmith Socialist Society, in addition to writing political treatises, poetry and novels. He railed against the Industrial Revolution’s dehumanization of mankind and believed that a market economy alienates human

beings from their work, from each other and from themselves. Morris exerted an immense influence on the artistic and political developments of his time by campaigning to bring art to the people and to better their social conditions. “For a socialist, a house, a knife, a cup, a steam engine, must be either a work of art, or a denial of art.” There was no split between Morris the socialist and Morris of the hand-printed, hand-woven, hand-dyed textiles, printed books, wallpaper and furniture.

I can imagine a bearded William Morris peeking into the leaded pane windows of Gairloch (in the year 2000 no longer a home but a public art gallery) and casting his eye over the installation of British artist, David Mabb. I am sure that, not only would he find in Mabb an artist sympathetic to his vision, but that he would immediately recognize his own design work—now altered, obliterated and changed. He likely would give Mabb an approving nod for re-working his now cloyingly commercialized and mass-produced works.

From the moment I met David Mabb and saw the work in his studio in London, England, I recognized the potential for an installation at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens. I have to say that one of the great pleasures of my job as a curator is the opportunity to enter into an exhilarating exchange with an artist like Mabb. Aside from the fact that his work is contentious, rigorous, demanding and downright beautiful, I knew immediately that it would resonate within the confines of the former estate home. Gairloch was built as a summer home that suggested “Englishness” in the style of the Arts and Crafts movement. With details such as the aforementioned hand-carved grapevine frieze, I knew Mabb’s paintings would “act-out” the social relations inherent in such a location to prompt memory, association and imagination.

During that first visit to London, Mabb demonstrated the development of his work. He started by showing me images that appropriated Robert Delaunay’s paintings of the Eiffel Tower but substituted Tatlin’s tower (the *Monument to the Third International*) in its place. He was particularly interested in how notions of class become encoded in painting and photography.

Following this series, he secured a couple of artist-in-residence projects in the North American mid-west—one in Omaha, Nebraska (1994) and the other in Banff, Alberta (1997). Positioning himself as a cultural tourist, he worked with local fabric that referenced the history of the place. In Omaha, he scavenged fabric shops that sold materials depicting cowboys and Indians, and then overpainted them, quoting the splatters and drips of American Abstract Expressionism. This project juxtaposed one set of myth-making language against another. Then, while in Banff, he thought that the tea towels sold in souvenir shops, when assembled and arranged, were evocative of maps. So again, he worked with the explicit imagery of the towels by overlaying a painted sign system of a map, as if the whole work was a massive map of Canada seen from a great height.

After returning to England, Mabb continued working with textiles but thought it necessary to investigate myths and traditions closer to home. In particular, he was looking for a subject like the Delaunay/Tatlin project to further explore and complement his commitment to ideas of utopian politics in art. He found that an element of the British culture industry, centred around the designs of nineteenth century designer William Morris, problematized aspects of tradition and identity. All too often it seemed to him that this “tradition” easily congealed into a static essence that simply was not called into question. The mass produced Morris designs now found on notebooks,

greeting cards and coffee mugs are a far cry from the effect intended by the socialist founder of an aesthetic movement whose purpose was the re-creation of a hand-made industry. Mabb felt Morris's designs and the politics they embraced were subjects worthy of his further scrutiny. In Steve Edward's essay, *The Trouble With Morris*, which follows, the author demonstrates Mabb's "dialectical dance" with this nineteenth century designer.

Following my initial visit to London, I invited Mabb to come to Oakville so that he could respond to Gairloch and begin plans for an exhibition appropriately called *The Decorating Business*. For Mabb, this exhibition is a means to explore ways of opening up the art of William Morris to new interpretations. He uses reproductions of Morris's textile and wallpaper designs as a starting point but then adds a new twist. He alters, obliterates and overpaints the Morris design with squares of white, black and red, isolating selected aspects of the design—for example a single floral or fruit motif. The resulting works are evocative of other eras such as Russian Constructivism, or occasionally, the "flower-power" aesthetics of Pop Art.

It is as if Morris's Arts and Crafts movement has converged with the utopian project of Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935). This Russian artist took cubist forms to their logical conclusion of absolute geometric abstraction. According to Malevich, "... in the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form..." This was another utopian period in art history when revolutionary artistic and political movements became fused by the early years of the Russian Revolution.

In Mabb's conflation of aesthetic histories there is both intelligence and audacity. Not only is it the look or style of these movements that interests him, but also the issues of ideology,

aesthetics and politics which they pose. He allows his paintings and wallpaper installations to traverse spaces of contradiction that characterize the dilemmas and possibilities of painting.

Mabb is aware of the diminished role of painting within late-capitalist culture. The conceptions of bourgeois individualism, authenticity associated with the painterly gesture, and the commodity status of paintings as singular objects, have been argued over endlessly during the last twenty years. But, while the work acknowledges these debates (and especially strategies of appropriation), Mabb has continued to use paint and canvas in an attempt to open new possibilities for a medium which has been labelled "bankrupt," or even "dead."

In Mabb's installation *The Decorating Business*, Morris and Malevich oscillate and intersect, while new associations freely emerge. In occupying this in-between realm, Mabb emphasizes both the contingent nature of representation and the paradigms that have shaped painting. He sets up a complex dialogue around the history of painting, the institutions it inhabits and the political processes through which paintings are produced and viewed. Seen in the context of the Oakville estate, the painting and the wallpaper installation take on an extraordinary richness. The living quarters of Gairloch are now enlivened with stimulating ideas and debate—a place where Mabb feels questions concerning art and politics need to be asked.

**Marnie Fleming**

*Curator of Contemporary Art*

## THE TROUBLE WITH MORRIS

William Morris is a problem. At least he is a problem for those English radicals interested in modern art. In England Morris is everywhere. Exhibitions are the least of it. Morris's classic designs have become a staple of domestic furnishings: cushions are covered in *Bird*; curtains made from *Pomegranate*; sofas from *Strawberry Thief*. Walls appear smothered in *Honeysuckle*. Almost any fabric available to be printed on—from tea towels to bedding—has been Morrised. Domestic interiors seem to be drowning under the weight of his fussy beauty. This is also the Morris of the export industries that circulate his designs, alongside Shakespeare and the Cotswolds, as consumable signs of a pleasant England that never was.

In the world of the new middle class Morris goes with the National Trust, restored Victorian houses, Liberty carrier bags, holidays in France... This is, admittedly, only a section of the English middle class—the young and thrusting have recently developed a taste for loft-living and minimalism, as if carefully arranged storage could provide a solution to commodity culture. (Flush MDF cupboards seem a perfect homology for the prevailing cynicism that would pack capitalism out of sight.) But despite the fashion for Eames chrome and leather, or Panton plastic, there is no escaping the Morris industry: his characteristically intricate designs are to be found on coffee mugs, diaries, stationary and the rest. This is to say that Morris has become prim and proper. Worst of all he has become tasteful. No self-respecting modern artist would go anywhere near this stuff.

But then there is the other Morris who wrote *News from*

*Nowhere and Pilgrims of Hope*; who funded and edited *Commonweal*; the Morris of the Social Democratic Federation, the Socialist League and the Hammersmith Socialist Society. This second Morris—the one who was a Marxist agitator—hated not just industrial society but capitalism. This Morris despised his world not just because it was ugly, but also because it was saturated with inequality and exploitation. It is one of his enduring features that he was so capable of despising and hating. In a famous essay on the nature of English society Perry Anderson argued that England was without a native Marxism: it was crucial to his argument that there had been no significant English Marxist thinker<sup>1</sup>. In response to provocations from E.P. Thompson, Anderson was forced to reassess this position and conceded that he had occluded the work of Morris.<sup>2</sup> As Thompson, John Goode and others have argued, Morris's conception of utopian desire and romantic refusal of the drab Victorian world gave a new impetus to social change, while his concern with the environment, and interest in art as a model of unalienated labour, brought new and vital impulses to Marxism.<sup>3</sup> Morris towers over English socialism.

Morris, however, believed that he was one person rather than two. For him the design work formed part of his larger project of 'educating desire'. Beauty was intended to hollow out Victorian society. Beauty was to march, hand-in-hand with socialism, heroically into the future and remake the world. Utopia and beauty exist in Morris, in a tense relation to actually existing ugliness. In a fascinating passage T.W. Adorno argued that kitsch was not a form of ugliness.<sup>4</sup> Rather, he suggested, kitsch was a kind of 'purified beauty'. Kitsch is that form of beauty that has been purged of its moment of determinate ugliness. The Morris industries have succeeded in turning his work into kitsch by severing his connection to the ugly. The repose and calm in his

work are separated from his nervous energy, so that the textiles figure a world of taste and ease in 'now time'. In important ways the path for the Morris industries was paved by the tradition of English Labourism. This tradition, rooted in the trade union bureaucracy, drew its authority from a fictionalised male working class. Its values were collective responsibility and state run utilities, outdoor rambles and the traditional pub, woolly jumpers and folk music. As a political strategy it was committed to accommodating to the conservative values of the electorate, and treating the state as a neutral vehicle for change. Things were to be taken over as they were. The intellectual articulations of Labourism in Orwell, Priestley, and *Picture Post*, suggested that what was principally wrong with British society was that it was run by a self-serving old guard. Decent people, in contrast, would govern decently in the interests of all.

Labourism took Morris as one of its standard bearers but it also excised his fierce hatred of capitalism and his vision of social conflict. *News From Nowhere* became, for these people, an emblem of a distant future and a signifier of English reasonableness. What had to be conveniently forgotten was this text's discussion of revolutionary strategy, its advocacy of insurrectionary violence, and Morris's serious commitment to the self-determination of working people. For much of the twentieth century the English Left was dominated by this anti-modernist Labourism. More recently this formation has itself lost out in the battle for socialist hegemony to a group of modernising technocrats. For these newly dominant 'designer socialists' committed to managing capitalism, the problem of Morris does not even exist. He has been consigned to the past and handed over to the polite.

For David Mabb, an artist working in the wake of modern-

ism and an English socialist, this history is difficult to manage. Morris appears vital and unavailable, respected and loathed, desired and detested, so near and yet too far. So what to do with Morris? In one of those strange dialectical switchbacks of history Morris, the champion of handicraft, has become, in the hands of the kitsch industries, an industrial product. In Mabb's paintings this reversal is registered in the manufacturer's colour coding that runs along the edge of the fabric. Mabb reasserts the tradition of Morris in the face of this industrialization by producing hand-worked images over the industrial form. But there is more going on in these works than this. If the Morris industry makes these designs 'nice', the first of these paintings I saw in Mabb's studio was, in contrast, smeared with gunk and goo. In this work—*Pomegranate*—puddles of sticky stuff had been poured onto the fabric, making it nasty, destroying imagery that has become pallid and tasteful. It was an awkward and unappealing painting, but this was its strength. It was, I take it, a work of ruination, meant to make Morris dubious again. In order to distance Morris from the cloying world of middle-class pleasantness he would have to be spoiled and ugliness once more internalised into the image. Redone in this manner Morris could, again, take his position in the battle against English good taste. *Pomegranate* revels in an infantile strategy of insult and debasement—what comes to mind here is the disgusting calling card that some burglars delight in leaving on the (*Strawberry Thief*) sofa. *Pomegranate* in Mabb's hands became scandalous and philistine. Beauty, it would seem, had to be compromised or contaminated before the work could begin. The paintings that emerged after *Pomegranate* are cooler and apparently more detached. Many of them—look at *Sweet Briar Leaves* or *Fruit* or *Red Rose*—could even be said to be pleasing to the eye.

There is a palpable anxiety at work in the eight paintings that make up *The Decorating Business*. Mabb appears ill at ease with Morris's prettiness, he seems to want to reassert a modernist simplicity in the face of all that fuss and decoration. These paintings neurotically strive to mask out what Walter Benjamin called the 'phantasmagoria of the interior'. In these works the comfortable Morris of English taste is wiped clean or obliterated. *White Fruit* is the symptomatic painting in this regard: with its overt attempt to veil Morris's pattern-making beneath a skein of white paint. But the very translucence of the pigment in this painting stands as testimony to a work of negation. *White Fruit* struggles with its own desire for Morris. In the other works a single motif, or elementary combination of motifs, is selected to draw out a kind of systematic modernist repetition from Morris. In some of the paintings — *Lily* and *Sweet Briar Flowers*—the motif seems to drift across a ground from the left edge, in others these forms spread out from this ground to rejoin the decorative scheme.

The internal square format, a square within a square, provides the basic compositional structure for all of these works. This compositional device points to the exemplary modernist figure of Kazimir Malevich, whose *Black Square* of c.1913 stands as one powerful endgame strategy in the story of modern art. Mabb's colour choices explicitly work with this reference. Two works introduce a coloured square into the field of Morris's fabric: *Golden Lily* stands in relation to the *Black Square*, as *Red Rose* does to *Red Square (Peasant Woman, Suprematism)* of 1915. The eight paintings in the exhibition can all be seen as bizarre versions (that is, if anything can be thought of as more bizarre than Malevich's own canvas) of the 1918 *White Square on White*. The high priest of Suprematism is here brought up against the champion of craft revival. It is difficult to imagine a weirder conflation

of worlds than this meeting of Malevich with Morris. This staging of a confrontation between two contradictory systems of representation is a manoeuvre that Mabb has learned from the work of Art & Language. As two cultural systems come into contact meaning spills and swirls around. Both halves of the equation are put under stress, while 'third meanings' rise to the surface.

While the paintings all seem to work with the figure of Malevich, the video—*A Closer Look at the Life and Work of William Morris*—evokes Richard Paul Lohse, or even (and perhaps this is to the point) Ben Nicholson of 1936 and '37. In this piece Morris's imagery literally transmogrifies into geometric abstraction. But at the same time this abstract image metamorphoses into Morris's elaborate textile design. Morris is confronted, in this piece, with a shimmering modernist beauty. Virtual space is an exemplary site for this kind of utopian meeting. The pixels at one moment mirror the colour coding of the fabric, and at the next transform into the warp and weft of the textile. The whole four minutes and ten seconds of the video is presided over by a Russian rendition of the *Internationale*; here it seems as if a militant class politics provides the condition for this fusion. This work, like the paintings, seems intent on imagining, or creating, a Morris who is other than himself. If Anderson was mistaken in passing over Morris, there is definitely a point to be made about the absence of an English tradition of modernist Marxism. Paris and Berlin, Prague and Moscow all played host to important work in this idiom. It is surely significant that the strongest works of English modernism, Nicholson amongst them, were produced not in London but in St. Ives. Perhaps Mabb is searching for the space left by the absence of an English modernism, dreaming, as it were, of an Anglicized Malevich. Maybe these works toy with the idea of a Malevich possessed of Morris's politics, just as they

posit a Morris the abstract painter.<sup>5</sup> This collision, or conflation, produces a generative imaginary space. These are rare utopian images.

But however much Mabb tries to veil these fabrics, to mask out the kitsch, or to impose abstraction over their surface, pattern breaks out. Morris's decorative designs spread out from under the painted square filling the space where there should be only blank canvas. The briars seem literally to be growing over the abstraction, tangling it in thorns and choking it. To shift the metaphor, an island of modernism exists here in a sea of decoration. The square is dragged down into deep space, while strange amoebic forms in, for instance, *Honeysuckle*, float over its surface. In *Golden Lily* the *Black Square* fills up with pattern, suggesting one of the recurring nightmares of modernism as abstraction is engulfed in decorative stuff and absorbed back into it. In Mabb's paintings the *horror vacui* of modernity returns to haunt abstraction. In western aesthetic thought decoration and the decorative have long been associated with women, workers, and so-called 'primitive' peoples. This 'simplistic' taste for decoration has, in one powerful modernist account, been counterposed to the colour white, understood to represent a form of spiritual purity or process of mental abstraction.<sup>6</sup> (On this reading there is no more radical artist than Henri Matisse.) Mabb's paintings offer no easy victories on this score. The decorative is denied and yet reasserts itself. A vapid English taste is masked over, while, at the same time, pattern plays havoc with the transcendental claims of modernist abstraction. It is ultimately impossible to decide in these works whether abstraction or decoration holds the upper hand. Even in *White Fruit* the forms of *Pomegranate* assert themselves through the paint. Decoration and abstraction here hold each other hostage.

Once a confrontation of this kind is staged there is no knowing what might emerge. None of these paintings reveals this possibility so much as *Fruit Twigs*. The design worked over here is *Pomegranate*, surely one of Morris's most powerful statements of the utopian figure of abundance. Abundance is one of the key themes of utopian thought and occupies a central place in *News from Nowhere*. *Pomegranate* depicts the utopian society of the future, in which scarcity and the economics of survival have been vanquished, in the form of an oriental garden. Here the ripe pomegranates present themselves to the beholder as a delicious foodstuff that does not require human labour. All we need to do is stretch out our hand and nature will provide for us.<sup>7</sup> In this Morris reaches back to the Xenia painted on the walls of Pompeii. The pictorial intelligence at work here entails setting a system of possibilities in place. Once *Pomegranate* has been selected a series of options present themselves. The effects that result can be startlingly different: in *Fruit* (which works the same design) the pomegranates remain to the fore, but in *Fruit Twigs* winter has drawn in and stripped the garden of its delights. The snow has fallen leaving the branches barren; in this harsh environment pleasure gives way to toil, and ease to survival. In *Fruit Twigs* the world of abundance has been suspended. This is as compelling an image of the blockage of Morris's utopia as anything that I know. In all of these paintings Mabb choreographs a dialectical dance around the histories of Morris's assimilation into kitsch and provides some contemporary ways of thinking about the 'education of desire'. I suspect that Morris is still unusable for modern artists but these strategies represent an attempt to come to terms with the problem that his work goes on posing.

Steve Edwards

## Notes

- 1 Perry Anderson, 'Components of a National Culture', *Student Power: Problems, Diagnosis, Action*, Alexander Cockburn and Robin Blackburn eds, Penguin, 1969, pp. 214–84.
- 2 Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, Verso, 1980. Anderson was responding, amongst other things, to Thompson's 'The Peculiarities of the English', *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays*, Merlin, 1978, pp. 35–91, and his monumental *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*, Pantheon Books, 1976.
- 3 Thompson, *William Morris*, op. cit.; John Goode, 'William Morris and the Dream of Revolution', in J. Lucas ed., *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, Methuen, 1971.
- 4 T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 71.
- 5 Mabb has often worked with the imagery of the Soviet avant-garde as a token for a politicised modernism. See: John Roberts, *History Painting, Politics and the Avant-Garde: an Essay on David Mabb's Unrealised Project Series*, Holden Gallery, Metropolitan Galleries Manchester, 1993.
- 6 For arguments concerning decoration and purity see: Mark Wigley, *White Walls and Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*, MIT, 1995; Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Methuen, 1987; David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, Reaktion Books, 2000.
- 7 This model of fecundity does suggest that Morris's utopia is gendered feminine.





Previous Spread: Installation view

Above: *Willow*, 2000, acrylic on wallpaper

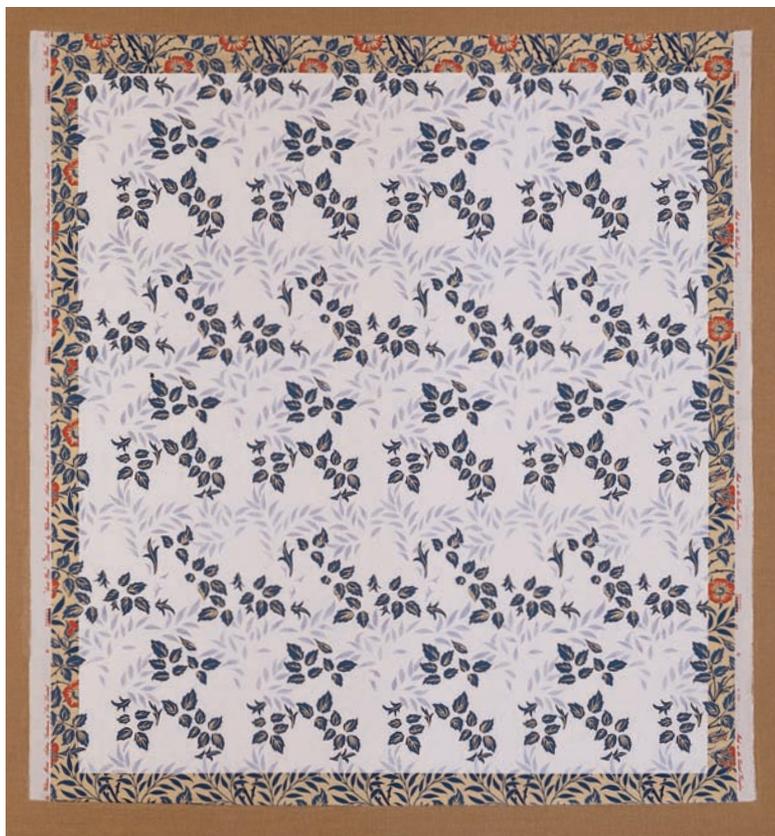


Above: *Honeysuckle*, 1999, acrylic paint on fabric

Over: *Honeysuckle* (detail), 1999, acrylic paint on fabric



*Wharfedale & Sons Limited.*



Above: *Sweet Briar Leaves*, 1999–2000, acrylic paint on fabric



Right: *Sweet Briar Leaves* (detail), 1999–2000, acrylic paint on fabric



*Sweet Briar Flowers*, 1999, acrylic paint on fabric



Above: *Fruit*, 1999–2000, acrylic paint on fabric  
Collection of Oakville Galleries

Over: Installation view





*Large Fruit*, 1999, acrylic paint on fabric



*White Fruit*, 1999, acrylic paint on fabric



*Fruit Twigs*, 1999, acrylic paint on fabric



*Black Lily*, 2000, acrylic on wallpaper



*Lily*, 1999, acrylic paint on fabric



*A Closer Look at the Life and Work of William Morris*, 2000, video still

DAVID MABB: 20 QUESTIONS —  
A PROJECT BY MATTHEW HIGGS

*The typical one-to-one format of an interview invariably reveals as much about the subjectivity of the interviewer as it does about its subject. In an attempt both to democratise the role of the interrogator and hopefully to broaden the scope of the interview, 20 individuals<sup>1</sup> —all of whom have had either a professional or personal relationship with David Mabb— were each invited to pose him a single question. What follows are Mabb's responses.*

**Janet Hodgson:** I know that your brother is also an artist, do you come from an artistic family and in what ways do you think that your background has affected your practice?

**David Mabb:** Yes he is an artist, but I don't come from an artistic family. I suppose my background has affected me in lots of ways. My parents were working class people who had middle class aspirations. Ultimately, I think not coming from an artistic, educated or a wealthy background has informed my politics, in the sense that I can't really forget where I come from and I have to deal with that. I often wonder though how I ended up being an artist, because there was nothing artistic whatsoever in my family background. I guess the only thing that I can put it down to—and this goes back to my reading Winnicott years ago when I was a student—is a notion of play. My mother always encouraged both my brother and myself to play, we were always allowed to make a mess and create things, and that sense of creative play has always stayed with me.

**Stephen Snoddy:** What is your earliest memory of a political event that affected the way you thought about life?

**David Mabb:** Oh Christ! Well the big one for me would be the Miner's Strike in Britain in 1984, but there must have been events before that.

**Matthew Higgs:** I guess for me it was the period just after punk rock, around 1979, when organisations such as Rock Against Racism, CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) and the Anti Nazi League began to impact upon my life.

**David Mabb:** I can remember my art teacher showing us pictures of the Sex Pistols in *The Sun* newspaper in 1976. I would have been about 16. So my first introduction to punk was through my art teacher! So yeah punk was important. 'Anarchy in the UK'. I definitely identified with those ideas back then, but I am still trying to think if there were specific political events before that that made me become sympathetic to political or rebellious ideas, and there must be but I can't for the life of me think of them.

**Matthew Higgs:** Maybe I could add to Janet Hodgson's question: Were your family in any way political?

**David Mabb:** Only in the sense that they sat on the fence over absolutely everything. They were terrified of extremism in the broadest sense. So, no, not at all.

**Matthew Higgs:** How did the Miner's Strike, at that time in the mid-1980s, relate to your working practice?

**David Mabb:** I don't think I ever made any work that related directly to the Miner's Strike. The strike took place during

Margaret Thatcher's regime. It was a strike that divided the country. It polarised everybody in terms of how one related to that struggle. And my beginning to get involved with that situation was really significant to me and really defined for me an understanding of class politics, which I don't think I really had before. And that legacy of holding on to a notion of class—which has been terribly unfashionable for the last decade—has, I think, in many ways, isolated me. But it is also the Miner's Strike, in consolidating that position theoretically, that has impacted upon my work right up to the present.

**Matthew Higgs:** Stephen also asked how politics affected your life. Has the work you have been making always been essentially 'political' or was there a point when you made a conscious decision to make essentially 'political' work?

**David Mabb:** Yes there was. I would have been about 28. I made a series of paintings called *Elegies to the Third International*, which I almost stumbled across doing by accident. I initially did just one and then the writer John Roberts suggested that I do a series of them. That was 1988, and before then—when I was a student—my work was largely aesthetic or formalist, in the tradition of 1980s British sculpture. So I guess I was relatively quite old before I embarked on this course of action, if you like.

**Bryan Biggs:** Is it possible to create a political art for today, and if so, do you see your work as attempting to do this, and how?

**David Mabb:** Yes I do. But then I tend to think that all art is fairly political. But I also think that art should admit its politics, that it should be self-reflexive, it should acknowledge its history, it should acknowledge where it comes from ideologically. So then the questions arise 'What is the ideology of the work?'

‘What are the questions that it is asking?’, ‘What are the problems that it is confronting?’. So more than being ‘possible’ I think that it is essential to create political work. I think it is what needs doing, rather than pretending that it’s not there, which is what is so dissatisfying about a lot of work: that it doesn’t acknowledge its politics, that it has a politics without necessarily being aware of it.

**Colin Darke:** Is contemporary left-wing art located in the past, the present or the future?

**David Mabb:** I don’t really know what contemporary left-wing art would be, partly because what constitutes the ‘left’ is always in a state of flux. And that dilemma isn’t just something that is received by artists—it is something that artists are involved in generating. So the idea of protest and the idea of a leftist critique is constantly shifting. What constitutes being ‘left’ is moving all the time. It’s contingent, not fixed.

**Terry Atkinson:** Even if you think the art of the future will, or should, continue to look like the art of the past, do you think it will continue to function like the art of the past?

**David Mabb:** Well I don’t think the art of the future will continue to look like the art of the past primarily because the development in technology is shifting constantly. Painting used to be the ultimate art form, yet now it is simply just another way of making art. It has lost its elevation. Today you are just as likely to see video, digital or computer-based work. There are so many technologies that are constantly evolving, which in turn will change the form of the work. So there is no way that art is going to look like it did, and even if it does, it is going to be received differently because, again, art works are contingent.

**Matthew Higgs:** Yet both you and Terry continue to work with or through painting, you both make reference to earlier existing imagery, for example William Morris’s fabrics in your case or images from the First World War in Terry’s. Both of you share a commitment to some semblance of a painted representational image.

**David Mabb:** Probably both Terry and I are interested in history, in the way that history can be alive in the present, in the way that history can be useful in the present. History for me is a way of opening up the future, a way of understanding the future. If you don’t understand the past how can you hope to have any grasp of how to understand the present or anticipate what is going to happen next? It is essential. I think that it is as important for art as it is for anything else.

**Anonymous:** What is living and what is dead in history painting?

**David Mabb:** Oh God! (*Laughs*). There is an academic notion of history painting going back to the 18th and 19th centuries. There existed a hierarchy within painting, which privileged history painting. There is a slightly tainted sense of how it is prioritised within painting, but if you are looking at history painting in the terms of, say, how Terry Atkinson was using it with his First World War paintings, or in the way that Art & Language have used it, then I believe it’s what you are looking at, why you are looking at it and what you are doing with it that is important. Once again, everything is contingent. History painting needs reinventing, it constantly needs rethinking. I can’t really see it as being dead because those things never are, there are always questions that need to be asked. And each generation

will ask new questions of things relating to the past, because obviously we only ever see history from the perspective of the present.

**Susan May:** Is there a specific historical or political intent in your elimination of certain elements of William Morris's original designs? Or are your decisions simply an elaboration of their formal and aesthetic qualities?

**David Mabb:** There is definitely a specific intent in my decision to obliterate certain elements of Morris's designs, which has recently become more explicit for me. I have just been reading David Batchelor's book *Chromophobia*, and in particular the section where he is talking about white, and how white obliterates colour. He's talking about the condition of colour and its relation to society and to sensuousness and sexuality and the deviant. And I just realised what I was doing—or rather it was another way of realising what I was doing painting these white modernist squares over the Morris designs—was essentially a form of obliteration. But it was also an attempt to undermine the sensuousness of the Morris design and replace it with another form of sensuousness: a sensuousness of order, a sensuousness of Protestantism. Modernism was a cleaning out, whereas William Morris was about a sense of luxury and beauty. When I renegotiate Morris, in terms of what I choose to leave in or take out, I alter the meaning of the original; there is always a level of renegotiating meaning in the Morris.

**Steve Edwards:**

'Ah love, could thou and I with Fate conspire,  
To grasp this sorry scheme of Things entire,  
Would we not shatter it to bits—and then

Remould it, nearer to the Heart's Desire!'

(from *The Rubáiyat of Omar Khayyám*)

What do you desire—aesthetically and politically—from William Morris?

**David Mabb:** Aesthetically I am torn apart by Morris because I actually like the designs. It's difficult to admit that you are fascinated by them—they are absolutely sumptuous. But on the other hand they are completely unacceptable to me at the same time. My interest in Morris is borne out of contradiction.

**Matthew Higgs:** Where does the unacceptability come from?

**David Mabb:** They almost appear decadent now, they appear to hold onto a value system which is middle England, middle class and conservative. Even though I can understand the attraction I can't go full pelt into thinking that I can accept these values and what they have come to mean. Politically Morris is really interesting because his own political development was fascinating. Unlike a lot of people now who tend to start out being slightly left-wing or rebellious and progressively become more conservative, Morris actually got more and more radical as he got older. He started out by forming an organisation that was against knocking down old buildings, essentially the forerunner to English Heritage or the National Trust, yet he ended up in his 50s being heavily involved with the leadership of revolutionary socialist organisations. (This was pre-Labour Party, pre-Communist Party.) So you had all these factions, including anarchists, who held very different beliefs actually part of the same organisation until it split and blew apart. I find that whole situation fascinating: that someone can actually be both a writer, an artist, a poet, a designer and still be heavily involved in politics. Often these

things can appear to be separate worlds, and I think that is central to the dilemma that I have had in understanding myself in terms of my own practice over the years. It's one of the reasons as to why I became really fascinated by him, along with the fact that I made a decision some time ago to start examining my own culture. That is a notion of being 'English' and what it actually constitutes. And how that history relates to the Left in England. I had begun to feel that the 'touristic' work that I had been doing for a number of years was increasingly unsatisfactory. I was always looking at bits of American history, bits of Russian history, bits of German history but never really addressing the history in my own back yard. So being interested in Morris pulled all these things together.

**Lynda Morris:** Do aesthetics have anything to do with ethics?

**David Mabb:** I heard Vito Acconci give a lecture a few years ago. And he kept referring to the 'B' word. For him the 'B' word was like a swear word, it was like the most disgusting word you could ever use. And the 'B' word was 'Beauty'. He was completely hostile to it. For him producing beautiful, pretty things for the middle classes to consume was anathema to his whole ethos. And I sort of understand that. I understand it from a theoretical position, but I don't agree with it, because I like being seduced by an artwork. I like to be pulled into a work on an aesthetic level and then at the same time as being seduced find out that there is something interesting conceptually going on. So I like aesthetic work. I like beautiful work. As long as it's not just that, I like beautiful works that have contradictions or problems associated with them. I don't think anything is fixed, because beauty can be quite a subversive thing, whilst in another time or context it can be really conservative and reactionary.

**Jon Tupper:** Where do you look for new ideas?

**David Mabb:** Where do I get ideas? I go to conferences. Books, reading things that generate new ways of examining the world. Sometimes from other exhibitions. Art. Travel. Sometimes from other people. Finding people who are interesting to talk to, who challenge you, suggest things to you.

**Matthew Higgs:** You mentioned that more recently you have started to investigate your own culture, ideas around Englishness, which is a very particular line of research.

**David Mabb:** All of my work which was looking at Russian culture and history I legitimated on the understanding that it was all to do with looking at class and working class history and that that, in turn, had a relevance in Britain. But it did occur to me that you could do the same work about English history. I always think that there should be a strength or intimacy of understanding of your own culture which would give it extra validity.

**Gerard Hemsworth:** When realising new work, how do you re-contextualise your values to avoid reiterating what you have already achieved in the past?

**David Mabb:** In a funny way that doesn't happen. I tend to work in series. When I am trying to work out what I am trying to do, the work is invariably dreadful. Then I have a sort of good period where I will produce five or ten paintings that work. Then something happens, and it's been happening for years: I get bored. So invariably I think 'Oh shit, I've got to do something else now!' If a group of works seem to have run their course, I can't make them any more—even if I wanted to—they turn out to be awful. They

go past a point where they no longer have any meaning. If they stop being 'live' for me, if they stop being an investigation and become a reiteration, then I have to find something else to do.

**Lesley Sanderson:** Your work takes as its focus an appropriated image, chosen for its political or cultural content. In conversation with you once, you mentioned your disappointment when an artist raised the notion that you had culturally appropriated imagery (i.e. the *Skins* series) and this could be misread as a Eurocentric gesture. This was clearly totally opposite to your intention. You also said, on another occasion, that it was important that the politics of your work should be implicit rather than explicit. So, if within the work, the audience is not guided into how you intend it to be read and your position in relation to the appropriated image, how do you want the audience to engage with your work and understand it's content? And, what is your feeling if, as in the case I mentioned, your work is misread?

**David Mabb:** Lesley's referring to a talk I once did and someone in the audience accused me of being a racist. The reason for his annoyance was that in a series of paintings I had made I had used fabrics which had representations of indigenous Americans in them. I was re-contextualising them and questioning their meaning in relation to photography. But for him, I think, this material was untouchable, anyone reusing this stuff was reiterating the racist content of how these things were originally made, and as a white man doing this I was in no position to critique that material. That was my understanding of why he thought I was a racist. But in a sense I think it was more a problem with his politics, because white people must be in a position to question white racism. As to how do I open up the work to be read? I

don't really. I don't think you can control how things are read. What I tend to do is to collide two or three different things in a work. For example with the recent paintings I collide a reference to Malevich with a reference to William Morris, and as a result of that collision there is a fusion out of which another meaning is generated. I throw the question out, and the solution is actually the interaction between the audience and the baggage that they bring to the work, and the problem or question that the work is proposing to them. And I can't control that and nor would I want to.

**Matthew Higgs:** Do you increasingly feel a sense of confidence in the work that might allow it to be more or increasingly ambiguous?

**David Mabb:** Well this goes back to the notion of explicit/implicit. I don't feel as though the politics have to be worn on the work's sleeves. I don't like art, generally, where its politics sort of hit you over the head. If I know something straight away, invariably I am not interested in it. So I am not sure if it has something to do with confidence, maybe it's more to do with maturity, in the sense that I credit my audience with a bit more intelligence and don't feel the need to sloganise to the degree that I used to. But I still think the implicit political content is there. The same issues are still there, the same questions are there but more heavily encoded, and therefore more open to interpretation. Perhaps the questions are now more sophisticated in the way that they are framed.

**Helen Sloane:** What impact have copyright laws had on your working process and what are the implications on the production of art in the broader context?

**David Mabb:** Since the ‘Magnum’ show I had at London’s Camerawork gallery, where the Magnum photographic agency prevented me showing paintings which used appropriated imagery

originally taken by Magnum photographers, I have addressed the issue of law and how I appropriate photographs, paintings and textiles tactically. Sometimes I just copy the work I want to use on the basis the owners of the copyright wouldn’t ever find out, wouldn’t care if they did or even if they did care wouldn’t be in a position to do much about it. On other occasions I have asked for permission before actually making the work. In the case of the use of the Morris fabrics, I suppose a case could be made by Sandersons — who print the actual fabrics and hold the copyright to the original Morris designs — that I have broken Moral Rights legislation, which is about stealing other people’s ideas. All the laws I am referring to are European Union legislation, I have no idea how Canadian Moral Rights law operates or if it does. I would have to seek legal advice. As for the law’s application in a broader context: most Pop Art would not have been made if these laws were deployed in the 1960s, as most Pop Art involved some aspect of appropriated imagery. Laws end up being a form of censorship, not directly by the State but rather by the market place. In practice of course the law works primarily to the benefit of those who have both the power and knowledge of how to use it. Whichever side they are on: whether they are the appropriator or the person being appropriated, this dilemma is something I constantly have to negotiate in my work.

**Francine Périnet:** Your work in its original state can never stay pure, it is transformed by being made public, by altering the space where it is presented, by almost ‘dirtying’ the space. By

repositioning the work, you are recreating histories and also recreating the work in a series of slippages. You create a ‘back and forth’ between the work and its presentation. How does the context within which the work is presented change your work?

**David Mabb:** Well I like the idea of slippages in the sense that you move constantly from the historical references to the current day, from the context of the building to the gallery, from decoration to art and back again. It’s not stable, you are constantly sliding around. You might assume that it is all quite simple really: just painting around flowers or something, but it is a very unstable site because the work is moving back and forth between all these possibilities, and I enjoy that. I don’t however think that what I am doing is a form of ‘dirtying’. When I paint onto the fabric or onto the wallpaper I think it is a process of ‘cleaning up’ or simplification. If you go back to Malevich’s white square there is a spirit of purity. Purity of the Modernist ideal. So for me it is not ‘dirtying’ but rather more purification. It’s idealist, it’s utopian, but not ‘dirtying’.

**Peter Lloyd Lewis:** David, artists are always being interviewed these days and sadly not a great number of them have anything of real interest to say. Please tell me something interesting about your work.

**David Mabb:** (*Laughs*). One of the common critiques about artists’ interviews is that they are often too complicit with the artist. They are often too easy. I even read a critique in which someone said that the death of critical writing had occurred because of the rise of the whole genre of the artist interview, where nothing gets challenged. So it’s sort of interesting in this context, because interviews can become a bit like *Desert Island*

*Discs* where nothing of any substance gets discussed. But as to ‘Can I say something interesting about my own work?’ Oh God! (*Laughs*) Well I hope I have been talking interestingly about the work so far! (*Laughs*). To try and say something really

interesting now might imply that everything else I have said is really boring! Which it might be!

**Marnie Fleming:** How do you make your paintings (usually understood as autonomous objects) work as installation at the site of Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens?

**David Mabb:** I see the works as being very flexible, particularly when thinking about their installation. On each occasion that I install them it is always a different situation. In terms of the Oakville Galleries show some of the works will be hung over William Morris wallpaper. One of the rooms will be completely wallpapered in a Morris fruit design, and then the *Fruit* paintings will be hung onto that, and hopefully it will work because it’s an Arts and Crafts building in Oakville, it has an ornamental frieze and panelling. It roots the paintings into the context. Alongside those paintings I am doing two wallpaper installations, again with Morris designs. I am painting directly onto the wallpaper in the same way that I paint onto the fabric in the paintings, so that the painting in this case will be literally rooted into the structure of the building, rooted into the history of the site. I don’t see paintings as fixed entities. I tend to see them as installation, although that said, other paintings do just hang on a white wall. So there is this sense of flux between the autonomous object and always being aware that the site affects the reading of the work, and working with that paradox every time. Working in series I tend to think of the paintings in terms of a totality. So when they

are installed in a gallery setting, you are not simply looking at one painting, rather you are looking at a series of statements or questions which are ultimately very similar, but where each has its own nuance, and the series allows that to happen.

**Catsou Roberts:** Animal, mineral or vegetable?

**Matthew Higgs:** I think this refers to the American quiz show called ‘20 Questions’ but I am not sure as I am not familiar with it!

**David Mabb:** Is this like the kids game ‘Animal, mineral or vegetable’? Do you know that? You get 20 questions to find out whether something is either an animal, a vegetable or a mineral. So at the end of the questions you find out what the right answer is. It’s a vehicle through which you might arrive at the right answer, which is interesting in this context because obviously there are no right answers!

**Matthew Higgs:** This is always the last question, and it always comes from me: ‘What question would you like to ask yourself?’

**David Mabb:** ‘What question would I like to ask myself?’ Two or three people rang me up when they knew you were doing this interview project and asked me ‘What sort of question would you like me to ask?’ and I told them to think about it for themselves! But I’m not sure what question I would like to ask myself. I sometimes have to keep asking myself questions—not that I want to, but they constantly impose themselves on me through necessity.

**Matthew Higgs:** Are they questions of existential doubt, you know the ‘Why am I here?’, ‘Where am I going?’, ‘Why am I doing this?’ kind of questions?

**David Mabb:** Oh no, I don’t have any of that! (*Laughs*). I never

ask myself ‘Where am I going?’ or ‘Why am I here?’. I don’t ask myself those questions because I don’t find them very helpful really. I always find the immediate reality of living and working much too interesting and absorbing in itself to end up asking large metaphysical questions like that!

**Note**

1 Of the 20 individuals invited to participate in this project 18 responded in time for publication.

**Glossary of names:**

**Janet Hodgson** is an artist based in London, England.

**Stephen Snoddy** is Director of the Milton Keynes Gallery, Milton Keynes, England.

**Bryan Biggs** is Director of the Bluecoat Arts Centre, Liverpool, England.

**Colin Darke** is an artist based in Derry, Northern Ireland.

**Terry Atkinson** is an artist based in Leamington Spa, England.

**Anonymous** wishes to remain anonymous.

**Susan May** is a Curator at Tate Modern, London, England.

**Steve Edwards** is a Research Lecturer in Art History at the Open University, England.

**Lynda Morris** is Curator of the Norwich Art Gallery, Norwich, England.

**Jon Tupper** is a Curator and is at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada.

**Gerard Hemsworth** is an artist and Lecturer at Goldsmiths College, London, England.

**Lesley Sanderson** is an artist based in Sheffield, England.

**Helen Sloane** is a freelance curator based in London, England.

**Francine Périnet** is Director of Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario, Canada.

**Peter Lloyd Lewis** is an artist based in London, England.

**Marnie Fleming** is Curator of Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario, Canada.

**Catsou Roberts** is Senior Curator at the Arnolfini, Bristol, England.

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

**Matthew Higgs** is an artist and Associate Director of Exhibitions at the ICA, London, England.

*Willow*, 2000  
acrylic paint on wallpaper,  
198 x 828 cm (wallpapered area)

*Sweet Briar Flowers*, 1999  
acrylic paint on fabric  
160 x 160 cm

*Sweet Briar Leaves*, 1999–2000  
acrylic paint on fabric  
175 x 160 cm

*Honeysuckle*, 1999  
acrylic paint on fabric  
175 x 160 cm

*Fruit*, 1999–2000  
acrylic paint on fabric  
160 x 160 cm  
Collection of Oakville Galleries

*White Fruit*, 1999  
acrylic paint on fabric  
152 x 152 cm

*Large Fruit*, 1999  
acrylic paint on fabric  
206 x 160 cm

*Fruit Twigs*, 1999

acrylic paint on fabric

152 x 152 cm

*Lily*, 1999

acrylic paint on fabric

152 x 152 cm

*Black Lily*, 2000

acrylic on wallpaper

189.9 x 335.3 cm (wallpapered area)

*A Closer Look at the Life and Work  
of William Morris*, 2000

video

4 minutes and 10 seconds

**David Mabb would like to thank the following:**

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**Oakville Galleries Staff**

*Adjunct Curator, Media Arts:* Su Ditta

*Communications Officer:* Jenifer Pappararo

*Curator of Contemporary Art:* Marnie Fleming

*Development Officer:* Gail Smith

*Director:* Francine Périnet

*Gallery Attendants:* Jon Blanthorn, Beth Cockton, Kerrie Gill, Carol Palmer,

Victoria Sigurdson and Robin Wilson

*Head of Public Programmes:* Teresa Casas

*Installation Officer:* Rick Dzupina

*Intern:* Catherine Sicot

*Office Manager:* Maria Zanetti

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