

Some Introductory Notes on my Morris Works

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The notes and brief comments on some of my artworks published here are intended to provide a context for Steve Edwards' article 'The Trouble with Morris', which was written in 2000. I have also included some reproductions of work produced after the essay was written in order to illustrate more recent developments in my work.

As an artist my interest in Morris was borne initially out of two apparent sets of contradictions. The first was the apparent tension between Morris's politics and his work as a designer: he was Britain's own indigenous Marxist – the Trotsky or Gramsci of Hammersmith – and also the designer of interiors for the wealthy. While there may be no easy reconciliation between these two aspects of his project, I have come to see that his Utopianism means this might not be a contradiction at all. If it is, it can be a productive one. There is no escape within capital, only its overthrow, and this is something Morris came to understand clearly. The second, more sustainable, contradiction is that it is possible to be aesthetically torn apart by Morris. It is possible to like and be seduced by his designs while simultaneously finding them unacceptable. The meanings of Morris's designs have changed over time: now widely available through relatively cheap Sanderson copies, they have come to represent the values of middle England, suburbia, the middle classes and the aesthetically conservative. The reason for this is perhaps that although they constituted a radical break with the past when produced, their critical charge is now buried beneath the comfortable blanket of time. Morris's designs now seem to lack the inherent contradictions and problems that generated them: stripped of their critical context, they make Morris's Utopian project appear a nostalgic yearning for a place where the sun always shines, where it never rains, and where it's certainly never winter.

So, what do I make of Morris's designs? How do I respond to them as an artist working today? In 1967-68 the radical modernist sculptor Richard Serra made a 'Verb List' of the various things that could be done to physical matter. I have appropriated this form here and altered it to describe what I have done to Morris's fabrics. The lists should be read from the top to bottom of each column starting on the left. My works as a whole appropriate and thus renegotiate other artists' images.

TO SELECT
TO BUY
TO COLLECT
TO STORE
TO SAVE

TO PRIME
TO SMEAR
TO MESS
TO SPOIL
TO ALTER

TO CUT
TO STICK
TO STRETCH
TO LAMINATE
TO CLEAN
TO EXCAVATE
TO RENEW
TO MODULATE
TO REVISE
TO MODERNISE
TO POSTMODERNISE
TO COMPLEMENT
TO CONTRAST
TO REVERSE
TO CONTRADICT
TO DESTABILISE
TO PROBLEMATISE
TO WEAR
TO MODEL
TO SCAN
TO DIGITISE

TO PAINT
TO ERASE
TO SIMPLIFY
TO EDIT
TO OBSCURE
TO ANIMATE
TO PROJECT
TO PRINT
TO COVER
TO HANG
TO LEAN
TO CONTEXTUALISE
TO LIGHT
TO RECONTEXTUALISE
TO PHOTOGRAPH
TO SELL
TO BIN
TO REFER

A brief description of a series

I have been working with Morris's designs for over three years. The paintings are made on cheaply available, mass-produced copies of Morris's original fabrics and wallpapers. Mostly the fabrics have been glued and stretched directly onto linen canvas to give the material the appearance of a valued specimen display. Parts of Morris's design are then painted over, in something akin to a design analysis, emphasising some parts at the expense of others. Usually stress is placed on the flowers, but occasionally the leaves or twigs are picked out. This process has the effect of reinstating the unique and handmade in the face of mass-produced versions of the fabric.

I have found three ways of painting over and around Morris's patterns so as to problematise our relationship to the designs. Firstly, by over painting with white or black I introduce a flat, simple, modernist space onto the fabrics. Secondly, by over painting images from an archive of industrial photographs from the North West of England, I seek to engage with Morris's hostility to industrialisation. Thirdly, in more recent paintings I have worked over parts of the design with copies of Kazimir Malevich's paintings of peasants, probably from the period of the 1920s and 1930s. Malevich's paintings are highly complex works, appearing to represent a modernised (if faceless) peasantry radicalised by the Russian revolution at a time when millions of peasants were facing death and starvation due to Stalin's enforced collectivisation. Morris, of course, tended to look to the past for an image of idealised collective that could serve as a model for post-revolutionary society. Each of these three juxtapositions is intended to question the idealism of Morris's designs, whilst at the same time retrieving them from the past.

My engagement with these designs has also taken the form of video, clothing,



Fig. 3. *Self-portrait posing as Rodchenko, dressed in a Rodchenko Production Suit made from 'Fruit' William Morris fabric (2002). Framed photograph (edition of 3). Photo: Robin Forster.*

and photography. Through these media I examine the way Morris's patterns can be used in different contexts to create new meanings. Examples include the video, *A Closer Look at the Life and Work of William Morris* and the *Rodchenko Production Suit* [Fig. 3]. When installing these works I hang them in ways that combine different elements; for example, the video and *Rodchenko Production Suit* are juxtaposed with paintings made directly onto Morris's wallpaper, or paintings are hung directly over the wallpaper. Frequently, I use the gallery's interior design and architecture to root the work in the building, blurring the division between interior design and art. In this way I hope to project debates about Morris into the present.

NOTES ON THE BLACK AND WHITE IMAGES

[Fig. 1] *Pomegranate*. This was the first work I made with Morris's fabric. It shows evidence of the struggle I went through in trying to reinterpret *Fruit*. Firstly, I applied resin, paint, and gold and silver leaf to the surface. Subsequently, I scratched much of this material off to reveal the pattern underneath. In the process of making this work, I discovered how to simplify the pattern, create space, and emphasise chosen elements.

[Fig. 2] *Fruit Twigs*. In this painting I reversed the isolation of elements seen in *Pomegranate*. Up until this point I had been isolating the fruits and flowers in the designs. As Edwards suggests, with *Fruit Twigs* I reversed this procedure, transforming summer into winter, and freezing the design within the utopian white square.

[Fig. 3] *Self-portrait posing as Rodchenko, dressed in a Rodchenko Production Suit made from 'Fruit' William Morris fabric*. Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956) was one of a group of Russian artists committed to the artistic practice of Constructivism, which supported Communism after the Russian Revolution. His Production Suit was an example of his sense of responsibility as an artist towards his fellow citizens, moving away from a discredited gallery art associated with the bourgeoisie, to the creation of more utilitarian products often intended for mass production. I recently had a copy of Rodchenko's Production Suit (originally from 1921) made out of *Fruit* fabric. In this piece, I was concerned to bring together two not necessarily compatible Utopian moments. Rodchenko's Production Suit demonstrated his visible commitment to the Soviet working class, while Morris's *Fruit* was a representation of nature in all its fecundity. What really surprised me about the completed object was that it ended up looking like a rather absurd child's romper suit. I then restaged photographs from 1921 of Rodchenko wearing the Production Suit.

NOTES ON THE COLOUR IMAGES

A. Installation view from *The Decorating Business* at Oakville Galleries, Ontario, Canada. The Oakville Galleries are based in what was once a private house closely modelled on a Voysey arts and craft design. The curator chose a series of my works for this space sympathetically. In this photograph, *Willow* can be seen painted directly onto *Willow* wallpaper, which has been installed around the fireplace. In this piece I painted out the leaves so they are only just visible leaving the twigs alone to stand out. The shape of the rectangle above the fireplace is reminiscent of a patch of wallpaper that has been protected from the light by a mirror or painting. The painting on the right is *Fruit Twigs* hung over *Fruit* wallpaper, and in the left foreground is the edge of *Black Lily* (below).

B. *Black Lily*. The room in which this work was made has a very elaborate carved wooden architrave, which the painting has been installed in relation to in order to integrate it with the building. I painted a large black area (quoting Malevich's famous *Black Square*) onto Morris's *Lily* design in an attempt to turn the light, optimistic wallpaper into a dark, deathly modernist decoration; the flower heads are left isolated and floating in dark space.

C. *A Closer Look at the Life and Work of William Morris* is a DVD/video that quite literally looks closer at his work. It functions as a parodic art documentary, particularly with regard to the rostrum camera shot of the artwork and the close up. The structure is taken from a computer-generated movie/animation that replicates the zoom tool in the computer software programme Photoshop. The animation takes the viewer on a journey. The image of a Morris fabric starts as a pixel (the basic unit out of which digital images are constructed) and zooms, appearing to get smaller and smaller (1% at a time) until the whole image fills the screen. This procedure then appears to go into reverse, getting smaller until it ends as a dot on the screen. The space vacated by this image is filled by another of Morris's fabrics, which has begun the inverse process: the image appears to get larger and larger until a whole image becomes visible, and then it seems to increase still further until once again a single pixel fills the screen.

This imagery is set to a Russian rendition of the *Internationale*. This music, juxtaposed with the imagery, highlights the divergence that existed in Morris's practice between his *Decorating Business* and his Socialism. It also acts to place Morris firmly within the revolutionary tradition, and brings that tradition forward to the end of the 20th century through the medium of computer digitisation. This technology, we can assume, would have been an anathema to Morris, who with few exceptions looked to the past for his tools.

D. *Green Engineering Object*, installed in the Martinware Room, Pittshanger Manor and Gallery, Ealing, London. The image is of a large piece of industrial engineering, which has been painted on and around *Honeysuckle* fabric. This room displays Martinware arts and crafts ceramics and was already hung with Morris's wallpaper. The industrial image within the painting contrasted vividly with the handmade objects. This apparently straightforward inverse relationship

was made more problematic because my painting of the industrial object (an object which is itself now obsolete and skewed by nostalgia) was rendered by hand. The green in the engineering object was chosen to integrate the object with the fabric (I used the colour way of the fabric as a guide in the painting of the photographic image).

E. *A Closer Look at the Life and Work of William Morris, Big Red Propeller and the Rodchenko Production Suit*. This is an installation shot of my recent exhibit in the Crafts Council Gallery, London. The video, on the left, was presented on a monitor mounted on the wall. In the centre is the painting *Big Red Propeller* painted on *Lily* fabric. The propeller is juxtaposed with, and painted around, the flowers in the fabric. The industrial object is tended by a single man, as in *Green Engineering Object*, again making it look almost handmade. On the right, the *Rodchenko Production Suit* hangs on the wall. These diverse works in different media were installed over *Garden Tulip* wallpaper.

F. *Reaper*. This work was made specifically for *Sidewinder*, a touring exhibition of India, 2002. The fabric is Morris's *Indian*, a design clearly with Indian origins. Over and around the design I have copied Malevich's painting *Reaper*, a representation of a peasant probably painted in the 1920s. The figure's hand appears to come to the foreground and take hold of the plant in the fabric in order to uproot it.