

wallpaper

RAYMOND ARNOLD ROSALIND ATKINS DAVID BAND KATE ELLIS MATTHYS GERBER EUAN HENG DAVID NOONAN LOUISE SAXTON



RAYMOND ARNOLD

*Henri IV - La subite* 2002 (detail)  
etching  
trial proof 4  
92 x 59 cm

## The distress of excess

*'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful', William Morris.*<sup>1</sup>

Wallpaper is a humble somewhat antiquated medium by contemporary standards. William Morris, influential proponent of the late nineteenth century English Arts and Crafts movement, was a great fan of the stuff and devised memorable designs that live on today alongside his equally popular fabric and furniture templates. Morris believed in the inherent valour of manual work and developed a utopian vision of creative skill as an antidote to what he and his compatriots regarded as 'crimes' against aesthetics wrought by the late industrial age. It was he who claimed, 'art is man's expression of his joy in labour'.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps there's something in wallpaper that can help us with the querulous tenor of our times today? According to Morris' philosophy, what individuals furnish their walls with was as important as the books they read, the company they kept and the ideology they espoused through their professional lives. For him there was no division between the public and private self in a political sense. In many ways this is an idea with which we have lost touch over the last one hundred years. Has the contemporary mind forgotten the significance of what it mirrors through its habits and habitations? Today people often seem dislocated from the social implications of their behaviour: they don't necessarily want to know where their raw materials come from or to learn about the broader ramifications of their daily work and leisure activities. There is something inherently unhealthy about this abstraction that is beginning to eat at the cornerstones of mainstream culture, radiating a low-level sense of unease.

Morris' guiding philosophy offers a useful balm to sooth this state of psychic uncertainty. His humanitarian ideals lead us back to a place where art regains its power as a trigger for conscious living; where what we put on our walls provides a transparent metaphor for personal and collective psyche. Though not always rosy, the psychological space of art is essentially optimistic in that it conveys a basic faith in the power of images to lead civilisation back to sense and safety.

David Noonan's gently spooky *Waldhaus* (owlhouse) is an apt scenic backdrop to the morality play of our unsettled global present. Installed as a large screen-print, the work was originally designed for a film set and is reconfigured here as a detail of an interior scene, where the wallpaper supports a smaller focus print of a *Waldhaus* subject. The clusters of owls gaze out at us like gothic sentinels, their large dark eyes posing silent but insistent questions. Lighter in touch but no less relevant to contemporary existence is Matthys Gerber's pop-styled *Wallpaper*, designed to furnish real walls as well as function as art in the gallery space. Running floor to ceiling the vast printed surface seems to mimic the incessant grid of sensory information that backfills every corner of our social space. The rhythmic presence of pattern leaves little room for breath and, like the circular continuum of electronic dance music, creates a space that is both entrancing and potentially claustrophobic.

But what of Morris' beauty imperative in this context? This is an exhibition founded in the fine and also somewhat antiquated art of printmaking. In its technical demands, the print is in every way a romantic's medium. There is very little that is quick or economic about it. If, as Morris asserted, effort has its own beauty, then indeed there is much of visual worth here. On a picturesque level David Band's layered paper patterns transport us back to the lyrical space of childhood creativity, specifically to the art of the spirograph. Band's brand of wallpaper walks easily between the realms of commercial and high art, happy to invent its own tune of playful optimism, spontaneous and infectious. Across the way Louise Saxton's arabesque collages of recycled envelopes map out a similar domain between modernism's two-dimensional homage to form and a more assertive social statement. Her material is the exposed interior of patterned DL envelopes (aptly known in the postal business as *DL Secretives*), which she carefully cuts, arranges and quilts into compositions inspired by the mesmerising decorative quality of Islamic tiles. More macabre but no less elegant are Kate Ellis' somewhat eerie poodle assemblages *Untitled: wall drawing* and *Untitled: poodle paw*. Simultaneously obsessive and intriguing, these small composite wall sculptures use delicate and unusual materials — poodle fur, wax, silk thread — to counterbalance the inherently clinical nature of the work's premise. Although the images bring the uncomfortable science of taxidermy or forensics to mind, their collective mood is one of homage, edged with a soft sense of humour.

'Work on paper' is something of a misnomer in the case of Rosalind Atkins and Euan Heng's contributions, though both artists also engage with Morris, ideals of beauty and function. Atkins' delicate gossamer banner of tiny woodcut prints on sized silk mimics the ethereal transparency of Japanese screens while its subject matter, on closer inspection, reveals a mind warped by a Kafkaesque empathy with the unseemly household fly. The work presents a quintessentially Australian portrait — of flies on fly wire — yet does so in a way that transforms a commonly disdained creature into an exotic wonder of nature. By contrast, Heng's incursion is aimed at the gallery space itself. His wall drawing presents a contemporary version of the European fresco, replete with humanist iconography representing mankind's passage to understanding of self and the world. In working with the movement of the gallery's staircase the artist also creates a neat parallel with the viewer's own peregrination.

Wallpaper is a physical layer between a building and a viewer's space. As a historical palimpsest its layers tell

potent stories about lifestyles of the past. This inherent functionality is of interest to Raymond Arnold. His meticulous etchings ponder the history of human costume, specifically armour, as an extension of the constructed environment in which we live. Through the lens of a period of French history and the life of Henry IV, Arnold builds up a rich tapestry of ink and decorative patterning that is antique in its subject but clearly relevant to the philosophical issues of our time. In its painstaking detail and Tolkienesque nostalgia for valour of the past, Arnold's work reminds us of human qualities that need and deserve resurrection: faith, hope, patience, dexterity, compassion. Something in the way he works reminds us to look carefully at the form and function of our own surrounds, lest we paper our lives with flimsy versions of our own potential.

Anna Clabburn

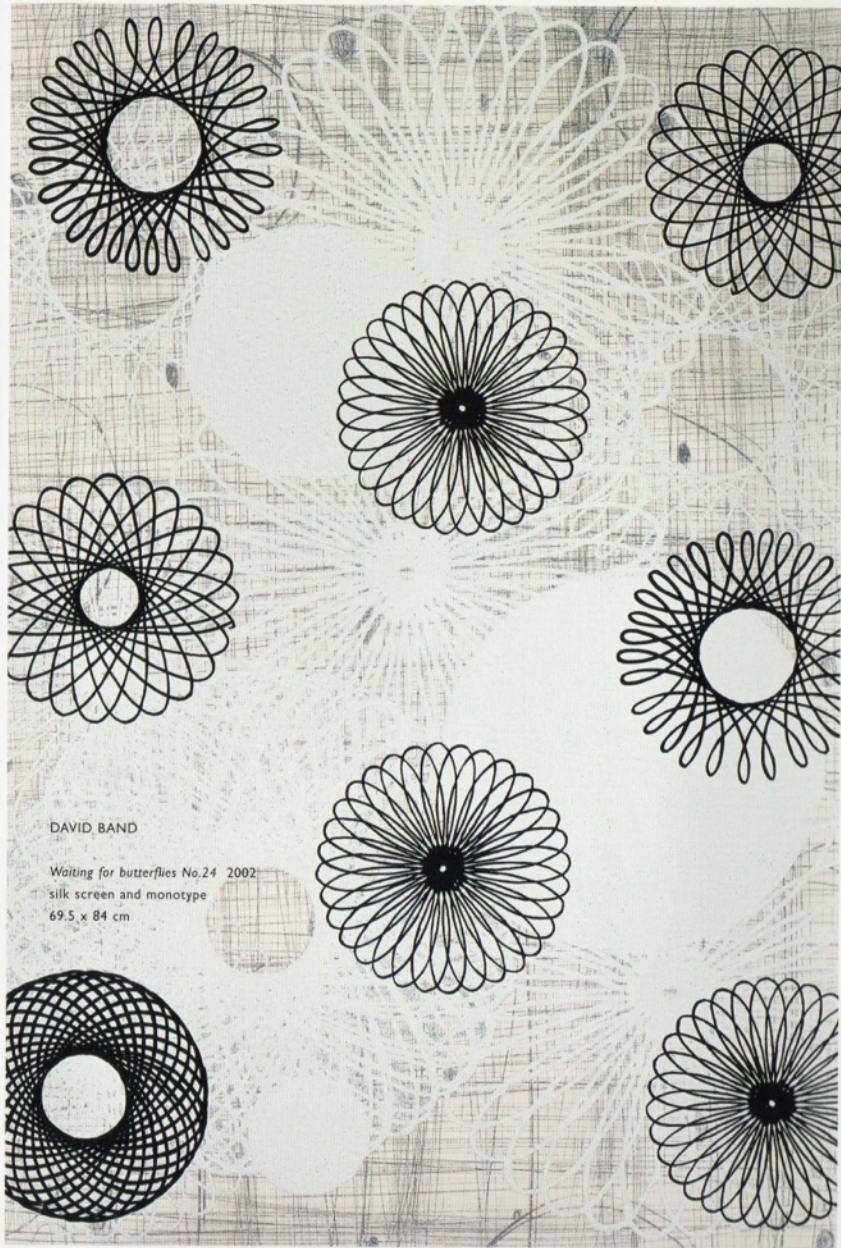
<sup>1</sup> Morris, William, 1880. 'Art in the home', *The Beauty of Life*, in William Gaunt (ed), 1948. *Selected Writing of William Morris*, The Falcon Press, London, pp. 42-3

<sup>2</sup> Morris, William, 1883. 'Definition of art', *Art under plutocracy*, in *Ibid*, p. 44



MATTHYS GERBER

*Wallpaper #1 and Cut-Ups 2001*  
silkscreen on paper and gouache on paper  
installation view Sarah Cottier Gallery  
Courtesy Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney



DAVID BAND

*Waiting for butterflies No.24* 2002  
silk screen and monotype  
69.5 x 84 cm



DAVID NOONAN  
above:  
*Waldhaus* 2002 (detail)  
offset digital prints  
dimensions variable

left:  
*Waldhaus* 2002  
installation view PSI

Courtesy  
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney  
Uplands Gallery, Melbourne



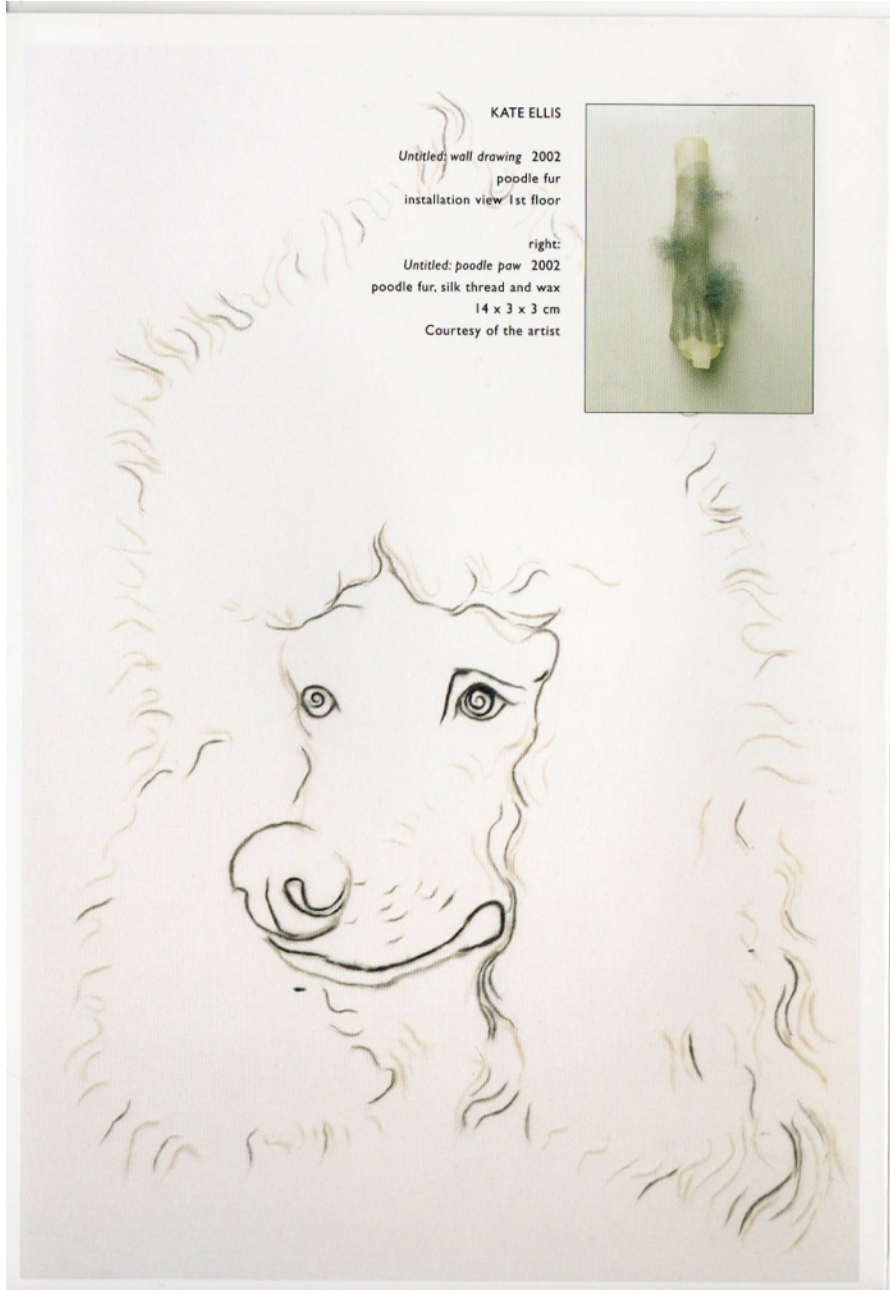
LOUISE SAXTON

*Envelop* 2001  
form cut recycled envelopes  
and embossed rag paper  
installation details, Linden  
Courtesy of the artist



EUAN HENG

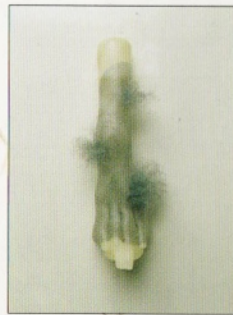
*Predominantly blue*  
*(Pleasure garden)* 2003  
study for wall drawing  
conte on paper



KATE ELLIS

Untitled: wall drawing 2002  
poodle fur  
installation view 1st floor

right:  
Untitled: poodle paw 2002  
poodle fur, silk thread and wax  
14 x 3 x 3 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



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6 MARCH - 6 APRIL 2003

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FASHION FESTIVAL

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