No flowers please: wallpaper exhibition exposes the dark side of the home

Crime scenes, school bullies and genitalia feature in first UK exhibition of medium

Charlotte Higgins, chief arts writer
guardian.co.uk, Friday 5 February 2010

Article history

Wallpaper design Efeu by Thomas Demand, at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester. Photograph: Christopher Thomond

On Oscar Wilde's deathbed it was a case of mortal combat between him and the wallpaper – and the writer lost. Among the wallpapers that can be seen in Manchester from today, in the first major UK exhibition devoted to the subject, there are certainly those that might defeat a doughtier individual even than Wilde.

"If you watch CSI," says the Whitworth Art Gallery's Christine Woods of a striking, scarlet-patterned paper, "you'll know that these are blood spatters." On closer examination, one can also see gory handmarks. This is wallpaper as murder scene.

It was specially created by artist Abigail Lane for an installation at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in the 1990s. "It works very well as a pattern repeat," says Woods, Britain's only full-time wallpaper curator. "My hunch is that if it were made commercially available, it would find a substantial niche market. Which personally, I find quite terrifying."

From a distance, what appears to be a chic white pattern on a black ground turns out to be Robert Gober's Male and Female Genitalia Wallpaper (1989) – a repeat pattern of penises, vaginas and backsides. "He's railing against a culture that stops people from talking about genitalia and yet reinforces gender stereotypes," says Woods. "And he's bringing scatalogical graffiti into the home."

Then there's the wallpaper by Thomas Demand that looks like a pleasant, dense pattern of ivy leaves and turns out to be based on a child murderer's lair; the witty pattern that uses the head of performance artist Leigh Bowery as a motif; the one that at a distance

resembles an elegant 18th-century print but in fact is decorated with scenes of Afghan refugees; and the design that contains the leering yearbook faces of American teenagers in elaborate floral cartouches – the artist Virgil Marti's revenge on the bullies of his school years.

The first 20th-century artist to exploit the potential of wallpaper, a feature of aspirational home decoration since the 17th century, was Andy Warhol.

Working in wallpaper was particularly appropriate for an artist concerned with mass reproduction, and who voraciously exploited every conceivable medium from television and magazine to sculpture and photography. His first paper was Cow (1966), featuring a bovine portrait he had adapted from the image on a milk carton. Eight years later he made a paper bearing the head of Mao Zedong – recalling the 18th-century papers that commemorated political events, such as the tricolour-embellished papers available in France in the 1790s.

Damien Hirst, one of the most self-consciously Warholian artists of our time, has two wallpapers in the Whitworth's exhibition: one, a pattern of pills and biblical episodes, which once papered his restaurant Pharmacy; the other, a hectic pattern of butterflies – superficially pretty, but certainly not remotely restful on the eye.

With the rise of the installation, artists have also found in wallpaper a useful way of creating a complete environment for other elements of their work, such as the late Angus Fairhurst's paper Underdone/Overdone, which lined the walls of Tate Modern for the group exhibition In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida in 2004. The design was one of overheated, post-apocalyptic, burnt-out trees. Few, if any, of these have been commercially available, though the Whitworth has commissioned two papers for sale at the exhibition: Chris Taylor and Craig Wood's Blank Cheque and Witness – the former a pattern of the soon-to-be-obsolete cheque, the latter of staring eyes.

For some artists, the apparently safe and comforting medium of wallpaper has seemed ripe to be adopted, appropriated and subverted. A simple pattern by Lisa Hecht turns out to represent a chainlink fence – an urban, and frankly disturbing, take on the traditional trellis pattern. Another, which looks like chintzy cabbage roses from a distance, is in fact a dense pattern of screaming pink babies by artist Hayley Tomkins – a reminder that the home can be something of a prison.

The uncomfortable properties of wallpaper have long been recognised. The most complete literary exploitation of the idea is perhaps Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story The Yellow Wallpaper (1892), which uses wallpaper as a metaphor for woman's confinement in the home. The narrator becomes obsessed by the yellow wallpaper in her room – and finally believes that there is a woman "trapped" in the wallpaper.

Sarah Waters explicitly references that story with the peeling wallpaper in her novel The Little Stranger. Nor was wallpaper beyond the notice of Dostoevsky (Raskolnikov notes a lilac-flowered pattern in Crime and Punishment), Dickens (a hilarious episode on the suitability of horses as a subject for wallpaper in Hard Times), Joyce (Molly Bloom's monologue), or Proust (passim).

Wallpaper, argues the exhibition, is neither neutral, safe nor benign. And sometimes it can be overtly political, as in Palestinian artist's Bashir Makhoul's Points of View, a trompe l'oeil paper derived from photographs of bullet-marked walls in Beirut: a case in which it is impossible to paper over the cracks.

Walls are Talking: Wallpaper Art and Culture is at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, from today till 3 May.

But is it cutlery?

Since Marcel Duchamp took a urinal and presented it as art (Fountain, 1917), humble domestic objects have been up for grabs by artists. The Swiss surrealist Méret Oppenheim famously covered a cup and saucer in fur for Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure).

Louise Bourgeois, who has also worked in a surrealist tradition, has even embroidered a handkerchief with the unforgettable line: "I have been to hell and back, and let me tell you, it was wonderful."

Cornelia Parker has used flattened cutlery and silverware for sculpture; Rachel Whiteread has cast the humble cardboard box. Sarah Lucas, whose paper Tits in Space is shown in the Whitworth's exhibition, covered a domestic vacuum cleaner in cigarettes for her 2000 exhibition, Fag Show.

;