



Apocalyptic Wallpaper

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Wallpaper has traditionally been regulated to the discipline of craft, meaning its primary function has been decorative. But during the twentieth century, when anything can be considered a material for art, some artists use wallpaper's decorative qualities to comment on larger, conceptual issues. "Apocalyptic Wallpaper" highlights four wallpaper installations by artists Andy Warhol, Robert Gober, Abigail Lane, and Virgil Marti.

Warhol's fluorescent yellow and pink Cow wallpaper (1966) flanks a long wall in front of the exhibition space. It seems fitting that this piece is the introduction for the show, as Warhol was one of the first artists within recent history to employ wallpaper as a medium. In the 1960s, his silkscreened images of popular brand names, personalities, and car crashes echoed the mass bombardment of images from television and advertising onto culture. Warhol talks about the familiarity that repetition breeds, while commenting about the desensitization that frequent exposure creates. Wallpaper as an arrangement of repeated patterns is therefore a logical format for Warhol to use.

The ironic component of Cow is that, at the time it was created, it raised issues about the nature of art making and culture by manipulating the decorative aspect of wallpaper and by placing such work in a gallery space. In the nineties, however, this critique has been downplayed as the wallpaper re-assumes its decorative function: Cow wallpaper can be special-ordered and used to accent one's home.

Around the corner, one enters the exhibition room where Gober's *Forest* (1991) is installed. Gober has had the wallpaper professionally silkscreened with a pattern, which, when applied to all of the walls as it is here, creates an illusionistic landscape for the viewer to inhabit. At floor level, a leaf-covered forest floor seems to extend back into space, as if one could enter the area. The illusion continues as one looks up from this floor to the tree trunks, and through the curvilinear branches that end about halfway up the wall. It is here that the illusion of space breaks down, and the representation of trees is rendered into pure pattern. Instead of letting the branches extend to the top of the wall, Gober repeats the bottom image of floor and trees again, but this time they are flipped upside-down. The tips of the branches of both trees meet in the middle of the wall and form a spider web of brown lines against a blue ground. This section pushes the viewer out of the illusionistic space of the wallpaper and back onto the surface pattern.

While this work can be discussed in terms of its formal arrangement, the thrust of the piece

lies in the experiential aspect for the viewer. Gober has produced other wallpaper installations, but usually in conjunction with his signature wax body parts or plaster sinks. In the case of *Forest*, his surrogate body parts are replaced with the viewer's actual body. Standing inside the ring of trees, one feels a sense of loneliness and confusion created by the patterning, scale, and subject matter. Gober transforms the typical landscape painting from a small image viewed from a distance to one that we physically—and, therefore, psychologically—experience.

From a distance, Lane's *Untitled (Bottom Wallpaper)* (1992/1997) appears to be a quiet repetition of paired and stacked light blue forms printed on white paper. The forms resemble large teardrops, giant teeth, or even butterflies. Upon closer inspection, small, delicate lines can be seen in the forms and it becomes apparent that they are prints of someone's behind. Two wooden chairs with seats that have been made into giant blue ink pads face the wallpaper.

Certainly, the use of a live model as a tool for making art is not new. Yves Klein made a reputation with his *Anthropometrie* drawings in the early sixties. Some say that capturing the imprint of the female nude is a celebration of beauty and life; it could be easily debated, however, that Klein's use of women as a literal tool for his art continues the long history of the manipulation of the female body at the hands of the male artist. Lane snubs this tradition by not only using both male and female models to create variations of the piece, but by irreverently displaying the prints of the buttocks in the viewer's face so that one gets the sensation of being mooned. In a humorous way, *Untitled (Bottom Wallpaper)* questions notions about the body and its role in making art.

The final installation is Marti's *Bullies* (1992-1997). This wallpaper has been printed with fluorescent ink and is displayed under black lights reminiscent of the 1970s. It is from this era that Marti takes the imagery for this copy of a nineteenth-century wallpaper, using photographs from his high school yearbook of 22 boys that he perceived to be bullies. The grainy half-tone pictures are displayed in decorative oval frames and surrounded by fluorescent blue, red, orange, and green flowers. The piece is at once funny and pointed; it speaks to the use of wallpaper as a material used to establish social stature, as wallpaper has often been used in the past as a symbol of a homeowners' taste and wealth. For Marti, it becomes a tool to ponder the idea of gender as a series of socially produced traits. Decoration and flowers have been traditionally viewed as "female" interests; by surrounding the "bullies" with these activities, Marti emasculates these bad boys.

Virgil Marti, *Bullies*, 1992-97, fluorescent ink and rayon flock on Tyvek with blacklights, dimensions variable (photo: Richard K. Loesch, courtesy of the artist).