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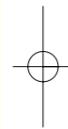
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THE MUSEUM OF DOMESTIC
DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE



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PURL: six artists inspired by MoDA's collections. 6th April – 29th August 2004. at MoDA - the Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture, Middlesex University.

Three British and three American contemporary visual artists have taken inspiration from MoDA's collections of domestic design. Using digital technology, weave, print, painting and stitch, they develop an exciting innovatory relationship between fine art, craft and technology. Boundaries are expanded, allowing visual art to grow in new directions.

ARTWORKS BY: Laurie Addis, Michelle Charles, Michelle Grabner, Jane Langley, Kathleen Mullaniff, Jennifer Wright.

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY by Gill Saunders, curator and writer.

All art is an act of translation, but there is a tendency to see translation as a process which can only impoverish or misrepresent the original – a process in which something is inevitably lost. But at its best, translation weaves together the essentials of the original with the implications of its new incarnation; it can infuse fresh associations and suggest new interpretations, especially where something has been dulled by familiarity. This process – by which something is *found* in translation – is abundantly evident in this exhibition. Each artist has taken familiar forms, traditional methods and 'found' motifs and re-presented them in ways which enrich our understanding, confront our prejudices and preconceptions and, above all, compel us to re-examine the givens of those fraught oppositional categories, 'art' and 'craft'. Each of the artists has produced work in response to material – either specific or generic – in the collections of MoDA, using a variety of media including digital technology, weave, print, painting and stitch.

For much of the 20th century, avant-garde art was uncomfortable with domesticity as subject matter, and with decoration as a strategy. The domestic and the decorative were identified with tradition, convention and conformity whereas Modernism – as embodied in art and architecture – was characterised as radical, experimental, risk-taking. The decorative was set in false opposition to the functional, and ornament was decried as decadent and 'criminal', and equated with moral debasement.¹ Pattern and decoration have been consistently denigrated, and were actively

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excluded from the fine art canon to the extent that the ultimate insult to an artist was to compare his or her work to the lowest forms of domestic decoration: thus (in 1920) the critic Ludwig Gorm wrote of Paul Klee's work 'To me the paintings are only coloured carpets'²; forty years later Harold Rosenberg accused Jackson Pollock of being in danger of producing 'apocalyptic wallpaper' if he continued with his method of dripping paint across ever larger canvases.³ But the recuperation of the decorative and domestic, begun in the 1960s and 70s with Pop and feminism, has produced a situation in which pattern, fabrics and thread are no longer marginal but mainstream. Building on this legacy of earlier efforts to rehabilitate despised materials and marginalised practices, the works in PURL successfully evade pejorative definitions and expose as arbitrary and artificial the boundaries between high and low, art and craft, hand-made and hi-tec, masculine and feminine, as well as those between painting, drawing, weaving, and stitching.

A common thread linking the work of these otherwise very individual artists is an interest in exploring the process of making; in particular, the process of making by repetition, whether it be the repeated loop in knitting, the accumulated strands in weaving, the multiplying marks of cross-stitch, the re-iterated blocks of a pattern. Sewing, stitching, weaving and knitting – and replications or representations of these processes – have a clear narrative dimension, reflected in common metaphors: we speak, for example, of 'spinning a yarn', of 'piecing together' an account of events, and of 'embroidering the truth'. Writing has much in common with needlework and weaving – the finished script or printed text runs on in rows, each dependent on the one preceding. Ideas are pulled together, woven into an ordered sequence, and the reader follows the thread of the argument through. This analogy between stitch and language runs through PURL from Jane Langley's delicate painted 'cross-stitch' patterns, in which each mark is the equivalent of a letter or fragment of code (reminiscent of early computer programming), to Michelle Charles's 'knitted' linear loops, which can be read as a cursive script, a vigorous homespun calligraphy.

In her paintings of knitting Michelle Charles investigates authenticity and authorship. Knitting has a mathematical quality, and is carefully plotted to achieve the desired shape, openings and patterns. But despite the insistent repetitive character of knitting, Charles resists a predictable linear perfection in favour of something unmistakably hand-made, with knots and snarls interrupting the even progress. Like the obligatory flaws in the perfection of Islamic ornament, such deliberate

disruptions emphasise the human agency in the making. Charles's paintings might be read as a playful riposte to the muscularity of gestural abstraction – here the skeins of poured paint from a Pollock have been tidied up, the wild gestures domesticated. These paintings question the relative values allotted to the machine-made and the hand-made, perhaps with reference to the machine-knit 'paintings' made by Rosemarie Trockel in the 1980s. The machine-made has a purity and perfection that the hand-made, with its overtones of 'home-made' and 'amateur', by definition, lacks. But at the same time there is often a premium attached to the hand-made in an age of mass-production which can be set against the anonymous 'perfection' achieved through automated processes of manufacture. But to read Charles's knitting paintings in only one direction – as images of making – is to overlook their arrested momentum, poised at the point of an imminent unravelling. Some in this ongoing series depict energetic but enigmatic tangles which might equally represent 'before' or 'after'.

As Sadie Plant has noted, the textile arts preceded, and prefigured, the computer age: 'Weaving was already multimedia: singing, chanting, telling stories, dancing and playing games as they work, spinsters, weavers and needleworkers were literally networkers as well...: the textures of a woven cloth functioned as the means of communication and information storage long before anything was written down.'⁴ Sewing, weaving and knitting continue to provide us with abundant metaphors for the ways in which we communicate, connect with others, and develop, maintain and support social and familial networks – the fabric of society. Sewing - sharing patterns, swapping fabrics, working together on the same piece - has often served as a way for women to create their own social networks, a web of connections to family, friends and community. To quote just one instance, in her novel *The Age of Innocence* (set in the 1870s) Edith Wharton describes how Mrs Archer and her daughter Janey would retire after dinner to the drawing room where they 'stitched at two ends of a tapestry band of flowers destined to adorn an 'occasional' chair in the drawing room of young Mrs Newland Archer [the son's wife to be]'.⁵ Needlework can be a device of social conformity, but also the means of a subversive defiance – under the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan, some girls managed to continue their forbidden education by gathering together in sewing circles, their books hidden in baskets of dressmaking materials.⁶

Laurie Addis, originally a painter, adopted weaving for its history and the inherent character of the

process, notably its precision. Here she has responded to a fragment of fabric printed to imitate a tapestry weave. As an incomplete repeat it embodies that aspect of weaving that particularly appeals to her: its 'un-framed' space, and the implication that the piece can continue boundlessly. This echoes Lisa Corrin's observation that when an artist chooses to use thread 'It is as though the canvas – the age-old symbol of all we have come to recognise as Art – has been unravelled, its weft and warp the raw matter for re-fabricating the formerly acknowledged limits of artistic activity.'⁷ Artists have often chosen to use thread as a conscious challenge to the hegemony of painting, and as a rebellion against the conventionally gendered hierarchy of materials. For Addis, thread functions as pigment: in a weaving the dyed threads are simultaneously the motif and the ground, the surface and the support. In her woven pieces, pattern – predictable and ordered – is disrupted by computer-generated rules, which are thus both systematic and arbitrary. The resulting haphazard fluctuating weave questions conventional definitions of 'pattern'.

A fascination with pattern emerges as another unifying theme in this exhibition. Jennifer Wright's works explore optical illusions and the ways in which pattern mutates through different media - children's plastic 'hama' beads, needlepoint, and a digitally printed fabric with the same pattern - so that bead equals stitch equals pixel (or at least its visual equivalent), and the mass-produced melds into the hand-made and the hand-made is in turn 'translated' by computer into a representation at one remove, of the stitch and bead. The digital version may then become a template for remaking the pattern with beads or thread. The pattern is seen to be evolving, but it is also disrupted at the point of transition from one medium to the next: in the process of re-making it fragments, loses coherence. The relationship between the different media is coloured by the relative values attributed to the hand-made and the machine-made, and to 'industrial' units, such as the beads, set against hand-crafted stitches. Wright's painstaking work of making and translating her pattern from one medium to another speaks eloquently of the essential tedium, the mindless repetition, that characterises much 'women's work', and especially needlework. Each bead, stitch and digital image contributes to a cumulative evocation of ennui – calling to mind Millais's painting of Tennyson's Mariana stretching her aching back as she stands up from her embroidery, the work which embodies her experience of the slow passage of time, and her repeated refrain 'I am weary...'.⁸ The choice of the 'hama' beads, with their garish luminous colours, reads as an assertion, a demand to be noticed – rather than blend harmoniously into a background of muted self-denial, this woman's work

commands attention, foregrounds the painstaking process of its making, and demonstrates a vivid connection between this process and the love of children, family, and the routine repetitive activities that are the fundamental work of home-making and house-keeping. The works themselves reproduce this identification between care and craft, loving and making.

Jane Langley's circular paintings mimic the form and size of embroidery hoops – their circumscribed boundaries suggest the historically restricted space of women's creativity, and their seclusion in the domestic sphere, where their creative energies were properly focussed on the making of things which would furnish their homes and dress their families. But, like embroideries, these paintings function as a kind of diary, a record of passing time, and as a reference to those rites of passage in their lives which women marked with their needlework – sewing a trousseau, piecing a quilt for the marriage bed, making a baby's layette, crocheting doilies, embroidering tray cloths. Like the view down a microscope, the circular paintings frame floating floral motifs in several stages of evolution, caught in the delicate net-like grid derived from layout papers for needlepoint.

What is it about pattern that we find so compelling, so endlessly seductive? Periodic attempts to oust it from our homes ('chuck out the chintz') are regularly reversed as ornament and colour are welcomed back. Yet even in the most minimal settings pattern survives, lying dormant. Previously Michelle Grabner might have been considered an archaeologist of the contemporary domestic vernacular, uncovering and appropriating the self-effacing patterns she found embedded in the familiar and the everyday; her recent works are responses to more up-front assertive patterns she found in MoDA's archive – specifically the concentric singular designs by Peggy Angus for ceramic tiles, and the all-over patterning characteristic of wallpaper. Each of the new drawings is dense with meticulous marks, creating a tight vortex of kaleidoscopic tesserae. They range in size from 8" x 8" to 30" x 30"; Grabner proposes that they be close-hung salon-style to form a rhythmic whole, a fractured irregular grid, echoing the way in which Angus's tiles often rely on a cumulative effect to read overall as a patterned field.

Part of pattern's appeal has to do with certainty and predictability. Pattern – generally characterised by rigorously repeated motifs – is the embodiment of order. Yet it can also be obsessive, oppressive, unsettling, as is the eponymous 'yellow wallpaper' of the neurasthenic nightmare evoked in Charlotte

Perkins Gilman's famous novella; the narrator describes this wallpaper as the antithesis of those patterns constructed according to logical laws or principles which can be summarised as 'radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry'.⁹ And as the design reformers of the 19th century recognised, pattern, however logically formulated, can also be deceitful, acting as a disguise or an illusion. It can be disorienting, and repetition can itself transmute a motif. Kathleen Mullaniff takes elements of a pattern, and through transcription and repetition transforms them in sometimes unexpected ways, disrupting their identity and legibility. In *Imprint-Rosefoxglove* she has explored floral repeat textile patterns. She investigates the effects of 'migration' on a motif as it is translated from detailed hand-made pencil drawings, via the computer, into small-scale digital print; this may in turn be scaled for painting. She has used carbon paper, with its distinctive blue colour, to establish the drawing through tracings and imprints. Her methods of overlaying and distorting the imagery give the drawings a texture which mimics the folds and weaves of cloth. The colour, and the sense of flux within and between each repeat, suggest the shimmering fluidity of silks and satins; the artist herself has referred to the mutable liquid quality of pattern and to the way in which the reconfiguration of the source material produces unforeseen effects so that 'Pattern cascades and falls down the page, clusters form and fade. Patterns emerge and disappear'.¹⁰

Pattern has often emerged in painting, only to be outlawed as an inadmissible 'other'. In PURL that most insistent yet self-effacing of patterns – the grid (which has been the fundamental organising principle of modernist painting) – has been stretched, teased out, tied up and unravelled, interrupted and elaborated. Exhibiting its rich and supple eloquence, pattern has been convincingly rehabilitated, and we find art and craft reconciled, their old quarrel patched up.

Gill Saunders January 2004

¹ Adolf Loos, *Ornament und Verbrechen*, 1908, published in English as *Ornament and Crime, Selected Essays*, California, 1998, pp.167-75

² Quoted by Alan Powers in review of Markus Brüderlin, *Ornament and Abstraction*, Yale, 2002 in *Crafts*, no.177, July/August 2002, p.58

³ H. Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', in *The Tradition of the New*, New York, 1965, first published New York, 1959, p.34

⁴ Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*, London, 1997, p.65

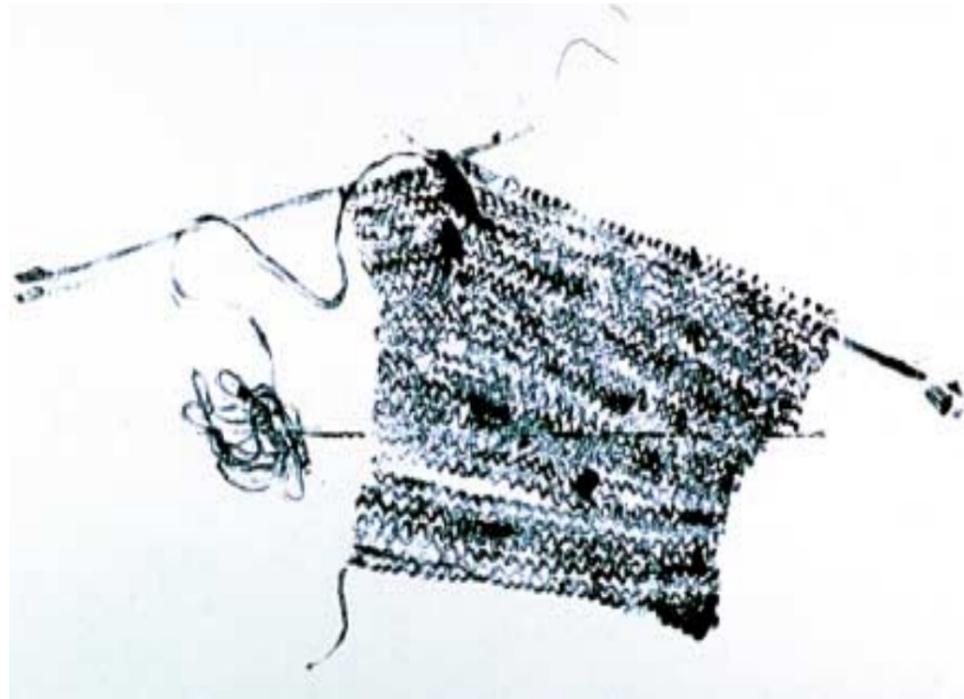
⁵ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, London & New York, 1920, ch.5

⁶ Christina Lamb, *The Sewing Circles of Herat*, London, 2002, ch.5

⁷ Lisa G. Corrin, 'Hanging by a Thread', in *Loose Threads*, exhibition catalogue, London, 1998, p.12

⁸ Sir John Everett Millais, *Mariana*, 1851, Tate Britain

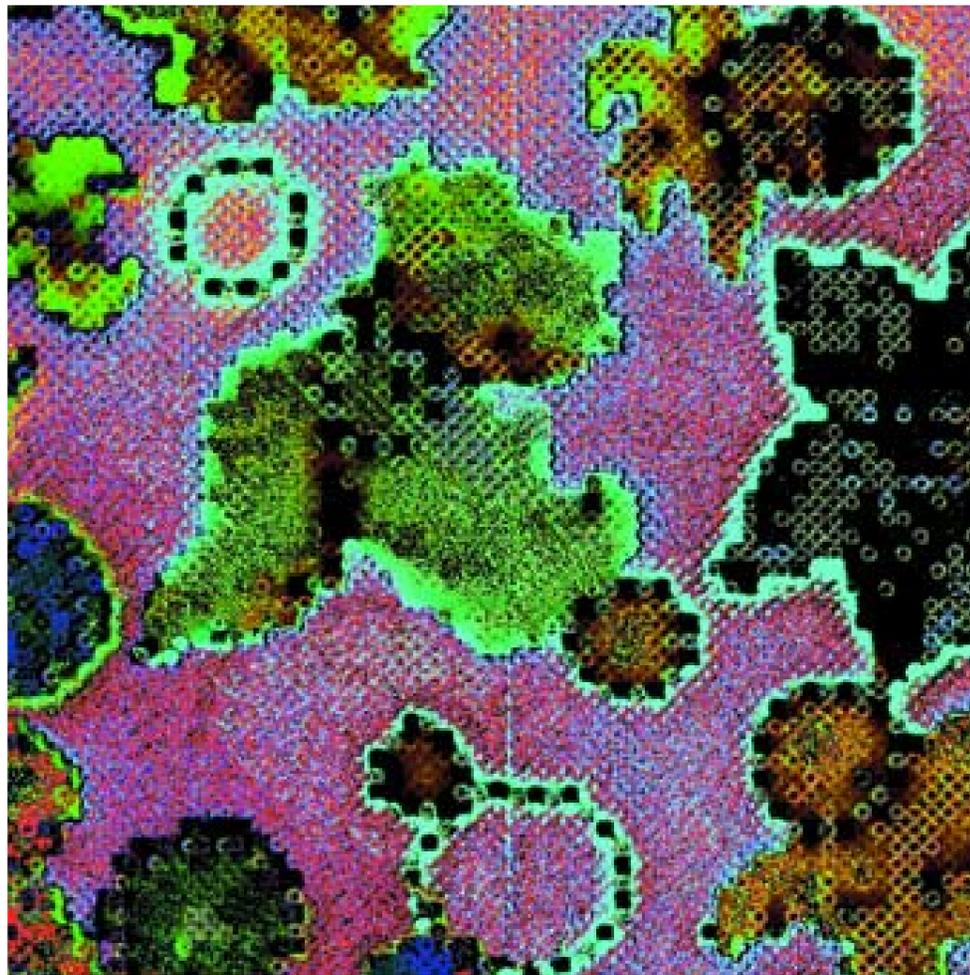
¹⁰ In a statement about *Imprint-Rosefoxglove* prepared by the artist for the author, 2003



MICHELLE CHARLES *Large Knitting I*. 2003. Oil on paper. 101.6 x 127cm



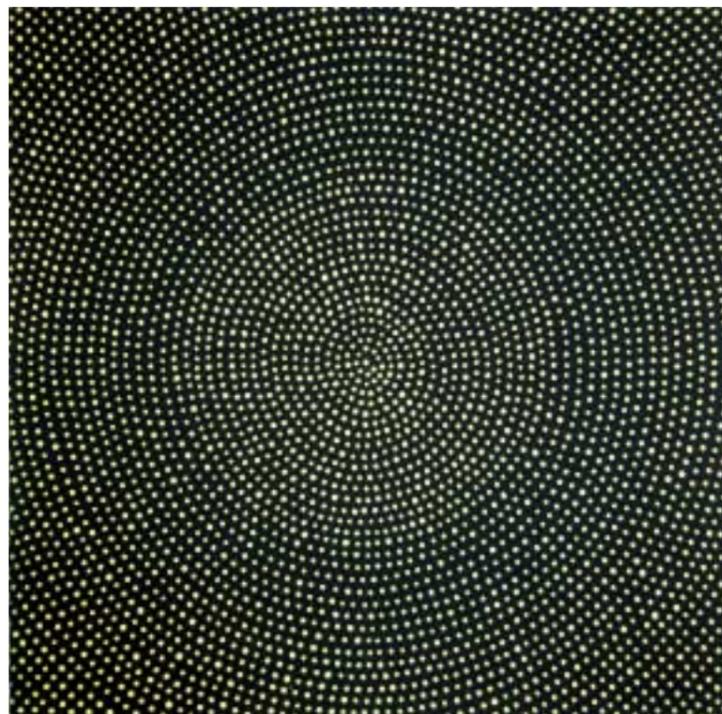
LAURIE ADDIS *sd.27232, rule 150*. 2004. Linen. 243.8 x 137.2cm (detail)



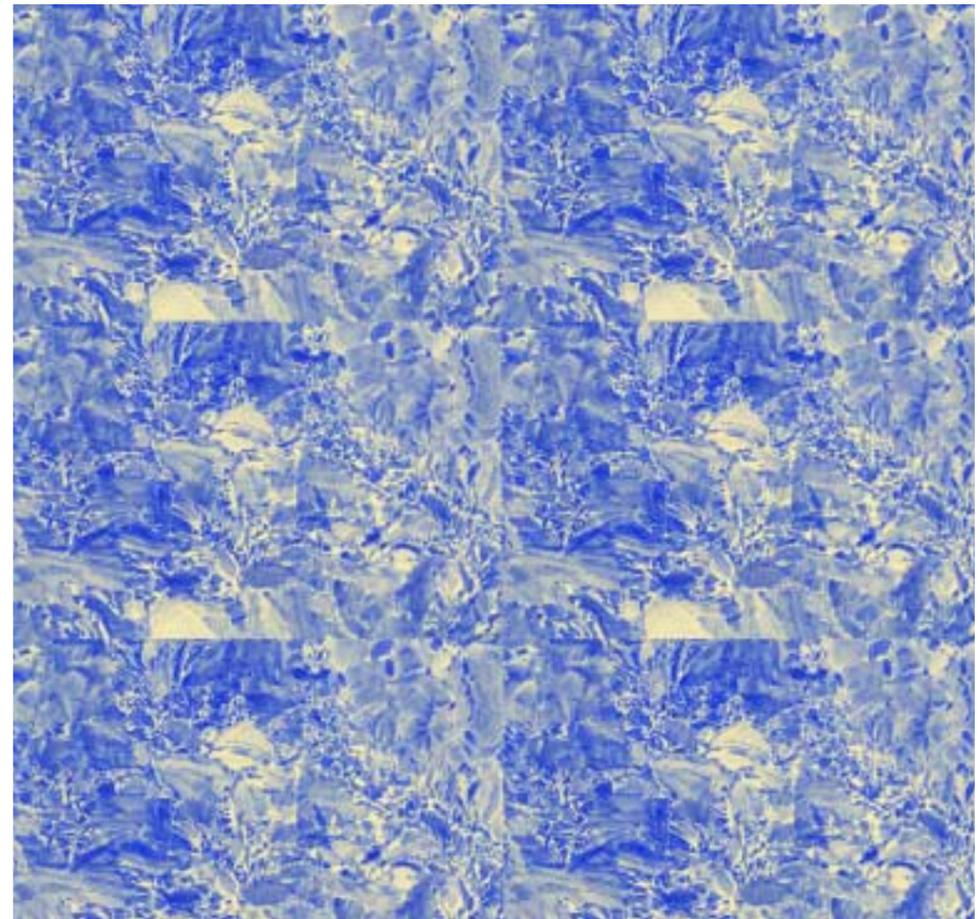
JENNIFER WRIGHT *5. Count*. 2004. Digital print and thread on cotton. 118cm x 174cm (detail)



JANE LANGLEY *Autumn Fall*. 2003. Oil and silverpoint on panel. 100cm diameter



MICHELLE GRABNER *Untitled*. 2004. Flashe on paper. 20.3 x 20.3cm



KATHLEEN MULLANIFF *Imprint-Rosefoxglove*. 2004, digital template (detail)

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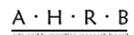
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