The Trouble With Morris

Steve Edwards

William Morris is a problem. At least he is a problem for those English radicals interested in modern art. In England Morris is everywhere. Exhibitions are the least of it. Morris's classic designs have become a staple of domestic furnishings: cushions are covered in Bird; curtains made from Pomegranate; sofas from Strawberry Thief. Walls appear smothered in Honeysuckle. Almost any fabric available to be printed on – from tea towels to bedding – has been Morrised. Domestic interiors seem to be drowning under the weight of his fussy beauty. This is also the Morris of the export industries that circulate his designs, alongside Shakespeare and the Cotswolds, as consumable signs of a pleasant England that never was.

In the world of the new middle class Morris goes with the National Trust, restored Victorian houses, Liberty carrier bags, holidays in France . . . This is, admittedly, only a section of the English middle class – the young and thrusting have recently developed a taste for loft-living and minimalism, as if carefully arranged storage could provide a solution to commodity culture. (Flush MDF cupboards seem a perfect homology for the prevailing cynicism that would pack capitalism out of sight.) But despite the fashion for Eames chrome and leather, or Panton plastic, there is no escaping the Morris industry: his characteristically intricate designs are to be found on coffee mugs, diaries, stationary and the rest. This is to say that Morris has become prim and proper. No self-respecting modern artist would go anywhere near this stuff.

But then there is the other Morris who wrote News from Nowhere and Pilgrims of Hope; who funded and edited Commonweal; the Morris of the Social Democratic Federation, the Socialist League and the Hammersmith Socialist Society. This second Morris – the one who was a Marxist agitator – hated not just industrial society but capitalism. This Morris despised his world not just because it was ugly, but also because it was saturated with inequality and exploitation. It is one of his enduring features that he was so capable of despising and hating. In a famous essay on the nature of English society Perry Anderson argued that England was without a native Marxism: it was crucial to his argument that there had been no significant English Marxist thinker. In response to provocations from E. P. Thompson, Anderson was forced to reassess this position and he conceded that he had occluded the work of Morris. As Thompson, John Goode and others have argued, Morris’s conception of utopian desire and romantic refusal of the drab Victorian world gave a new impetus to social change, while his concern with the environment, and his interest in art as a model of unalienated labour, brought new and vital impulses to Marxism. Morris towers over English socialism.

Morris, however, believed that he was one person rather than two. For him the design work formed part of his larger project of ‘educating desire’. Beauty was intended to hollow out Victorian society. Beauty was to march, hand-in-hand with
socialism, heroically into the future to remake the world. Utopia and beauty exist in Morris, in a tense relation to actually-existing ugliness. In a fascinating passage in his work *Aesthetic Theory* T. W. Adorno argued that kitsch was not a form of ugliness; rather, he suggested, kitsch was a kind of ‘purified beauty’. Kitsch is that form of beauty that has been purged of its moment of determinate ugliness. The Morris industries have succeeded in turning his work into kitsch by severing his connection to the ugly. The repose and calm in his work are separated from his nervous energy, so that the textiles figure a world of taste and ease in ‘now time’.

In important ways the path for the Morris industries was paved by the tradition of English Labourism. This tradition, rooted in the trade union bureaucracy, drew its authority from a fictionalised male working class. Its values were collective responsibility and state run utilities, outdoor rambles and the traditional pub, woolly jumpers and folk music. As a political strategy it was committed to accommodating to the conservative values of the electorate, and treating the state as a neutral vehicle for change. Things were to be taken over as they were. The intellectual articulations of Labourism in Orwell, Priestley, and *Picture Post*, suggested that what was principally wrong with British society was that it was run by a self-serving old guard. Decent people, in contrast, would govern decently in the interests of all.

Labourism took Morris as one of its standard bearers but it also excised his fierce hatred of capitalism and his vision of social conflict. *News From Nowhere* became, for these people, an emblem of a distant future and a signifier of English reasonableness. What had to be conveniently forgotten was this text’s discussion of revolutionary strategy, its advocacy of insurrectionary violence, and Morris’s serious commitment to the self-determination of working people. For much of the twentieth century the English Left was dominated by this anti-modernist Labourism. More recently this formation has itself lost out in the battle for socialist hegemony to a group of modernising technocrats. For these newly dominant ‘designer socialists’, committed to managing capitalism, the problem of Morris does not even exist. He has been consigned to the past and handed over to the polite.

For David Mabb, an English socialist and an artist working in the wake of modernism, this history is difficult to manage. Morris appears vital and unavailable, respected and loathed, desired and detested, so near and yet too far. So what to do with him? In one of those strange dialectical switchbacks of history the Morris who is the champion of handicraft has become, in the hands of the kitsch industries, an industrial product. In Mabb’s paintings this reversal is registered in the manufacturer’s colour coding that runs along the edge of the fabric. Mabb reasserts the tradition of Morris in the face of this industrialisation by producing hand-worked images over the industrial form. But there is more going on in these works than this. If the Morris industry makes these designs ‘nice’, the first of these paintings I saw in Mabb’s studio was, in contrast, smeared with gunk and goo. In this work – *Pomegranate* – puddles of sticky stuff had been poured onto the fabric, making it nasty, destroying imagery that has become pallid and tasteful [Fig. 11]. It was an awkward and unappealing painting, but this was its strength. It was, I take it, a work of ruination, meant to make Morris dubious again. In order to distance Morris from the cloying world of middle-class
pleasantness he would have to be spoiled and ugliness once more internalised into the image. Redone in this manner Morris could, again, take his position in the battle against English good taste. *Pomegranate* revels in an infantile strategy of insult and debasement – what comes to mind here is the disgusting calling card that some burglars delight in leaving on the *(Strawberry Thief)* sofa. *Pomegranate* in Mabb’s hands became scandalous and philistine. Beauty, it would seem, had to be compromised or contaminated before the work could begin. The paintings that emerged after *Pomegranate* are cooler and apparently more detached. Many of them – look at *Sweet Briar Leaves* or *Fruit* or *Red Rose* – could even be said to be pleasing to the eye.

There is a palpable anxiety at work in the eight paintings that make up *The Decorating Business*. Mabb appears ill at ease with Morris’s prettiness; he seems to want to reassert a modernist simplicity in the face of all that fuss and decoration. These paintings neurotically strive to mask out what Walter Benjamin called the ‘phantasmagoria of the interior’. In these works the comfortable Morris of English taste is wiped clean or obliterated. *White Fruit* is the symptomatic
painting in this regard: with its overt attempt to veil Morris’s pattern-making beneath a skein of white paint. But the very translucence of the pigment in this painting stands as testimony to a work of negation. White Fruit struggles with its own desire for Morris. In the other works a single motif, or elementary combination of motifs, is selected to draw out a kind of systematic modernist repetition from Morris. In some of the paintings – Lily and Sweet Briar Flowers – the motif seems to drift across a ground from the left edge, in others these forms spread out from this ground to rejoin the decorative scheme.

The internal square format, a square within a square, provides the basic compositional structure for all of these works. This compositional device points to the exemplary modernist figure of Kazimir Malevich, whose Black Square of c.1913 stands as one powerful endgame strategy in the story of modern art. Mabb’s colour choices explicitly work with this reference. Two works introduce a coloured square into the field of Morris’s fabric: Golden Lily stands in relation to the Black Square, as Red Rose does to Red Square (Peasant Woman, Suprematism) of 1915. The eight paintings in the exhibition can all be seen as bizarre versions (that is, if anything can be thought of as more bizarre than Malevich’s own canvas) of the 1918 White Square on White. The high priest of Suprematism is here brought up against the champion of craft revival. It is difficult to imagine a weirder conflation of worlds than this meeting of Malevich with Morris. This staging of a confrontation between two contradictory systems of representation is a manoeuvre that Mabb has learned from the work of Art & Language. As two cultural systems come into contact meaning spills and swirls around. Both halves of the equation are put under stress, while ‘third meanings’ rise to the surface.

While the paintings all seem to work with the figure of Malevich, the video – A Closer Look at the Life and Work of William Morris – evokes Richard Paul Lohse, or even (and perhaps this is to the point) Ben Nicholson of 1936 and ’37. In this piece Morris’s imagery literally transmogrifies into geometric abstraction. But at the same time this abstract image metamorphosises into Morris’s elaborate textile design. Morris is confronted, in this piece, with a shimmering modernist beauty. Virtual space is an exemplary site for this kind of utopian meeting. The pixels at one moment mirror the colour coding of the fabric, and at the next transform into the warp and weft of the textile. The whole four minutes and ten seconds of the video is presided over by a Russian rendition of the Internationale; here it seems as if a militant class politics provides the condition for this fusion. This work, like the paintings, seems intent on imagining, or creating, a Morris who is other than himself. If Anderson was mistaken in passing over Morris, there is definitely a point to be made about the absence of an English tradition of modernist Marxism. Paris and Berlin, Prague and Moscow all played host to important work in this idiom. It is surely significant that the strongest works of English modernism, Nicholson amongst them, were produced not in London but in St. Ives. Perhaps Mabb is searching for the space left by the absence of an English modernism, dreaming, as it were, of an Anglicised Malevich. Maybe these works toy with the idea of a Malevich possessed of Morris’s politics, just as they posit a Morris the abstract painter. This collision, or conflation, produces a generative imaginary space. These are rare utopian images.
But however much Mabb tries to veil these fabrics, to mask out the kitsch, or to impose abstraction over their surface, pattern breaks out. Morris's decorative designs spread out from under the painted square filling the space where there should be only blank canvas. The briars seem literally to be growing over the abstraction, tangling it in thorns and choking it. To shift the metaphor, an island of modernism exists here in a sea of decoration. The square is dragged down into deep space, while strange amoebic forms in, for instance, Honeysuckle, float over its surface. In Golden Lily the Black Square fills up with pattern, suggesting one of the recurring nightmares of modernism as abstraction is engulfed in decorative stuff and absorbed back into it. In Mabb’s paintings the *horror vacui* of modernity returns to haunt abstraction. In western aesthetic thought decoration and the decorative have long been associated with women, workers, and so-called ‘primitive’ peoples. This ‘simplistic’ taste for decoration has, in one powerful modernist account, been counterposed to the colour white, understood to represent a form of spiritual purity or process of mental abstraction.6 (On this reading there is no more radical artist than Henri Matisse.) Mabb’s paintings offer no easy victories on this score. The decorative is denied and yet reasserts itself. A vapid English taste is masked over, while, at the same time, pattern plays havoc.
with the transcendental claims of modernist abstraction. It is ultimately impossible to decide in these works whether abstraction or decoration holds the upper hand. Even in White Fruit the forms of Pomegranate assert themselves through the paint. Decoration and abstraction here hold each other hostage.

Once a confrontation of this kind is staged there is no knowing what might emerge. None of these paintings reveals this possibility so much as Fruit Twigs [Fig. 2]. The design worked over here is Pomegranate, surely one of Morris's most powerful statements of the utopian figure of abundance. Abundance is one of the key themes of utopian thought and occupies a central place in News from Nowhere. Pomegranate depicts the utopian society of the future, in which scarcity and the economics of survival have been vanquished, in the form of an oriental garden. Here the ripe pomegranates present themselves to the beholder as a delicious foodstuff that does not require human labour. All we need to do is stretch out our hand and nature will provide for us. In this Morris reaches back to the Xenia painted on the walls of Pompeii. The pictorial intelligence at work here entails setting a system of possibilities in place. Once Pomegranate has been selected a series of options present themselves. The effects that result can be startlingly different: in Fruit (which works the same design) the pomegranates remain to the fore, but in Fruit Twigs winter has drawn in and stripped the garden of its delights. The snow has fallen leaving the branches barren; in this harsh environment pleasure gives way to toil, and ease to survival. In Fruit Twigs the world of abundance has been suspended. This is as compelling an image of the blockage of Morris's utopia as anything that I know. In all of these paintings Mabb choreographs a dialectical dance around the histories of Morris's assimilation into kitsch and provides some contemporary ways of thinking about the 'education of desire'. I suspect that Morris is still unusable for modern artists but these strategies represent an attempt to come to terms with the problem that his work goes on posing.

NOTES
This essay was first published in The Decorating Business (Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario, 2000), a catalogue to accompany an exhibition of David Mabb's work at Oakville Galleries, 7 October–26 November 2000.

3 See Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary, and John Goode,


5 Mabb has often worked with the imagery of the Soviet avant-garde as a token for a politicised modernism. See John Roberts, History Painting, Politics and the Avant-Garde: An Essay on David Mabb’s Unrealised Project Series (Manchester: Holden Gallery, Metropolitan Galleries Manchester, 1993).


7 This model of fecundity does suggest that Morris’s utopia is gendered feminine.