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’; 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. 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-tech, 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 ‘piece 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 a 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 (remember of early computer programming), to Michelle Charles’s ‘knitted’ linear loops, which can be read as a cursive script, a vigorous homespun calligraphy.

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 deemed as decadent and ‘criminal’, and equated with moral debasement. Pattern and decoration have been consistently derated, and were actively


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 innovative 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-purposed them in ways which enrich our understanding, confront our prejudices and preconceptions and, above all, compel us to re-examine the genres 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 deemed as decadent and ‘criminal’, and equated with moral debasement. Pattern and decoration have been consistently derated, and were actively
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. 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'.

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; spinners, weavers and needleworkers were literate networkers as well... the textures of a woven cloth functioned as the means of communication and information storage long before anything was written down."" 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]. Needlework can be a device of social conformity, but also the means of 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.

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. 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 mélange of the hand-made and the hard-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 texture, the mindless repetition, that characterises much 'women's work', and especially needlework. Each bead, stitch and digital image contributes to a cumulative evolution of theme - calling to mind Millais's painting of Pennywise'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...'. 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...
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’. 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 transmogrify a motif. Kathleen Muller 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 cartoon paper, with its distinctive blue colour, to establish the drawing through tracing and imprints. Her methods of overlapping 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.’

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 reviled 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 done with meticulous markers, creating a tight vortex of kaleidoscopic lenses. 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’.

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 focused 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 troussseau, 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 layouts for needlepoint.

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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

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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-Rosefoerglove. 2004. digital template (detail)
Curators
Lesley Hoskins, Jane Langley, Kathleen Mullaniff

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Bluemove Communications

Photography
Paul Boocock (cover)
Martin Ball (Laurie Addis)
F.X.P (Jane Langley)
Tom Van Eynde (Michelle Grabner)

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