

Captured in Symmetry by Anne Brydon



A palindrome is a game played with words or music: a sentence that reads the same forward and backwards; a composition that uses a musical phrase in retrograde. It is a rhetorical gesture not always consciously perceived by a listener, even if it is recognizable—visible, that is—when on paper. That's part of its lure: it can be a device for creating a subliminal unifying order, an underlying sense of proportion, system, and symmetry. Sometimes the guiding force of structure can be more seductive when imperceptible rather than in plain view: more a suggestion than a rule.

As a work of art, Patrick Mahon's *Palindrome* acts on the periphery of the viewer's senses, in order to prompt attention to that decisive moment when the visual veers toward either meaning or confusion. Humans crave pattern; our survival depends on perceiving it. Cognitively, we give it meaning, even if what's considered a pattern is imposed somewhat arbitrarily, like animal shapes onto a sky full of stars. Meaning, always flexible and unstable, reassures us enough to make feelings of threat subside. What happens, though, if we perceive a pattern but aren't able to conceive its meaning? How do we cope with strangeness when we can't domesticate it? Can perceiving its beautiful symmetry render strangeness acceptable, if not desirable? Make it feel like coming home?

This is the crux of *Palindrome*, the visible and palpable tension for which Mahon strives. He uses the viewer's compulsion to find meaning in art to bring attention to the cultural values latent in our relationships with people and the ordinary objects we use to mediate them. *Palindrome* entices by its aesthetic ambiguity and the responses that ambiguity solicits. By making art from a ubiquitous and innocuous material such as wallpaper, Mahon blurs the line between high art and low, thus repositioning his audience toward ideas of decoration and domestic space. This positioning is intended to prompt questions not only about how a decorative surface acts upon us in the way that it does, both obscuring and revealing, but also about the social values adhering to its appearance. The symmetry of design transforms into a metaphor for other symmetries: the emotional bonds between father and sons, the acts of giving and receiving which hold moral communities together.

Palindrome works across several visual and metaphorical surfaces to suggest the reciprocity inherent in a meaningful life. The work engages my own



anthropological preoccupation with locating the compelling gesture or act within the realms of cognition and cultural practice. I see in Mahon's work a parallel to my own concern with how perception entwines with assumptions acquired in an existence entangled in words and objects. We make language and things, but they also make us, and therein lies the reciprocity that draws us into and propels us through the rumour of our lives.

What's black and white and red all over?

The punch line is, a newspaper. The humour of this child's riddle relies on red/read's aural ambiguity, and unlike what once was said about kids, is better heard than seen. The impossibility of a surface being at the same time black and white and all red is resolved by the listener's sudden shift to another context, one of text rather than colour. But sometimes as kids telling this joke, we'd switch the answer to "a zebra with a nose bleed" or "an embarrassed giraffe", confounding expectation built upon the frequency with which we told it. The ambiguity sustained itself even on retelling: who could guess which answer the teller would demand in exchange for the question?

Palindrome calls forth a similar gestalt by virtue of its many possible associations and contexts, and its gentle sense of play. Rich lipstick red interjects into the stark contrast of the wallpaper's charcoal black and creamy white. Red puns on reading while evoking multiple bodily sensations of passion, heat, menstruation, childbirth, danger, and bloody death. The notational riffs—fragments of graffiti tags, binary codes, musical scoring—suggest something to be read and decoded. These notations are visual signs which, by convention, have established an association between themselves and an external referent, a gesture extending a thought into the world. But appropriated and broken apart as they are, their meaning remains illusive if not illusory. Mahon calls these fragments

“visual mumbling”, implying that they could be saying something if only our perception were more acute. Instead, the eye engages with their surfaces of repeated lines and scripts, where patterns nest inside larger patterns. Reading their various permutations becomes an alternative mode of perception. They form beguiling visual structures containing us rather than pressing us to think about what lies beneath their appearance.

The cognitive tension with which *Palindrome* ensnares its viewer is produced by a kind of visual play that tricks the eye into vacillating between stasis and movement. The eye wants to hold still and read the wallpaper as figure and ground. But which is what is uncertain, and this uncertainty becomes a wavering gestalt. The individual parts interact with each other, animating the image, making it alive with movement. The movement is not mimetic, a still image feigning motion, but rather made in the act of perception by the actions of the eye. It's compelled to trace each line, to search out the repetition, and to figure out how the design has been put together. But complex patterns are difficult to reconstruct. Can figure be separated from ground? Can one find the single motif which is then transposed, reversed, or inverted to create the overall flow? It's like finding one's way through a maze, compelled forward by implacable walls.

This tension makes a bodily link to a culturally embedded one, that prompts the viewer to figure out the artist's intentions in order to posit possible meanings for his art work. This playing around with figure and ground, making ambiguous the context or background against which the layers of notation can meaningfully refer to the world, forces the viewer in some way to place an order on the sensory experience. Fragmented as they are, the notations cannot operate like languages. Instead, they become patterns that refer to the idea of language itself.

Mahon's work reminds me of the anthropologist Alfred Gell's¹ assertion that art is, amongst other things, a form of agency: an extension of the self into the world and a means of influencing others. More specific to *Palindrome* is Gell's persuasive description of complex patterns as “mind-traps” and sources of “pleasurable frustration.” Without referring to anything beyond itself, pattern is capable of compelling a viewer to keep looking. Following along an intellectual path laid out by Marcel Mauss² in *The Gift* (an influential work for

Mahon as well), Gell compares the workings of social and visual obligation. The gift embodies the extension of the giver's agency, who seeks to connect with the receiver by the reciprocity demanded by culturally-sanctioned expectations. Gifts signify and mediate the connections between people. An appropriate gift is one that refers beyond itself to the relationship's truth; the wrong gift wounds by its failure to value or speak that truth.

Gell likens this social technology to complex abstract patterns, in that they can act as devices to enthrall the senses. The knotted strings or sinew of a bed-guarding dream catcher captures sweet dreams and lets bad spirits pass through; the knots of Celtic scroll work act as traps for malignant spirits. Apotropaic pattern, where design operates in a protective manner, wards off evil spirits. Just think of a goalie's mask: hostility spawns decoration that triggers paralysis of the will. In the Islamic world, from which representation is banished, the intricacy of pattern captivates the viewer within a state of contemplation; the mandala similarly enchants in Tantric Buddhism. If we are enthralled by a complex pattern, then we are caught in a trap of the artist's making. We are obliged to keep looking; our gaze itself becomes the gift returned to the artist.

Mahon layers code upon code to create an atmosphere in the gallery that oscillates between tension and stillness, drawing on the effects implicated in the materials and forms he uses and in the patterns of colour and line he sets up. If the viewer is unable to fully grasp the meaning of *Palindrome*, then that may precisely be its point. It evokes the sense that the work almost means something but any meaning manages to slip a little beyond our grasp. For the artist, the gap between abstraction and figuration—between pure visuality and the reference to or representation of something else—links to other ambivalent moments, such as between visibility and invisibility, or between comprehension and false impression. Other such moments come to mind, such as when innocence turns into knowledge, when a man acts more like a woman, when motion stops, when the visual becomes audible and tactile, when life crosses to death.

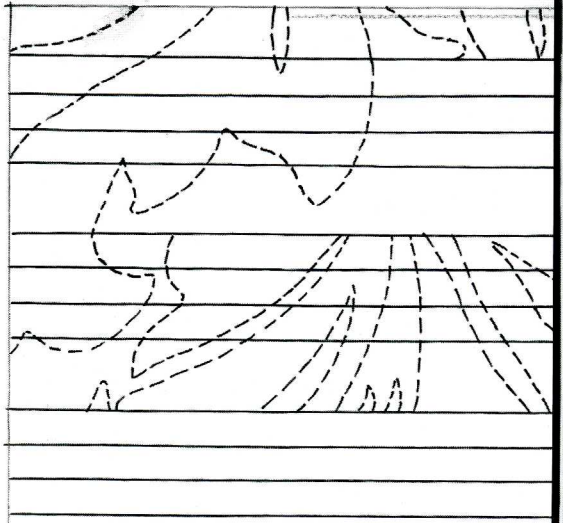
What happens in that moment when the possibility of comprehension hangs in the balance? There's a fascinating point in cognition that is fundamental to our ability to survive in the world, a moment when pattern emerges

confusion. Pattern feels like safety and home; confusion more like being dangerously lost. This I find to be a poetic means to invoke the space of the domestic that wallpaper marks and wraps, and also to signal the domestic's own oscillations between rupture and rest. Ruptures are destructive and creative, murder and playfulness both. The question for the artist is, what should s/he deliberately rupture? How far to go before the skin cannot be sutured together again?

Home and domesticity have been locations for North American popular culture's explorations of the social bonds holding people together, whether in mutual trust or reciprocal loathing. Notably in films like *Ordinary People* and *American Beauty*, a brittle surface of aestheticised harmony splits open to reveal a miserable rot that no amount of papering over can ever return to normalcy. In these films, both most definitely reflecting Hollywood's male bias, the women are the ones who are brittle, frozen, and incapable of emotional give and take. If anyone's to blame for our psychic mess, so this story goes, it's Mom. She, rather than her husband, fails to nurture enough. The domestic sphere and its ideological associations with the feminine and the decorative is a murderous zone of barely suppressed chaos and anger.

Unlike these suburban horror stories, Mahon's exploration of the domestic falls on the playful end of the spectrum. Home for him is a place where the feminine and the decorative are redeemed and revalued, and where the wallpaper makes whimsy. It becomes an object rather than surface, detaching from the wall to transmute into a watery flow, a pile of sticks, pretend origami, a rickety fence, a palindromic stick painting, and a couple bonded with bungee cords (is family life like bungee jumping?).

When describing his own Winnipeg upbringing, Mahon admits to no overwhelming angst or family calamity; the dramas were more of the kind one would expect in an imperfect but amenable middle-class life. Yet there's an



awareness I find in *Palindrome* of familial fragility, the necessity for protection to be part of nurturance, and the need for give and take to make it flow smoothly. The fence sheltering the wondrous contraptions of paper and tape made by his sons, Thomas and Christopher, suggests this. It's not a structure you'd want to lean on too hard, but good thing it's there for support, just in case. The bravery children must summon to extend themselves into the world of adults and their wondrous contraptions (like luges and doghouses, airplanes and spacecraft) is a gift from Mom and Dad, the kind of supportive giving for which parents cannot, should not, demand reciprocity.

In earlier works Mahon examined his own middleclass upbringing, exploring it through the possibilities and techniques of the print process. The works he has made using wallpaper carry the history of that process, through their content—notations of various kinds, as in *Palindrome*—and its form and function as wallpaper. In *The Palace @ 4 a.m.* (1998) and *Memento Florae* (1999) the use of wallpaper is inverted, wrapping around wall studs, exposing their forms while still covering their nakedness. When wrapped around an object, paper reveals contours while concealing what lies beneath the surface. It emphasizes and distracts simultaneously. Like Poe's purloined letter, it hides the object in plain view. As an allegory for human behaviour, it's rather like the role of manners in polite society, actions undertaken to distract attention or cover up what everyone notices but, oh so delicately, chooses not to see.

The installations *Re-entering the House of Flowers* (1996) and *Spaceflowers* (1997) refer to the previous incarnations of the respective gallery spaces as homes by surfacing their walls entirely with highly floral papers interwoven with boy-blue hero icons and images of foetuses. The wallpaper acts to enclose the space and make an environment; setting boundaries and defining an attitude. In a later version of *House of Flowers* (called *Mobile Home*, 1998-99), the glue adhering the large rectangular expanse of wallpaper appears to have come unstuck: the paper is angled as if slipping floorward to expose an intense red wall beneath. The red appears to loom forward, its intensity experienced as a bodily sensation of heat and vibration. While making references to sixties abstract painting and postmodern architectural riffs of playful façades, it also provokes awareness of the possibility for synaesthesia, for the melding of sensual experience. In *Palindrome* the paper is finally stripped and the red wall

fully exposed. Does the red open onto a passionate, dangerous place or is it yet another surface, appropriating transgression into design?

The fact that the wallpaper in *Palindrome* is treated more as an object isolated on the wall, rather than encasing an entire environment as in these earlier installations, sets up a disconcerting scenario in which the gallery's white walls, intended as neutral backdrops to emphasize art, become naked ciphers. Exposed by the wallpaper's absence they become absence itself. Thus, what wallpaper typically hides is uncovered to reveal . . . precisely nothing. The state of contemplation which white walls are intended to produce ends up feeling more like controlled veneer than serene repose, provoking neither fear nor desire. I am reminded of an earlier drawing series by Mahon, using himself and his wife Barbara as models clothed only in their underwear, slouched on a couch and bathed in the reflected light of the TV at which they impassively gaze. As an invocation of bourgeois home life, it suggests, too, that ordinariness is remarkably unyielding to the naked eye.

On and on, life's a story of give and take.

Social reciprocity is intended to enmesh the self in an array of obligations toward certain beliefs and behaviours. *Palindrome* is a second order enmeshing: as an art work it captures the viewer, using post-abstraction, post-modernist techniques of quotation, pastiche, ambiguity, and appropriation to set up historical and iconographic resonances with beliefs about gender, self, identity, domestic space, and material culture: in other words, the technologies of obligation that structure our relations with each other. This is familiar terrain for critical studies these days, and ultimately *Palindrome* reflects critically on the making of art. Mahon extends his intellectual critique to include divisions which denigrate women: between public and private space, masculinity and femininity, function and decoration, art and craft, reason and emotion, strength and weakness, and so on.

The separation of art and craft is revealed as yet another means to maintain cultural codes of classification that act to exclude and devalue that which is associated with the feminine. The realm of design as it appears on ordinary objects has conventionally been assigned to women: patterns on textiles, basketry, pottery and so forth. And women, in modernity at least, have been the ornamented gender, although in pre-modern times, decoration divided the classes rather than women from men.

Aesthetics bears the freight of bourgeois sensibilities, and carries with it a risk for any artist daring to use it as an iconography for critical comment. Nowadays, creating an art work that solicits an aesthetic response must be done consciously, with a sense of how the appearance of beauty has a complicated social genealogy. We of the West are now in an era where the idea of pattern being purely about decorative beauty seems peculiarly parochial. And the idea that the aesthetic is categorically separate from the workings of science, technology, and industry has been repeatedly exposed as a political discourse mixed with the morality of sobriety.

The concept of aesthetics as separate and secondary arose as a response to secularisation and the denigration of religion. The Protestant Reformation was an anti-aesthetic movement that associated decoration with blasphemy and idolatry, blurring together a condemned way of interacting with the world with a visual style. With the rise of science, the restraint and simplicity of the unadorned became not just matter for sight, but an embodiment of Western rationality, striving to render visible and clear the laws and principles supposedly underlying nature and society. Clarity extended to the survey, the map: technologies which expose and make visible some aspects of reality by making them appear separate and objectified in the world. This is the lie of rationality, of course. Without public secrets and tacit assumptions and things better left unsaid, the whole enterprise might just split apart at the seams.

Or would it? This is as primal as middle class fear gets: not so much a dread of rupturing the façade, but more a desire to avoid acknowledging that a façade even exists. Hence a suspicion of too much ornamentation and surface confusion. Decoration hides, avoids easy detection and decipherment even while it draws attention to itself. It creates illusions of depth and texture through overlays of patterns, patterns that intertwine and react and interact with one another. We're still detecting movement in the trees.

Mahon's work is not a return to decoration contained within an endless oscillation between classic and romantic. Rather, it's an examination of the perpetual friction between these different sensibilities, more specifically between those of modernism and nineteenth-century decoration. Arguably, modernism is a manifestation of scientific rationality and analytic philosophy. At its materialist best, the ideology of science reconfigures seeing as passive reception.

This understanding of the senses contradicts previous notions dating back to Lucretius, that objects emit thin layers that touch our eyes. Sight was touch—or rather, still is, even if we fail to acknowledge that perception is not a one-way street. The idea of sight as touch returns us to an awareness of an exchange occurring between seer and seen. Modernist abstraction never could eradicate representation altogether; the repressed has a habit of always coming home.

Decoration is a technology that adheres social obligation onto visual, bodily gratification. Enjoyment enhances susceptibility to the social codes of status and rank. Together they act as a trap—a source of pleasurable frustration as Gell claims—attracting the person into the object's social nexus. Objects in this sense oblige us to participate in, or at least acquiesce to, the cultural codes through which they are mobilized. The social history of wallpaper as an imitation of aristocratic tapestries suggests that its use enacts, however tacitly, a kind of sympathetic magic in order to attract in return the cultural capital of an epicurean sensibility. It betrays a middle-class desire lurking in its elegant, elaborate patterns, both riotous and restrained. Think of wallpaper, then, as middle-class propaganda, sensitive to what others think of it, seeking to please by means of its good taste. Or maybe it's just psychological warfare, reminding us of the necessity for docility in the struggle to place one's self within moral norms and within specific understandings of self.

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1. Alfred Gell, 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
 2. Marcel Mauss, 1969 (1925). *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Ian Cunnison, translator. London: Cohen and West.

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