*The stuff that surrounds you

by Robin Metcalfe

Patrick Mahon's installation works have, for the past several years, explored the relations between structure and surface, involving the medium of wallpaper both directly and obliquely. The artist produced a wallpaper installation at the Burnaby Art Gallery in 1996 called *Re-entering the House of Flowers*, inserting appropriated images of astronauts and rope-climbers within a William Morris-like foliage pattern and linking these images, through an accompanying video installation, to ones of himself and his son, each in pyjamas and each climbing (respectively) a rope and a ladder.

In *The Palace at 4 a.m.* (unfinished) (1998), Mahon silk-screened repeat patterns reminiscent of wallpaper onto the surfaces of pine studs. From these studs, he constructed an architectural memory, at two-thirds actual size, of an eponymous existing space, a tiny artist-run centre in London, Ontario, the city where Mahon lives and teaches. The more generally recognizable reference in the piece's title is a small 1932-33 sculpture by Giacometti by the same name, which also features the outlines of a building, rendered in wooden rods. Mahon similarly outlined an architectural volume in patterned studs (of light-gauge metal) for *Memento Florae* (1999), suspending a scale model of the Beaux-Arts framework of Regina's 1906 public library within the foyer of the current 1962 building.

Photographic documentations of these three earlier installations occupy the alcove gallery adjacent to the main exhibition space in *Palindrome* and place the present installation in the context of Mahon's most recent past work. He also continues his technique of printing on pine studs, stencilling an excerpt from his wallpaper pattern onto natural pine posts and installing them in a way that lets their relationship with structure remain fluid and contingent. The fourteen studs in *Palindrome: Vertical* lean against the wall in neatly parallel ranks, displaying a sequence of marks that rise and fall in successive crescendi-diminuendi, drawing on the meaning of palindrome as a musical as well as a linguistic term for a syntactical construction that reads the same forwards and backwards. This precise order is contradicted by the seemingly random jumble of *Palindrome: Big Pile*, which resembles nothing so much as a giant's game of pick-up-sticks. Where Mahon has combined his studs to form more durable structures, it is, in this case, by means of lashing them together with bungee cords, a procedure that suggests a temporary measure, easily undone.

Reentering the House of Flowers, installation view, Burnaby Art Gallery, 1996.

The wallpaper Mahon designed and had produced for this installation draws from several quite disparate sources, densely intertwined and overlaid. Its basic patterning is based on the boldly offset rectangular blocks of the 1959 *Mauer* pattern designed by Le Corbusier. The Swiss-French architect and painter was an icon of Modernist architecture and a conspicuous example of the aggressive appropriation and colonization of the work of a female peer, in his literal occupation of a house designed by Eileen Gray, during which he covered its minimalist white walls with aggressively sexual painted murals.[1]

Mahon's wallpaper also echoes the alternating squares of musical scoring, called *Chess Pieces*, that the American composer, John Cage, produced around 1944 for a show of works related to Marcel Duchamp. Through this art-historical juxtaposition, Mahon evokes several parallel Modernist aesthetic traditions: that of Cage's experimental, concrete music—with strong connections to concrete poetry—and Le Corbusier's assertion of the poetry of concrete, *le béton brut*, rough and unadorned except by the residual cast marks of the form work.

The most striking aspect of *Palindrome*, in contrast with the work that immediately precedes it, is that the wallpaper itself—produced by a commercial manufacturer to the artist's specifications—moves physically off the wall, taking on a sculptural and even structural presence of its own. Designed so that it can be installed either vertically or horizontally, Mahon's wallpaper comes in 24" widths, rather than the standard 28", to allow it to be mounted on standard masonite panels, and is presented untrimmed, with margin and register marks visible. In *Palindrome: Wall/Falls*, the wallpaper cascades down the wall in fifteen vertical stripes and then rolls softly out onto the gallery floor. Mahon has constructed a "fence" of lashed studs, in *Palindrome: Fence/Paper Models*, that supports a plexiglass shelf displaying folded-paper studies, toys and books. Taking the forms of tiny hats or crowns, buildings and paper airplanes, all executed in folded wallpaper, these studies employ the medium of surface decoration as a structural material.

Susan Schuppli, in her essay, "House Bound," considers Mahon's work in the light of a feminist analysis of the socially gendered character of domestic space, reading the work "against the grain" of its own insertion of male subjectivity within the home. It is understandable that Schuppli frames her discussion within a presumption of heterosexual family relations, given that those relations

form the basis of the patriarchal domestic regime and that Mahon foregrounds his own father-son relationship in the work. However, as a gay man, I find myself interested in reading yet again "against the grain" of Schuppli's own reading (and to spin off from her reference to the psychoanalytical theories of masquerade) by considering Mahon's work in the context of a homosexual aesthetics/erotics and the counter-cultural practice of drag and as a critique of the heroic masculinism of Modernist aesthetics.

The rejection of ornament in twentieth-century aesthetics is usually traced ideologically to the seminal (in more than one sense) 1908 essay, "Ornament and Crime," by Adolf Loos. A Czech architect and critic, Loos linked ornament

and other decorative features to cultural decadence and argued for a separation of architecture from art. He thus articulated a decidedly masculinist ethical stance that would characterize Modernist aesthetics in architecture until the heretical rupture of Postmodernism in the 1970s. Loos was typical of the Modernist rejection, in industrial design as well as architecture, of surface ornament in favour of a direct and transparent articulation of the underlying structure. Here the Germans set the standard, in the highly rational appliances that Dieter Rams designed for Braun after 1955, while the Italians, with their sinuous and playful surfaces, were the apostates. It was no surprise that Italians such as Ettore Sottsass launched the decisive rejection of Rams' Calvinist aesthetics by embracing theatrical fantasy in the 1981 design movement Memphis, which tolled the death knell of Modernist purity in design.

As the example of Le Corbusier demonstrates, the very radicalism of Modernism's rejection of ornament tended to collapse the distinction between surface and structure, allowing the pleasures of surface patterning to re-enter the dominant aesthetics by a different route. The repeat casting patterns of wooden building forms, for example, re-used again and again, became admissible where the repeat flourishes of cast plaster moulding no longer were.

Loos' early 1920s design for the Chicago Tribune building, described in a design reference book as "a powerful symbol of Modernist architecture,"[2] is a skyscraper in the shape of a giant Doric column supporting nothing but the dome of the sky. Paradoxically, in retrospect, it is far less convincing as a statement of Modernist sobriety that as a precocious exercise in fantastical Postmodern historicism.

Mahon, in citing Cage and Le Corbusier, quotes from works by two giants of the Modernist aesthetics of reduction, but he complicates those references by overlaying textual and formal references to other traditions, both opposing and complementary. His *Palindrome* wallpaper features, on a cream-coloured ground, an overall orthogonal grid of charcoal, almost black lines in varying densities, echoing Le Corbusier's *Mauer* pattern. Within this linear structure, still in black, he has added lines of alphanumeric characters based on rubber-stamped numbers and letters, the latter spelling out the text "on and on on and on on and on . . . ," These recall the poetry of b p nichol and the 1970s rubber-stamped diaristic text works of the late London, Ontario artist,

Greg Curnoe. Mahon also introduces dotted curvilinear floral outlines from his earlier *Flowers* wallpaper pattern.

Printed on top of this, in an intense cherry/fuchsia, Mahon overlays fragments of cursive text-based patterns derived from graffiti tags he photographed in Regina, Lethbridge and London. One is reminded of the aniconic Islamic tradition of text as architectural ornament, that all ornament is a form of social text and that the aesthetic impulse that produces the stylized elegance of calligraphy—whether conveying a sacred text or asserting the testosterone-fueled identity of an urban graffiti tagger—is often at odds with legibility.

Mahon describes himself as a print-media artist, one whose work is concerned with larger questions of print culture—the mechanical reproduction of images and texts—rather than the formal aesthetics of printmaking per se. He has expressed a particular interest in digital reproduction "casting light and doubt on print culture."[3]

Understanding the shifting relationship between text and image, as television cedes its hegemony to the Internet, is a slippery matter. The contemporary electronic culture is widely presumed to be a post-literate one driven by images and "icons" rather than by text. However, whereas TV and film derive their social form from theatre—presenting spectacle within a proscenium frame, in domestic or public domains respectively—digital culture is navigated to a considerable extent by the manipulation of linguistic characters through a keyboard and its dominant metaphors are ones of reading and writing—a solitary individual seated with a "powerbook" and "scrolling" through "webpages." The writing on the wall, in graffiti tags and in Mahon's *Palindrome* wallpaper, speaks of the continuing importance of text as a means of marking and shaping social space and our presence within it.

Oscar Wilde, dying in the final weeks of 1900, famously remarked that he and his wallpaper were "fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go." Like all of Wilde's most memorable asides, its waspish sting is a lethal one, prefacing the actual death of the brilliant playwright and critic. Wilde also predicted (accurately) that he would not survive the nineteenth century, noting that "the English public would not stand for it." Wilde, with his love of surfaces and profound appreciation for paradox, had to die to make way for the totalitarian earnestness of the twentieth century.

Despite such important counter-trends as Surrealism and psychodelia, the dominant aesthetic discourses of the century just past have often been characterized by an insistence on a directly legible correspondence between appearance and reality (the Bauhaus' "form follows function," Stalinism's Socialist Realism) and a rejection of ornament as ethically suspect. In effect, Wilde's duel in his Paris sickroom ended in both his own death and that of his wallpaper. Now that that century has run its course, from Constructivism through deconstruction, Wilde is once again in intellectual fashion and *Wallpaper** is the name of an expensive and stylish magazine about the surfaces of affluent daily life.

It is tempting to see Mahon's decorated studs, with their paradoxical use of structural members as a medium for surface ornamentation, as an exercise in travesty, clothing the stud—emphatically understood as male in this culture—in warm, blood-coloured patterns that signify the feminized space of both domestic and bodily interiors. Mahon is part of a larger critical discourse within which the displacement of surface pattern is a provocative means of a social and historical deconstruction, not only of gender relations but also of colonialism. American artist Renée Green, in such works as *Mise-en-Scène: Commemorative Toile* (1992), has inserted scenes from nineteenth-century engravings of enslaved Africans into printed fabrics used as wall and upholstery coverings. Similarly, the British artist Yinka Shonibare has produced faux-museum displays of dress designs based on those of the eighteenth-century European ruling class but rendered in Nigerian print fabrics, suggesting that colonial hegemony functions through a kind of cultural transvestism.

As I write this, Stockwell Day, a conservative politician known for his handsome, boyish charm and for his opposition to the legal recognition of homosexual partnerships, is campaigning for the leadership of the right-wing Canadian Alliance party. I find it fascinating that Day's CV includes a stint working as an interior decorator, a profession stereotypically associated with gay men. There are functional reasons why gay men often tend to concentrate in particular job ghettos, particularly those involved in the social production of beauty in personal and domestic adornment. Their presence in those fields is a highly ambivalent one, combining both resistance to and collaboration in the reproduction of conventional gender relations. That ambivalence erupts

in the distinctively gay sensibility of contradiction and self-mockery known as camp.

One expects conservative male politicians and heterosexual family men to reinforce uncritically the dominant regime of gender relations. Mahon, however, is clearly more comfortable than Day with exploring the contradictions within the social construction of his own masculine identity. When Mahon lashes two real studs together in a tight embrace and calls them *Palindrome: The Lovers* (in what could be read as a sexy pastiche of Brancusi's *The Kiss*), it is hard not to perceive a teasing flash of camp humour. The palindrome could here serve as a metaphor for the concept of sexual inversion, whereby the sexual act remains meaningful when performed either forwards or backwards.

Feminism has long asserted that the personal is political. It invites those who occupy the socially determined positions of figure and ground, respectively, to question and invert those subject positions. The interpenetration of text and pattern in Patrick Mahon's *Palindrome* queers the usual relations between gendered surface and structure and reminds us that it is in the surfaces of domestic life that we see the structures of patriarchy most clearly articulated.

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1. See Beatriz Colomina "Battle Lines: E.1027," in Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds. *The Sex of Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abram Inc., 1996), pp. 167-182.
2. *The Illustrated History of Twentieth-Century Designers* (London: Quarto/B. Mitchell, 1991), p.146.
3. Lecture by the artist, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 3 June 1999.