

The Language
of Textiles:
*Unravelling
Ornament*







The Language of Textiles: *Unravelling Ornament*

25 November 2021– 25 January 2022

Hadley's Orient Hotel

34 Murray Street, Hobart, Tasmania

Artists

Christl Berg

Janine Combes

Chantale Delrue

Jan Dineen

Janelle Mendham

Julie Payne

Denise Rathbone

Jane Slade

Frances Watson

Curated by Dr Llewellyn Negrin

The Language of Textiles: *Unravelling Ornament*



The starting point for this exhibition is the interior décor of Hadley's Orient Hotel – in particular, the elaborately decorated carpets, curtains, upholstery, cushion covers and wallpapers. Inspired by late Victorian designs, these interiors conjure up an ambience of luxury and exoticism, harkening back to when the hotel became established as a destination for well-heeled and distinguished travellers from all over the world.

The materials we employ to decorate our interiors serve as repositories for a variety of cultural meanings. Whereas in earlier epochs, when tapestries frequently adorned the walls, people were accustomed to 'reading' the narratives depicted, we have lost sight of the fact that meaning inheres not just in works of 'high' art but also in the very fabrics which 'clothe' our interiors (Brüderlin, 2013: 14). Since the dismissal of ornament as superfluous frippery by modernist architects and designers such as Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier in the early twentieth century (Loos, 1966 [1908]: 226-231; Le Corbusier, 1987[1925]: 83-99), its symbolic and communicative functions have been under-appreciated.



Chantale Delrue,
Things We Carry Around

The artists in this exhibition seek to ‘unravel’ some of these meanings, going beyond the visually sumptuous surfaces that these interiors present. In this context, textiles provide the starting point not just in a literal sense but also allude metaphorically to the working methodology of the artists where ‘threads’ are pulled apart and ‘re-woven’ to constitute new narratives in a potentially never-ending process.

While the works in this exhibition do not necessarily employ textiles as a medium, they reflect on the nature and language of the ornamented materials adorning the hotel’s interiors, interweaving meanings from the past with those of the present. Roland Barthes’ comparison of ‘texts’ to ‘textiles’ is apt in this regard. Conceiving of the ‘text’ as a ‘tissue’ which is resolved in a perpetual interweaving of quotations ‘drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’ (Barthes, 1977: 146), he states further that ‘In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; structure can be followed, “run” (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath; the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it...’(147). Likewise, the artists in this exhibition engage in a continual

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process of disentanglement and reconstitution of the threads of meaning in the decorative interiors at Hadley’s. In a manner analogous to the needlework of Arachne from Greek mythology, whose embroidery disrupted the rules of decorum and constraint, the artists weave a spider’s web which de-stabilises old meanings and generates new ones. Contrary to the modernist condemnation of ornament as deceptive, their works demonstrate that ornament can reveal as much as it conceals.

Many decorative materials at Hadley’s Hotel take inspiration from Oriental decorative art traditions. Indeed, this allusion is acknowledged in the full title: Hadley’s Orient Hotel. This reflects the nineteenth-century European fascination with all things Oriental. The opening up of trade between England

Jane Slade, *The Essence
of Pearl (Dracula)*



... ornament can reveal as much as it conceals.



Janine Combes, *Imagined Geographies* (detail)

and other countries with the East in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sparked an ever-increasing demand for Chinese-styled textiles, ceramics and other artefacts that reached its zenith in the nineteenth century. The appeal of such commodities lay in their vibrant colours and sinuous forms, which posed a challenge to neo-Classical ideals of order, symmetry and restraint prevalent at the time. Noting the popularity of Chinoiserie amongst female consumers in particular, David Porter argues ‘the embrace of Chinese exoticism in the decorative arts in the eighteenth century represented an antithesis not only to the strictures of Classical taste per se but also to the narrowly conceived forms of privileged and predominantly masculine identity associated with it’ (2010:19). In doing so, he suggests it ‘may have played a role in catalysing transgressive imaginings of utopian female space’ (12).

A number of the artists in this exhibition play with this theme of Orientalism. For instance, Janine Combes has made a series of brooches that echo the display of Chinese-style ceramic plates on the wall behind the bar. Crafted from shiny wire mesh (to imitate the look of fine, woven material), their undulating forms suggest imagined landscapes of faraway places. These

imaginings take an explicitly transgressive tone in the neck-piece *Women’s Rights Hanging by a Thread* where the coins symbolising Britain’s colonial dominion are re-purposed as emblems of feminist demands.

Denise Rathbone also reflects on the European fascination with Chinoiserie, assembling tableaux of Chinese-styled curios which are simultaneously alluring yet slightly kitsch. Their dual nature represents both the Western attraction to Oriental culture and the tendency to transform it into a stereotyped cliché. As in Combes’ work, Rathbone’s interpretation of Orientalism is given a feminist twist. In her series of scroll works, the landscape motifs traditionally found on Chinese scrolls are replaced by images derived from late-nineteenth-century postcards, reflecting patriarchal attitudes towards women that were prevalent at the time.

The gendered nature of ornament is a theme that emerges strongly in many works of the artists. In the writings of many early twentieth-century designers, the concept of ornament was frequently denigrated as effeminate, irrational and decadent. For example, Loos compared the highly ornamented nature of women’s dress unfavourably with the sobriety of male attire.



Denise Rathbone,
All That Glitters (detail)



Denise Rathbone,
All That Glitters (detail)

He argued that women's love of decorative effects was a sign of infantile, libidinal impulses that needed suppression for civilisation to progress (1982, [1898]: 102). In the hands of the artist Jane Slade however, ornament emerges from the shadows to challenge the dominance of male rationality. Taking inspiration from the William Morris-style floral wallpaper hidden behind the mirror in the breakfast room (which was part of the original décor of the hotel), she projects an image of it onto an embroidered Edwardian dress. Like the ghostly female presence which emerges out of the decorated wallpaper in the fevered imagination of Charlotte Gilman in her story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the projected pattern in Slade's work becomes the conduit for pent up emotions. In her drawing performances, Janelle Mendham also seeks to liberate the suppressed energies of ornament in her free-ranging arabesques that follow the rhythms of the music rather than any mathematically calculated system of design.

Another notable feature of the interior décor of Hadley's Hotel is the predominance of floral motifs. This was typical of nineteenth-century British design that frequently drew on botanical sources for its inspiration (Brett, 2005: 106-8). These designs implied that a view of nature must be harmoniously ordered

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and domesticated, which is reflected in the confluence of textile and garden design at the time. As Beverly Lemire points out, textile designs frequently modelled themselves on the design of gardens, particularly traditions such as the Persian garden, whose symmetrical layout symbolised the idea of paradise (2003: 65 & 71). Exotic species such as tulips were often preferred to local flora, thereby heightening the sense of fantasy.

The work *Invasive Species* by Julie Payne probes this preferencing of exotic species over native flora and fauna, highlighting the paradox of surrounding ourselves with a fantasised nature while estranging ourselves from our local habitat. The displacement of the local flora and fauna by imports can also be seen more generally as a metaphor for British colonialism, as the dress in Payne's work echoes that worn by Queen Victoria in the portrait above the stairs.

Christl Berg continues this theme in her work *Postcolonial Florilegium*, where she draws attention to the importation of foreign species, in particular, the ubiquity of the rose throughout the world. Although seen as quintessentially English, the rose originated in central Asia before spreading to all corners of the globe. For the British colonists, it symbolised a yearning for the land they had left behind. In Berg's work, the rose transmutes into the dream of a life of endless possibilities as it evolves into a seemingly infinite number of varieties. This idea is further developed in *Call of the Birds*, a piece inspired by the image of the pheasant emblazoning the hotel bar's wallpaper. In the unfolding series of images, the exotic bird takes flight, hinting at freedom beyond the confines of the interior in which it is embedded.

The exotic bird motif is also a source of inspiration for Frances Watson's work, *Baggage Claim*. Watson has bedecked her installation of historic travelling trunks with hats decorated with plumage from exotic birds that were typically worn by women of the time, including the illustrious Dame Nellie Melba, who was a guest at Hadley's Hotel. The pelts of other exotic species are also referenced in a nod to another notable guest who stayed at the hotel, Dr Kümm, a



Frances Watson,
Baggage Claim



big game hunter in Africa and a Christian missionary. In her trophy-like presentation of these items, she draws attention to our exploitation of exotic species for fashion and ornamentation. Her suitcases allude to the smuggling of illegal contraband, including exotic species, and are reminiscent of ones used by guests visiting Hadley's Hotel in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries.

In its appropriation of rare and exotic nature, ornament in Watson's work becomes a symbol of wealth and distinction. This theme is explored further in the artwork of Chantale Delrue: *Money Makes the World Go Round*. The decoration of her exquisitely crafted purses, based on styles popular in the Victorian era, speaks of luxury and affluence, recalling the function of such purses as a means of exhibiting the handicraft skills of their owners. It was only at this time that women's purses became fashionable. Before this, women did not handle money. In this context, they signal the increasing significance of the female consumer, which occurred concurrently with the rise of the department store. The growing popularity of the purse was also indicative of the greater freedom of social interaction that middle-class women began to enjoy, as these purses were frequently used to store calling cards.



Julie Payne, *Invasive Species (detail)*

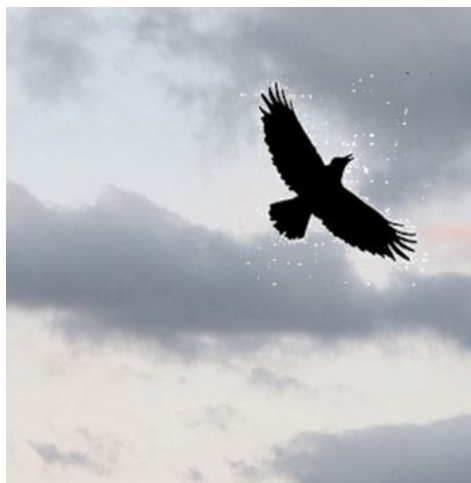
Julie Payne,
Invasive Species



In the unfolding series of images, the exotic birds take flight...



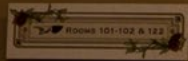
Chrisl Berg, *Call of the Birds*





*In its simplicity and unpretentiousness,
it serves as a quiet tribute to the women
who worked behind the scenes.*

Jan Dineen, *Maria*



As a counterpoint to the opulence of the decoration of Hadley's interior is the understated work of Jan Dineen. With her plain calico dress in the style of garb that could have been worn by cleaning and service staff who worked in the hotel, she draws attention to the class-based nature of ornamentation, the preserve of the well-to-do. In its simplicity and unpretentiousness, it serves as a quiet tribute to the women who worked behind the scenes to make the experience of the hotel guests a pleasant one.

In various ways, all artists in this exhibition have engaged with the many meanings inherent in ornamentation. Using the interior decor of Hadley's Hotel as a springboard, their works demonstrate the potency of the symbolic functions of ornament and its potential for multiple re-interpretations. Through the process of unravelling ornament in the Hadley's Hotel interiors, their works have become a vehicle for revealing the rich tapestry of the history of the hotel and of the guests who stayed there, while at the same time offering new interpretations of ornament from our present-day perspective. This never-ending process of unravelling and interweaving of stories and of thread is perhaps best captured in Berg's work *A Study of Threads*, where a textile fragment from Hadley's cushions is constantly transforming and mutating, and in the collaborative work *Deckchair Recollections* where everyone is invited to weave their own story.



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Janelle Mendham, *Arabesque: Irregular Pearl*. Photograph by Rosie Hastie

Chantale Delrue,
*Money Makes the
World Go Around*
(detail)





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Jan Dineen and Christl Berg,
Deckchair Recollections (detail)



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