



THE · WALLPAPER ·
PROJECT

“This WALLPAPER is killing me...

one of us has to go”_i

WALLPAPER

- **OSCAR WILDE** uttered this final hyperbolic gem shortly before his death in 1900. In doing so, he pinpoints the crucial difference between two dimensional artworks and wallpaper—one requires active engagement whilst the other offers an immersive experience.

To engage with a painting, we must consciously approach the work, whereas with wallpaper, we are more likely to find ourselves looking without realising. In this way, wallpaper can be a map of our own silent projections.

The potential for wallpaper to be such a receptacle was most poignantly described by Charlotte Perkins Gillman in the feminist classic *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The 1973 novella is narrated by a woman in the throes of nervous anxiety. In the story, the protagonist concentrates her attention on the wallpaper in her room— “a paper of a sickly yellow that both disgusts and fascinates her”.ⁱⁱ It awakens her imaginings of a female imprisoned within the walls so intensely that the story ends with the dramatic scene of the patient clawing and tearing shreds of wallpaper from the wall.

This is an extreme example, but most of us will be able to recall the designs of wallpaper in a room we have lived in. I vividly recall the wallpaper in a bedroom which adjoined a nursing home in Toowoomba. Strange silhouettes of female faces appeared from the brown and yellow rococo design, and so enlivened the wallpaper far beyond its purpose as surface decoration.

ⁱ The exact wording of this quote is widely debated – see www.en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Oscar_Wilde

ⁱⁱ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (afterword by Elaine R Hedges), Feminist Press, New York, 1973, p 51

- **IN CONTEMPORARY** art, we see examples of wallpaper which challenge both the traditional methods of design and also the way we think about art.

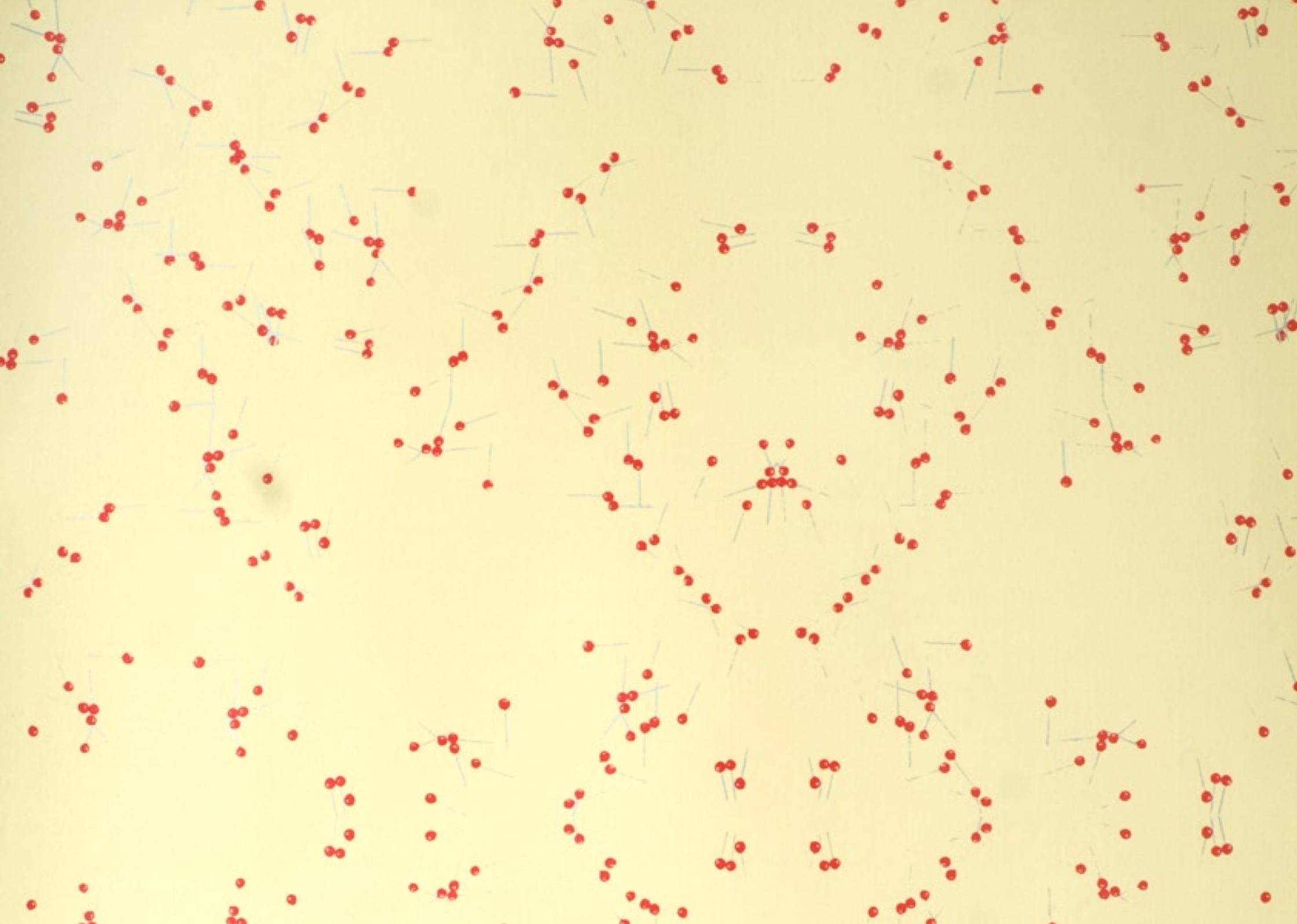
Andy Warhol's *cow wallpaper* from 1966 emphasised the democratic nature of machine made art. Robert Gober's *Sleeping Man Hanging Man* infused a mundane domestic surface with highly charged political imagery; the result was a pointed reference to the (then apathetic) state of American race relations. Alternatively, the bright bold geometric wallpaper patterns by Liam Gillick revisit the geometric designs in wallpaper from the sixties and seventies.

Wallpaper is now booming again. Online design studios such as *Domestic* and *Timorous Beasties* are notable for their provocative wallpapers.

Designs from the *Timorous Beasties* include scenes of prostitutes and junkies which are framed within Victorian designs, and so their studio has been described as "William Morris on acid". *Domestic* introduces objects where the end user can intervene and participate in the creation process. Their catalogue includes wall stickers which take the form of a silhouette of a bookshelf. It is then up to the client to position the accompanying adhesive vases, lamps and ornaments.

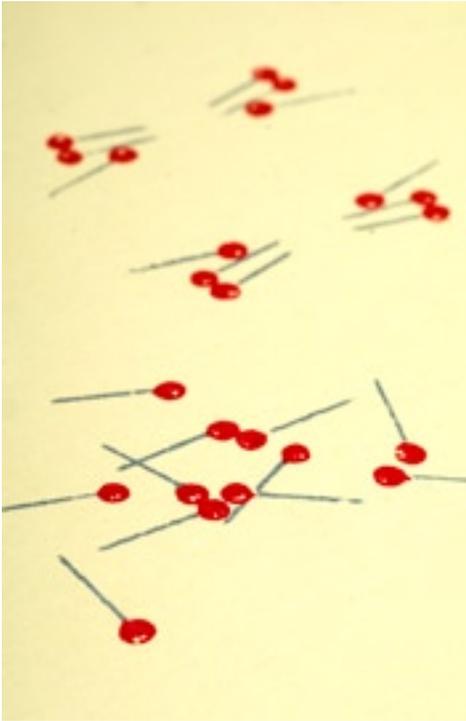
The popularity of these studios signals a broader appetite for interior design which offers a witty interpretation of contemporary culture.

- **THIS EXHIBITION**, initiated by Simon Mee, is similarly inventive. The project has been the culmination of his fascination with ornate styles of interior design, his collaboration with William Wilding, and the recruitment of artists whom he respects and admires. In these designs, we see how each artist has negotiated the conceptual and material parameters of wallpaper making.



· **LISA RADFORD** presents an illusory design which contains a galaxy of pins. The wallpaper is low key, but also reminiscent of the sharp angles and baubles so prevalent in the exuberant fashions of the eighties. Lisa belongs to a new generation of artists whose work treads a delicate balance between abstract geometric design and representation. Here the insinuation of domestic objects which are often attached to wall surfaces alters the perspective of the two-dimensional wallpaper.



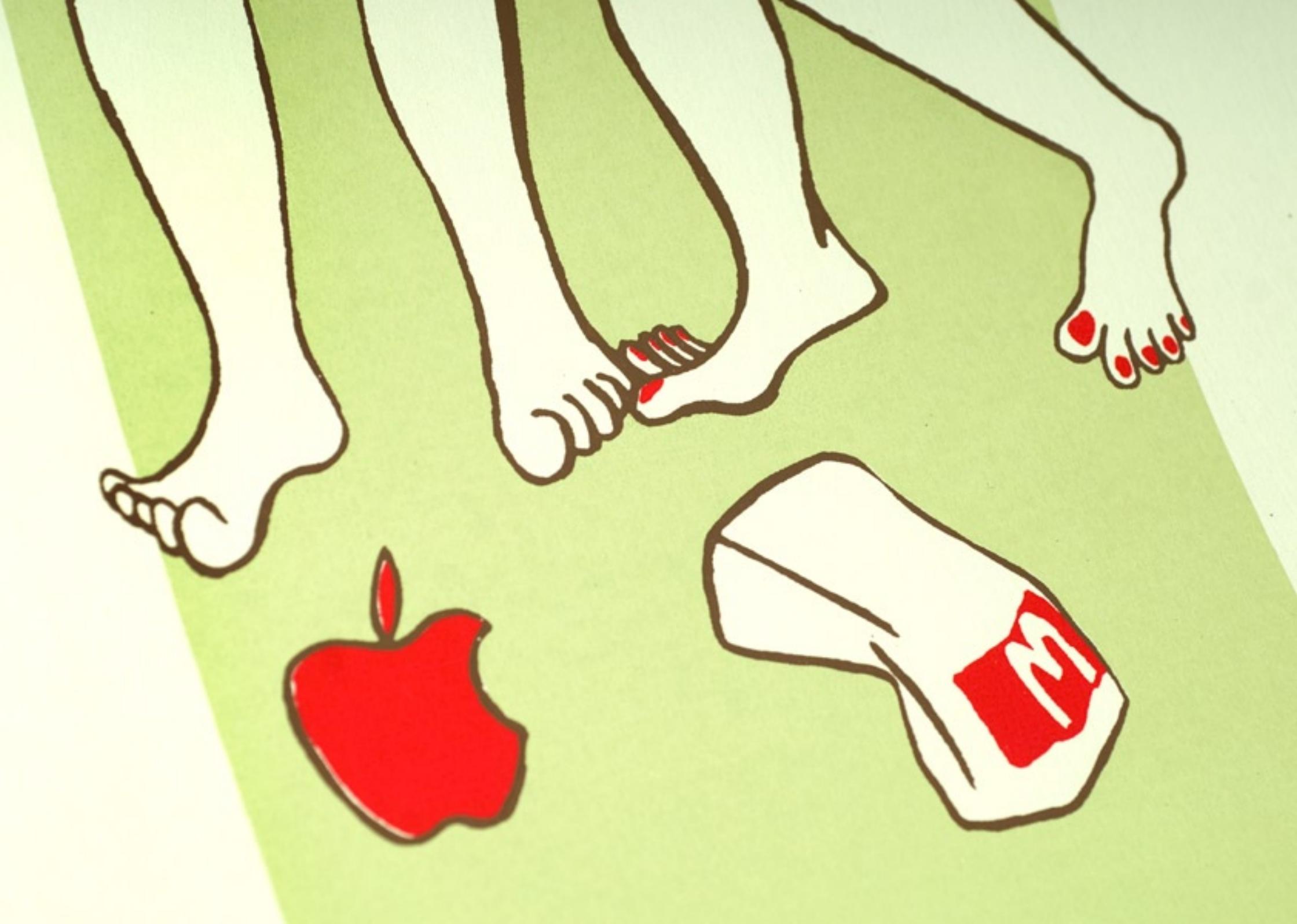


lisa radford | *pinned*
wallpaper design 2009

*Wallpaper as memory, wallpaper as place, wallpaper as decoration,
wallpaper as signifier, wallpaper as trend, wallpaper
as covering, as hiding, as camouflage
wallpaper as background, wallpaper as ornament, wallpaper as history,
wallpaper as brain-fuzz, a repetitive blurrrr, as harmony.
How do you make wallpaper silent?*

*The wallpaper in my house when growing up was bold and awfully 70's.
Large print, large pattern. Purples, greens, yellows and browns.
Neither loved nor hated, I was more intrigued by the matching blinds,
that when pulled down meant the windows disappeared.*

*I started thinking about invisible wallpaper -
something that was nothing from afar
but something up close -
a galaxy of sorts.*



- **ROB M^cHAFFIE'S** paintings typically belie a sense of futility in an excessive world. Here we see the artist's interpretation of Adam and Eve. Although framed with the traditional religious symbols of apples, trees and serpents, the lovers appear dumbfounded in a world awash with noise and detritus. It is an unconventional image, yet McHaffie embraces traditional principles of wallpaper design; the patterns of trees join in a way that accentuates William Morris's desire for wallpaper to be an organic whole.

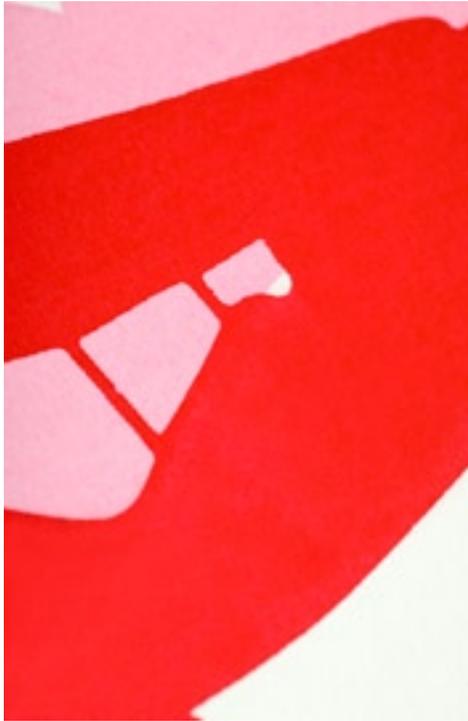


rob m^chaffie | *i got you babe (but i want more)*
wallpaper design 2009

• **SADIE CHANDLER** has previously exhibited large striking handmade wallpapers in public and private settings, and here, for the first time, we see a mechanically produced version. These pictures are united by a bold animated style; portraits of coquettes with elaborate hairstyles jostle with their chiselled masculine counterparts. Her wallpaper is adorned with swirling patterns which evoke the opulent aesthetic of the Victorian home. It is as though the artist has created an adhesive version of the majestic salon collections, where dense patterns of frames are crammed from floor to ceiling.







megan keating | *warpaper*
wallpaper design 2009

Whenever I think of wallpaper I think of those lovely fat catalogues with all the pages of different designs and textures that they have in paint and wallpaper shops.

There is a particular smell to those catalogues and the thought of browsing through them is very pleasurable.

My first experience of these was when I was a small child, I was allowed to have a choice in decorating my room and I desperately wanted to wallpaper it, and to my surprise my parents let me.

My pick was a very elegant pastel pink candy stripe. I remember thinking even then that I wanted something that I could grow into, a very sophisticated choice for a 5 year old. It is still in my room in my parent's house and it still looks fresh and smart.



- **MEGAN KEATING'S** work is concerned with the repetition of irregular oval shapes. The artist has also explored the senseless proliferation of war machinery. At first glance, this wallpaper appears to be a bold pop print which echoes the strong blocks of colour used by design company *Marimekko*. Upon closer inspection, we experience an unsettling sensation of illogical gravitational pulls. The aeroplanes, both vintage and high-tech, dart from the pink clouds in all directions.







tiffany shafran | *aviary*
wallpaper design 2009

My first real encounter with wallpaper was in Raleigh, North Carolina.

I have fond memories of the large plantation homes with their beautiful architecture and their outrageous wallpaper. Every room was wallpapered - including the bathroom and the designs were rich and vibrant and completely over the top.

Often the floral designs overwhelmed the room, making the occupant feel like they were standing in the middle of an overgrown jungle. The patterns weren't just printed either, they were embossed, flocked, striated and gilded too.

When designing my wallpaper for this project I was inspired by the experience of being encapsulated by pattern. It was important to me to have a pattern that filled the room and enabled multiple experiences within the space.

I loved playing with subtle colour variations and luminosity to make the wallpaper not just a pattern but a surface in which my compulsive drawings of birds aren't instantly apparent.



- **TIFFANY SHAFRAN** has designed her wallpaper by tracing images of various species of birds. The repetition of this natural motif creates a mesmerising, but claustrophobic image. She cites the computer game 'Tetris' to describe the dense arrangement of drawings; "this is not a happy aviary, there is little room for flying, and some of the birds are dead".ⁱⁱⁱ These birds, although beautifully drawn, bring to mind the menacing narrative of Hitchcock's film *The Birds*.

ⁱⁱⁱ In conversation with the artist, August 2009



- ANNE WALLACE is also a fan of Alfred Hitchcock but for this project the artist presents a scene of interweaving trees which resemble the elaborate woodcuts found in Grimm's fairy tales. Upon closer inspection, the trees reveal the menacing outlines of prowling wolves. According to the artist, the wallpaper is inspired by the story of Wolf Boy, the subject of Freud's who was traumatised after witnessing his parents having sex. Despite these disturbing undertones, Wallace's wallpaper also belies a keen sense of design; the tear drop shape of the trees resembles the ubiquitous red damask flock wallpapers.





ann wallace | *wolfdream wallpaper*
wallpaper design 2009
(in collaboration with aaron hill)

“I dreamt that it was night and that I was lying in bed. (My bed stood with its foot towards the window; in front of the window there was a row of old walnut trees. I know it was winter when I had the dream, and night-time.)

Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were quite white, and looked more like foxes or sheep-dogs, for they had big tails like foxes and they had their ears pricked like dogs when they pay attention to something. In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by the wolves, I screamed and woke up. My nurse hurried to my bed, to see what had happened to me.

It took quite a long while before I was convinced that it had only been a dream; I had had such a clear and life-like picture of the window opening and the wolves sitting on the tree. At last I grew quieter, felt as though I had escaped from some danger, and went to sleep again.” (Freud 1918)

- **FINALLY, SIMON** Mee's decorative pattern displays a curious mixture of grotesque and naturalistic elements. The way the image branches symmetrically from a central stem is a nod to neo-classical styles. Mee, with a typically dark sense of humour, creates a metaphor for the art world where two squirrels jealously spy one that is happily munching on nuts.

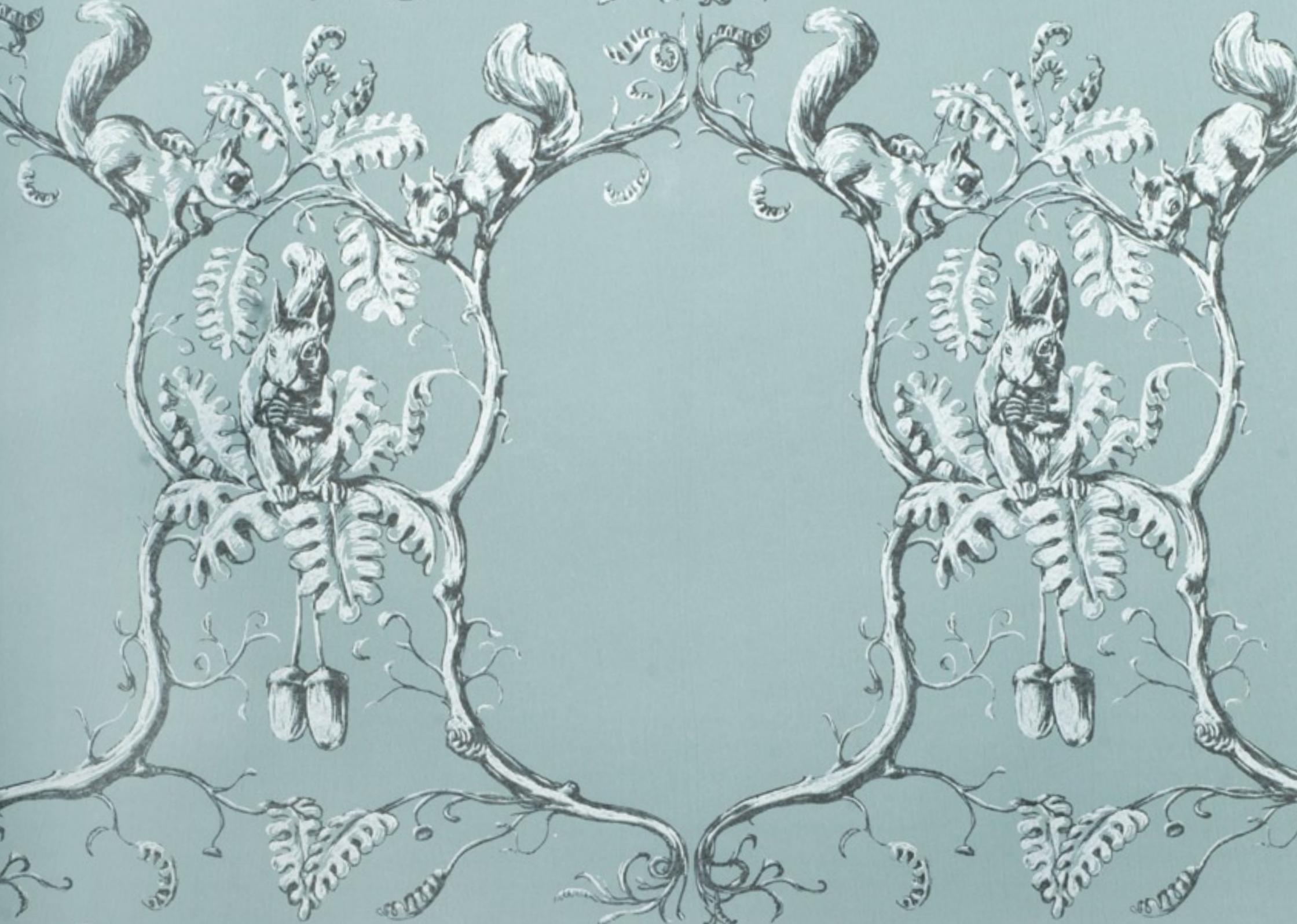




simon mee | *nutty squirrels*
wallpaper design 2009
(in collaboration with siân carlyon)

This design combines some of my favourite things, rococo ornamentation, suspicious animals and one of my favourite footnotes of art history, that of Michelangelo's acorns.

Large, phallic acorns appear in Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel as a way of acknowledging his sponsor, the pope, as they were part of the pope's family symbols. However he didn't like the pope much – hence their suggestive dimensions.



- **IN ALL** of these works, we see how the artists delight in their engagement with wallpaper.

If we were to imagine a house with each room covered in one of these designs, it might be something like this: a dining room by Simon Mee, a bedroom (for a child inclined to nightmares) by Anne Wallace, a boudoir for the modern couple by Rob McHaffie, a powder room by Sadie Chandler, a sewing room by Lisa Radford, a young female aeronautical enthusiast's room by Megan Keating and a birdwatcher's study by Tiffany Shafran.

At any rate, there is no risk that any of these wallpapers will ever be relegated to the status of a backdrop.

- **JANE O'NEILL** | August 2009





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