

David Mabb, Transmission: Speaking and Listening,  
Ornament and Utility, Sheffield Hallam University  
and Site Gallery, Sheffield 2004



*Opposite:*  
David Mabb  
*Self-Portrait as Rodchenko*  
2002  
Black & white photograph  
99 x 66 cm  
Photography by Robin Forster

David Mabb has shown widely in Britain and abroad. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Decorating Business*, Oakville Galleries, Ontario, Canada, *A Factory As It Might Be or The Hall Of Flowers*, Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario, Canada, and *The Hall of the Modern*, The Economist, London. He is Programme Leader of MA Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Mabb concentrated on his works that appropriate William Morris' work, addressing the way in which ideology affects art, design and decoration. The juxtapositions and collisions he sets up in his paintings and videos explore the relations between politics and the visual and the importance of political history. Rather than the nostalgic romanticism of the heritage industry, his is a practice of renewal and recovery, a way of making tradition contemporary through questioning and critique. By over-painting parts of William Morris' fabrics and wallpapers, Mabb transforms these designs of abundance into pared-down sparseness, while also making reference to Malevich and Modernism. Morris and Malevich are repeatedly referenced because of their political and social ideology and the role they believed art and design played in transforming culture. Mabb's work invokes such utopian visions to pay homage, but also to problematise and recontextualise these ideals. He layers and partly obscures the designs, presenting an archaeology of the pattern and the image. In works where he carefully integrates Morris with painted depictions of 1950/60s industrial Liverpool or Malevich's paintings of Russian peasantry he sets up a dialogue between the illusionism of the overpainting with the flatness of the underlying Morris design. Industrialisation as a counterpoint to the collectivisation of agrarian culture is made uncertain by Mabb. His photographic self-portrait and video *Rodchenko Pose* is a recreation of the iconic photograph of Rodchenko in his production suit remade in Morris fabric with the artist as Rodchenko. Here the utopian worker, wearing utopian fabric functions as celebration of historical precedents and their ideological position, but presented with wryness that evades nostalgia.

Contributors *Darren Flint, Lorna Knowles, Tom Newell, Natasha Page, Maya Richards, Heidi Schaefer, Vince Smith, Kim Sylvia*

Chair *Lesley Sanderson*

TN *In associating yourself with William Morris, do you risk limiting any progression of the work?*

DM This is four years work and during this period I have made works which aren't anything to do with Morris. I've shown this work because it fits the theme of ornament and utility. It addresses the question if ornament can be utilitarian, can have meaning. There is always a polarity in the work between ornament represented by Morris's patterns, and utility in terms of function.

DF *Morris moved from his middle-class origins to a radical socialist position and he has been described as a social philanthropist, but at the same time there are some people who suggest that while he constructs a nostalgia for an Arcadian*

*ideal, he also speaks against any kind of spontaneous working-class folk culture, against any honesty of emotion or genuine expression. How do you place your practice incorporating Morris' work in relation to those charges?*

DM Morris is complex because you can look at his writings on art and politics and draw one conclusion; you can look at his practice in terms of his business and draw a different conclusion. He wrote that creativity, art and culture should be available to everyone, not just in terms of consumption but in terms of production. He thought everyone should have the right to enjoy work as a creative activity, envisioning a society in which some would make pots, some would paint pictures, others make music and this was the only sort of work which was fulfilling and un-alienating, unlike factory work that is inhumane and debilitating and kills people off at an early age. But that's a theory, that's an idea of what socialism might be. If you looked at his business you see the opposite. You see him – not using production lines, because they didn't exist at the time – breaking down the creative process into small units so that the people who printed his fabrics each performed a different function, one person inked up the block and then someone else would be printing it in exactly the right place and then someone else would come along and print another thing on top of it. The work done in his factory wasn't creative at all. Creativity was left to him as the designer. It depends on which Morris you are talking about and you always get people saying Morris is this, Morris believed this and Morris did that. He lived a long time. If you examine what he wrote when he was young, it was all very romantic and you come to one conclusion. Take the late Morris and his ideas change and develop considerably. When people make those sort of criticisms they have usually picked up one thing, without looking at the other things.

How does my work relate to that? Well, I tend to take a disrespectful attitude towards Morris, I muck around with him and I try to challenge his ideas, to make them relevant again so they are not consigned to the dustbin of history. Those designs are now hopelessly middle-class, very conservative. People with those designs in their houses are generally small-minded middle Englanders. I attempt to re-invigorate that fabric, to make it new, rescuing it from where it's ended up.

DF *Would you say you are reacting to Morris' work as reactionary, rather than accepting at face value what he was attempting to do?*

DM I don't accept at face value what Morris was attempting at all, but I don't think it is reactionary. I think that Morris might like what I've

done with his work. By questioning it, I want to rethink it. Morris is interesting because he is a leading socialist, not an economist or philosopher like Lenin, Trotsky or Marx; but it's odd that one of the few significant indigenous thinkers and writers that Britain throws up happens to be a fabric designer. That's interesting if you are an artist, because if you are interested in what art means, who it is for, who consumes it, all those problems were thrown up in Morris a hundred and fifty years ago.

DF *If Morris wanted a world where everybody had beautiful things and that was a part of his idea of social change, if he didn't believe in the industrial making of things, how could everybody have beautiful things if someone has to make them?*

DM He thought industrialisation alienates factory workers, they feel no connection to what they are making, they are doing it for a wage. There is no creative process in working on a production line. If any of you have ever had a holiday job in a factory, you know it's tedious beyond belief and if you do that all your life it's stultifying. Morris thought that people should be able, not only to live amongst beautiful things, but to produce beautiful things. It's not only the idea of living among beautiful things, it's also that people ought to be able to make those beautiful things for themselves and not be alienated in the process. The twentieth century has completely rejected that, if you read Bauhaus theoreticians, they thought Morris was marvellous because he politicised design, but they weren't interested in crafts, they weren't interested in the handmade, they designed for technology. They were influenced by the Russian revolution, where it also wasn't an issue. Lenin and Trotsky imported Taylorism, the production line, into Russia. They got Ford over from Detroit to build them car factories. They thought that the working class was the vehicle out of which socialism would arise, so they wanted a working class that would be radical. There are two different visions of socialism there.

VS *The Constructivists were interested in producing a functional aesthetic and they were also interested in promoting industry and technology. Yet you dressed up as Rodchenko, someone who was part of the Constructivist Movement and interested in the production of utilitarian work. You decorated his outfit with a floral Morris design. Is this mocking Rodchenko and the Constructivist Movement, is this a critique?*

DM I don't think art is about telling you something. What I try to do is put two or three things together, which are contradictory. You could say I am mocking Rodchenko, but you could also say that I am mocking Morris. But you get the Morris Fruit fabric on one side, you

get the Rodchenko Suit on the other, and you put them together. This creates a third meaning, which doesn't nullify the two original meanings; it creates something else. Now, that something else is created in your head, you have to try and work out for yourself what the putting together of these two things is. You have to rethink your position in relation to those two utopian statements, because they are contradictory.

LK *I think you are playing safe in not saying what your position is and what you feel as an artist. You referred to middle class values on decoration in the home and you put this in a gallery space – what is that saying? The pattern is feminine and you have put it on a working man's overall – what does that say?*

DM If I didn't answer the question, it's because I don't know the answer. I am interested in problems. I don't have to know the answer to ask a question. The reason I am asking the question is because I want to know the answer. I think that's a fair-enough position; that your work can be questioning. It's not about having all the answers before you start, a work of art doesn't have to be an answer. I am interested in a work of art that is open and questioning, and will make me think when I make it, and make other people think, rather than one that closes things down. If I made a work that was closed, I wouldn't be thinking any more. I wouldn't be asking any questions. That's why I'm not going to answer, not because I am being evasive, but because I don't know.

A lot of textile design or textile work is considered women's work. But all the textiles Morris designed, with one exception, were made for furnishing and upholstery, not for costume, so it is interesting that it gets gendered. I read somewhere that Morris didn't design the Fruit pattern (I haven't been able to verify this), but one of his women assistants. The Fruit image, a pomegranate, is incredibly sexual; it looks like a vagina.

Audience *I am particularly interested that you put that pattern onto the garment, one linked to utilitarianism and the working class male.*

DM I got a tailor to make the worker's suit out of the Fruit fabric. I chose the design because it seemed to be the most extreme in its difference to the image of Rodchenko. I could have chosen other patterns, which weren't so explicit, but I chose it deliberately because the Fruit was so sexual.

MR *If William Morris wanted beautiful things in every home, you've chosen pristine gallery spaces. Presumably his designs and objects were intended to be used and touched, and you have put them remotely on the wall.*

DM Although I have chosen to make paintings, I don't really get to choose where to show them; usually curators choose me. In Oakville the curator liked my work because she felt it would work well in the old arts and crafts house that is now the gallery. She could see how easily a connection could be made between her gallery and my practice. Are you saying that people ought to be able to touch the wallpaper? How is that significant?

MR *One of the beautiful things about fabrics is being able to touch them, and you chose some fabrics that were stitched, where the texture is important. There are lots of very traditional weaving designs. I feel that fabric is something that you touch...*

DM I flatten the fabric, using it like wallpaper. Many Morris fabrics now available are not the original Morris fabrics, because people don't like them. Those available now were wallpaper designs that have been transferred to fabric. He would have differentiated between what would be a wallpaper design and what would be a fabric design. A fabric design, say for a curtain, would be designed so that it could be read when it is hanging as a curtain; it's a completely different thing to see it as a three-dimensional object, whereas a wallpaper design is obviously flat. People don't like his original fabric designs, they are much too fussy for our contemporary taste: the wallpaper designs are much clearer and simpler. I flatten them to become a surface from which to read information. Polke called it 'a polluted surface'; the pollution here is the Morris. I place fabric design within the tradition of painting—generally you are encouraged not to touch paintings in galleries. Because they have become paintings, they are removed from touch.

KS *How do you think about or work with the buildings in which you show?*

DM When I was asked to do the show at the Economist building, I was stuck. It's a distinct building and I knew my paintings would not work. I'd seen exhibitions there and some of them failed, because they didn't engage with the building. I didn't want to make the mistakes that I've seen other artists make. After many visits, I realised that I could put the Morris fabric over and beside the slabs of stone, which would then function like the white squares of Malevich in my paintings. The gaps between the stones were so narrow I couldn't find a means of fixing the cloth, so in the end I stuffed it with a knife. I always start with a questioning of the exhibition site. I don't think you can take gallery spaces for granted; you have to think about how you are going to install your work, you are foolish if you don't. You always have to think about the site and rethink what you are going to do in

that context.

KS *I can understand that in relation to installations, but hadn't considered it about painting. It does seem difficult to work with the site as a painter. How do you reconcile the two?*

DM I've done it by using wallpaper. It sets up a dialogue between the wallpapered room, which is part of the building, and the painting. So you get a wobble between a painting show, an installation and a decorated gallery, which can become domestic. There is a fluidity between all three, making links between the building and the art object.

LK *What I found fascinating in your work was the relation between industrial machinery and the patterns of William Morris. Morris' designs seem to be a fantasy, a dream-state, veiling the means of their production. In your paintings, does the paint become foregrounded to the printed design?*

DM Two things happen: obviously, the paint is painted on top of the fabric so it is physically in front of the design, however as an illusion it appears to be behind the design. There is a contradiction there; it appears to be what it's not.

LS *Why are you constantly drawn to working with failed utopias?*

DM Failed utopias? Nearly all Modernist works are utopian in that they represent a belief in a better society. There are different ways in which they try to articulate that vision—it's essential to Modernism. Even Futurism, which ends up being fascistic, has that dream. If there is such a thing called Postmodernism, then Postmodernism is the failure of that dream. It is the point where society gives up thinking that there is the possibility of a better future. I am interested in rescuing the dream of Modernism, opposing it to Postmodernism.

HS *Yet you have talked about subverting idealism. I have been thinking about the way you make contradictions by putting things next to each other, in relation to the question of idealism. On the one hand you talk about wanting to excavate it and bring back the modern and yet at the same time, you want to subvert idealism.*

DM If I subvert idealism, I subvert it with another idealism, I'm not just interested in rescuing the past and re-presenting it to you. I am trying to rethink it. When we look at Morris and his position on class or his relationship to industry, Morris is set apart from nearly every other Marxist. I'm not sure what is right and what is wrong, which utopian dream is correct, and in the end perhaps none of them are correct. If there is to be a new utopian dream, it is not going to be any of the dreams that precede it. Any new idea for socialism or an avant-garde art practice is going to draw on the past, but must fundamentally rethink it. All these utopian visions have failed. I am concerned with

reworking them and critiquing them and then trying to come up with something new. I place two things together that are both utopian visions, but contradict each other. Probably neither of them is working anymore, but some other vision comes out of the experience.

Audience *Do you hope to offer inspiration to other people, providing new visions through your work?*

DM I hope to make people question how they think about what they look at. There is knowledge to be gained from looking at a work and that will make you think about the world differently.

LS *Much of your work is concerned with beauty of surface. Do you ever try to spoil it?*

DM The first paintings I made using Morris fabric destroyed the surface of the Morris fabric. That seemed a negation of Morris, which wasn't useful, as I wanted to preserve an aspect of him. The beauty of the surface is a way of getting people interested, seducing them. So even if people understand absolutely nothing about the ideas and what's being represented in my work, they will be seduced and then begin to think about what it means. I use beauty as a means of drawing people into the work, engaging them conceptually. Good work always seduces you in some way.

LS *Isn't there a contradiction here as beauty is so related to conservatism. What is beautiful is what has become accepted by the general public as appropriate taste. Monet's paintings in their day were seen as ugly works, and were therefore subversive of notions of beauty. They were radical because they went against the grain of acceptable aesthetics. On the other hand, your work uses beauty, acceptable, conservative good taste.*

DM Recently I saw Paul McCarthy's show at Hauser and Wirth and it seems that ugliness is selling well at the moment. The model of the misunderstood avant-garde died with Modernism. There is no time lag now; art is consumed straight away or not at all. If anything, I would say my work doesn't look beautiful enough. There is often something clunky or clumsy about it that stops it being completely, effortlessly beautiful and so prevents its success.

*Opposite:*  
David Mabb  
*Girl with a Red Pole*  
2002  
Oil on Kentish Rose fabric  
198 x 152 cm

