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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Scalway, H. (2006). cultural geographies in practice: A patois of pattern - pattern, memory and the cosmopolitan city. *Cultural Geographies*, 13(3), 451-457. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1474474006eu367oa>

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cultural geographies in practice

A patois of pattern: pattern, memory and the cosmopolitan city

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For a long time I had a workspace in a warren of artists' studios in an industrial yard near Tooting, south London. The yard is surrounded by other industrial units: among others, a paper, string and packaging firm, an Italian ice cream factory, a shed where shrieking machines cut kitchen work tops out of marble and granite, all day long. And there is a space whose cement floor is white with splashes of plaster of Paris. It belongs to a company which turns out, by the ton, reproduction architectural mouldings. The craftsmen fill rubbish skips with fragments of egg-and-dart coving and broken plaster ceiling roses and wall-plaques in cod antique-Greek mode, or Victorian gothick, or French eighteenth century, or Brighton Pavilion proto-Indian. The items which come out whole from the moulds are sold in smart interior design shops in Fulham and Battersea.

I used often to negotiate a path, always casting an eye at the plaster firm's skips, between the backing, hooting lorries in the yard, to walk to the shops in Tooting. Tooting is home to many communities originating in India. The Broadway and Upper Tooting Road are full of their shops, selling food and clothing, jewellery and music. I once took apart a man's expensive city suit found in a charity shop. It was of dark worsted pinstripe; but in the invisible areas, under the collar and lapels and inside the pockets, was a silk lining of crimson 'paisley'. Replicated doubtless in thousands of other suits, I find in this detail a suggestive reminder of the colonization of the 'British' imagination by India.

Gradually I began to try to think in a more focused way about the *mêlée* of ornament in the place where I found myself, about ornament as a subset of a larger array of patterning forces. A work arising from such heterogeneous and hybrid space, foregrounding the polyglot narratives arising from conjunctions of pattern-in-place in all their disrupting energy, began to seem a possibility.

I take pattern to be a bearer of meaning and of memory. Just as the constructivists asked, 'By what geometries might the world be understood?'¹ – so as a visual worker I began to reframe that question in terms of the contemporary cosmopolitan city to ask: 'By what visual patterning forces and processes might the experience of this urban space be understood and represented? Could there be a mapping/modelling in terms of the diverse visual patterns it presents, and what part might be played by investigating the discontinuities within and between patterns?'

I began to look more closely at the textile shops on Upper Tooting Road. They might have been in any one of Britain's numerous multicultural urban settings, Bradford, Manchester, Leicester, Wembley or Southall, but the one I chose for special attention is prosaically housed in the ground floor of a modest Victorian building near Tooting Bec tube station within walking distance of my studio. Because I worked in the area it strikingly represented, for me, geographical strangeness and distance folded into the closest of proximity, challenging the loaded and limited notion of the 'exotic'.

It is possible to explain such places as solely economically driven, the result of immigration into poor areas in Britain, areas which then become vibrant (if precarious). But another narrative is possible, one that sees them as loci of permission-giving for the host country also, permission for joy in deep pockets of rhythmic ornament, colour, sparkle, in grey northern cities.

It is impossible in this shop to say precisely, this is Asian, this is Western, because if we go to Mumbai or Chennai we will see exactly the same kind of functional things in use. India is a land racing to modernize, full of internet and industry. There is no such thing as 'authenticity' or 'purity' in origins.

Still, certain families of pattern continue to be used persistently in the design of buildings, clothing and other material objects, by diverse groups of people, as markers of devotedly held cultural identity. For example the *boteh* or 'teardrop' motif, the infinitely variable mughal flower bouquet, appears and reappears in the design of saris, and geometric pattern recurs in contemporary Islamic architecture.

I began to frame the project as a subversion of the homogenizations and categorizations found in commercial pattern books. Because I was investigating the pattern in an Asian textile shop, the activity seemed to point me towards the father of Western pattern collecting, Owen Jones, the architect and architectural writer, working at the height of the British Empire.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 precipitated what was felt by many thoughtful people to be a design crisis concerning the future of ornament in the industrial world. Owen Jones's response was to seek to gather examples of ornament, and to archive them as a form of knowledge. In his 1856 *The grammar of ornament*² (a telling title), he turned the subject into a series of illustrated axioms. 'Grammar' here perhaps references the classical idea of architectural 'orders' which were deemed to give coherence to a building; but there is also something Linnæan about the way in which Jones categorized his huge pattern archive to generate 'axioms'. *The grammar of ornament* has to be seen in the mid-nineteenth-century context, a time of collecting, the world being seen as collectable, knowable, controllable. So examples of ornament were collected just as objects of material culture were, for example, by Pitt Rivers; there were

collections of criminal physiognomies, of fossils, insects, stuffed animals, medical curiosities and, perhaps most stupendously, plant material. Pattern collection was pursued all over Europe; in France a little after Jones's *Grammar*, Albert Racinet published his sumptuous collection, *L'ornement polychrome*³ (appearing in as a series between 1869 and 1873), and in Germany C.B. Griesbach produced *Muster Ornamente aus allen Stilen in historischer Anordnung*.⁴

Jones sought to place his work firmly in the then strictly masculine realm of architecture, as a work of a size and dignity to lie in an architect's office, for an architect's use, even though he acknowledged the huge debt to textile design and production in furnishing him with examples of ornament.

But, returning to the current project, visual pattern is not necessarily the same thing as ornament. Pattern may contain ornament, but is not coterminous with it. Ornament suggests embellishment, while the repeated rhythmic qualities of pattern may appear for purely functional purposes, for example, as in the current work, a row of coathangers, the markings on a thermostat or a gas meter, the repeating structure of a shelving unit, tiles, brickwork, etc. I was interested in all the kinds of things in the shop, the bland international modern and the ornamental, in the fact that here it all was, rubbing up together in one small commercial space; because a key issue in the work I had conceived concerned the relationship between different sorts of pattern, and how they contextualize and recontextualize each other.

There is an extensive psychology of pattern; here it is enough to note that it appears to be a function of perception, a constant element in the structure of consciousness connected to desire – we are drawn to decipher, fill in series, make wholes . . .

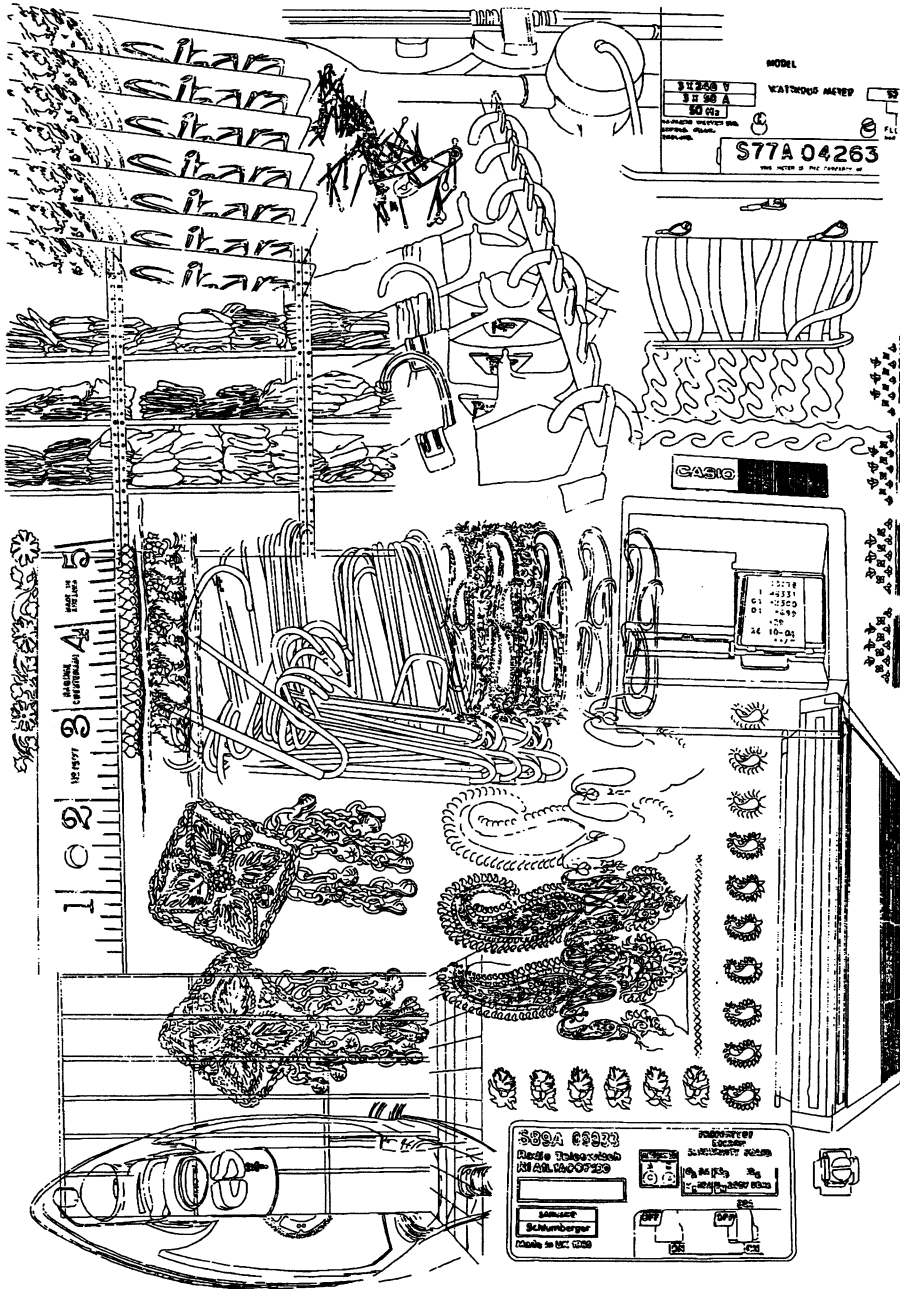
Drawn into my chosen site, I negotiated with the shop's proprietor. He courteously allowed me to take hundreds of photographs. I enlarged them and, back in the studio, began to sort and study them; and at last began to draw.

I drew for hours, rows of coat hangers, gold fringes, the chip and pin machine, gas meters, trees of life, teardrop botchs (flower motifs), mughal florals and geometrics. Something odd happened: I found myself caught between different kinds of space, and therefore trying to cope with different orders of time.

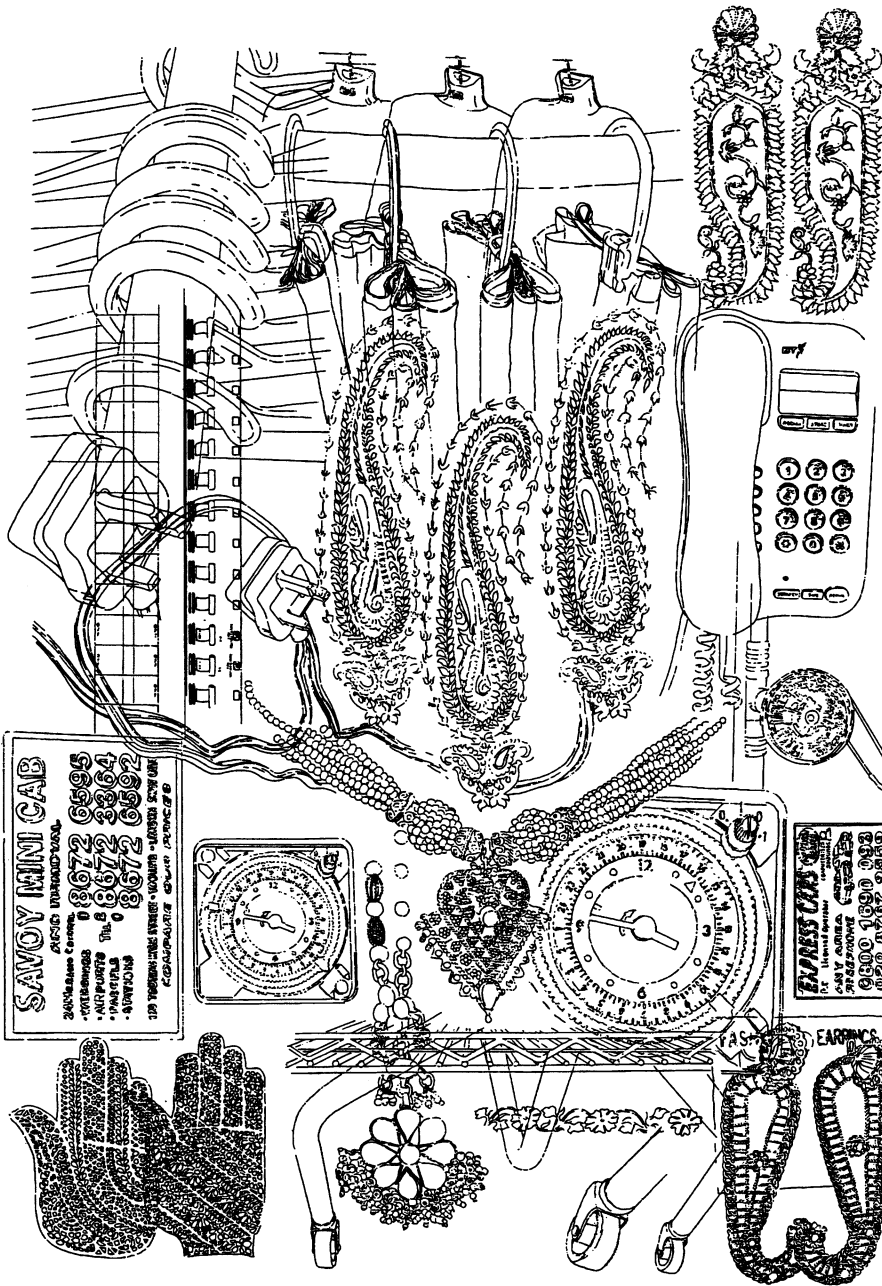
A system of visual representation is also a system loaded with a sense of time. Traditional renaissance perspective carries with it the implication of linear temporality, we are travelling through, from here to there, from near, to far, and the distance between will take us linear time to travel.

But the ornament in the shop, seen flat, intimated other conceptions of time. The shop, reflecting the multiculturalism of India, is full of patterns originating in both Islamic and Hindu communities (and there may well be motifs with a Buddhist origin; certainly there were implications of pattern originating in China and also Central Asia, in the piles of textiles. The proprietor of the shop describes them as 'All Indian'.)

Islamic ornament, combined with Hindu embellishment, produced the vocabulary known as Mughal. Islamic, Mughal and Hindu ornament implies, in different ways, infinity, endlessness. Islamic geometry comes from an ancient interest in mathematics (also visible in Eastern early pre-eminence in astronomy); the ability of Eastern pattern-generating cultures sometimes to fill an available space with pattern suggests not *horror*



From *A patois of pattern*, 2005



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vacui, fear of the void, but a sense of its humming fertility. Which is not to say that Islamic decoration cannot be utterly minimal; space, for example in an apparently empty room or courtyard, may be full of light or of angels; it is never merely empty. Islamic tradition forbids the representation of the human image as competing with God. Islamic geometric ornament is not an art of illusion but a performance of the world as a mathematical order in which perfection may only be alluded to as an attribute of divine. Such ornament repeated as pattern proffers a glimpse of endless harmony, capable of infinite extension. Where perspective plunges the viewer into a bounded time, a proprio-centric, illusory and mortal space, Islamic pattern evokes timelessness, out-of-time.⁵

The exponential explosion of gods, humans and creatures on a south Indian Hindu temple (a *stupa*), all from one tiny invisible point, also suggests the world's space conceived as inherently generative, endlessly fertile.⁶

But if repetition can imply sacred infinity it can also imply backbreaking labour. In a textile covered in thousands of sequins, each held by two hasty threads, here and there a sparkler has come loose and hangs down; threads are left dangling; the gold is not gold. Everything is necessarily in close proximity; such stuff as dreams are made of lie on scuffed shelves next to the plumbing pipes . . . all this evidence of labour, evidence of both fleshly creatureliness and hard economic reality in the pursuit of a dream, memory of cultural identity or hope of delight, gives the shop a real poignancy, a lived quality, a human richness.

In drawing I unpicked a mass of visual and physical intricacy and intimacy with its own textures and its own smells, in order to make it lie down flat on the paper. Drawing, like other embodied practices, is a form of corporeal knowing. What I had not foreseen was what it would reveal. At one moment I would find my pen whisking sharply along a steel rule as I sought to re-enact the lines of a rack of metal shelves or lighting unit, the next, the pen went wisping and wandering at an entirely different speed and pressure among the tendrils of a flowery boteh. The different physical engagements with the varied kinds of material elements in this complex site produced, as drawing often does, a bodily enactment or performance of different paces. These paces echo those implied in the different underlying conceptions of the world brought together in this particular site – conceptions varying from the rational modernism of the shop's functional systems, to the conception of the fertile universe, the gardens,⁷ paradises, references in textile ornament to divine perfection: where speeds vary from ethernet fast to the slowness of hand embroidery and the clack of industrial textile machinery.

Linked to pace is rhythm. Pattern is essentially rhythmic. Profound changes in street and shop visual rhythms have occurred as a result of the widespread arrival of Asian and other immigrant communities in cities like London, an aspect which might be conducive to an understanding of its vibrant complexity. Rhythm in music exemplifies the embodied effects of sound pattern, but visual pattern may appeal to a related human sensibility. The performative practice of hand drawing may enact the way in which different design purposes ('rational' international 'modern', and traditional ornament), developed in different cultures, interact to produce the cosmopolitan city.

The very word 'vibrant', clichéd in its application to cities, to streets and scenes, becomes more interesting when we inquire what 'vibration' entails in its visual rhythmic implications. In this project, drawing became a means of articulating the interaction of some of the different visual rhythms to be found in a particular cosmopolitan site. Such a site is the rich product of the coexistence of these different paces, rhythms and concepts of time and space arising from different apprehensions of the world: a microcosm of the city as an intricate and mutable space of fragmented visual narratives. In layering together elements of perspective drawing and Asian repeated ornament from the modest context of the site, some of this began to become visible.

I took my layered drawings to the Curwen Studio to produce the lithographic prints which are the visible trace of this enquiry. Their dimensions reflected those of the 1856 edition of *The grammar of ornament*, also largely printed using a lithographic process.

The prints are presented as an artist's book in an edition of 30, titled *A patois of pattern*. In referencing the idea of a sample from a pattern archive grown informal and unruly, I wanted to recall the close relation of Jones's original book, *The grammar of ornament*, to orderly archival and museum space, but in a way that might tip its contents back out into the lively street, my neighbourhood.

Notes

- ¹ See B. Fer, 'The language of construction', in B. Fer, F. Batchelor and P. Wood, *Realism, rationalism, surrealism: art between the wars* (Open University and Yale University Press, 1993), p. 106.
- ² O. Jones, *The grammar of ornament* (London, Day & Son, 1856).
- ³ A.-C.-A. Racinet, *L'ornement polychrome: cent planches en couleurs or et argent contenant environ 2,000 motifs de tous les styles* (Paris, Firmin Didot, 1869–73).
- ⁴ C.B. Griesbach, *Muster-Ornamente aus allen Stilen in historischer Anordnung* (Gera, 1865).
- ⁵ See R. Labrusse, 'What remains belongs to God: Matisse, Alois Riegl and the arts of Islam', in *Matisse, his art and his textiles*, exhibition catalogue (London, Royal Academy, 2004), p. 46.
- ⁶ See A. Hardy, 'Form, transformation and meaning in Indian temple architecture: space and time in representation and design', in *Paradigms of Indian architecture: collected papers on South Asia* no.13, ed. G.H.R. Tillotson (London, Centre of South Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Curzon Press, 1998), pp. 107–34.
- ⁷ See B. Spooner 'Weavers and dealers: authenticity and oriental carpets', in A. Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986). Spooner suggests that such symbolic motifs need nuanced understanding.