

POP ART, MODERNISM, AND MORRIS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID MABB

Rosie Miles and David Mabb

David Mabb is an artist, based in London, who has been working with William Morris wallpaper designs and fabrics for several years. His concern has been to engage with Morris's designs in the light of post-modernist aesthetic paradigms, as well as to "rescue" them from the conservatism with which they are now associated in terms of interior decorating. The following interview accompanies Mabb's current exhibition and installation at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK, which draws on the Whitworth's extensive collection of Morris designs.¹

Miles: To start, would you like to say something about how you came to be interested in Morris from your perspective as an artist? You make the point in a piece you recently wrote in the *Journal of William Morris Studies* that Morris's designs are anathema to contemporary art aesthetics (Mabb 11), so what got you into them?

Mabb: There were two reasons. The first was that I had been working with fabrics when I was in the States – Canadian fabrics, cheap American fabrics – and when I came back to the UK I wanted to make something which was quintessentially English. So I was casting around for something that seemed to me to epitomise Englishness. I also always like painting on grounds which aren't blank; most artists start off on a white ground and I wanted to work on something that already existed, as it provides a starting point to work off against. Prior to that I'd read E.P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, so I knew about Morris's politics, and when I came across the fabrics and the wallpapers I didn't quite understand at that point what the relationship was between the two; in fact, they seemed to me contradictory. It's only through working with them that I've begun to understand the relationship between Morris's political, ideological beliefs and the way his designs function as a set of beliefs as well.