

# Manifest Destiny



John Armstrong

Jordan Broadworth

Doug Guildford

Sadko Hadzihanović

Patrick Mahon

## Manifest Destiny

Curated by Stuart Reid



ART GALLERY  
OF MISSISSAUGA



“Of course to one so modern as I am, ‘*enfant de mon siècle*’, merely to look at the world will be always lovely. I tremble with pleasure when I think that on the very day of my leaving prison both the laburnum and the lilac will be blooming in the gardens, and that I shall see the wind stir into restless beauty the swaying gold of the one, and make the other toss the pale purple of its plumes so that all the air shall be Arabia for me. Linnæus fell on his knees and wept for joy when he saw for the first time the long heath of some English upland made yellow with the tawny aromatic blossoms of the common furze; and I know that for me, to whom flowers are part of desire, there are tears waiting in the petals of some rose. It has always been so with me from my boyhood. There is not a single colour hidden away in the chalice of a flower, or the curve of a shell, to which, by some subtle sympathy with the very soul of things, my nature does not answer. Like Gautier, I have always been one of those *pour qui le monde visible existe*.”

Still, I am conscious now that behind all this beauty, satisfying though it may be, there is some spirit hidden of which the painted forms and shapes are but modes of manifestation, and it is with this spirit that I desire to become in harmony. I have grown tired of the articulate utterances of men and things. The mystical in art, the mystical in life, the mystical in nature, this is what I am looking for. It is absolutely necessary for me to find it somewhere.”

– Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, 1905



Jordan Broadworth  
*Constituency* (detail), 1998  
oil on canvas  
162 x 198 cm

## Hidden in the Camouflage of Decoration

by Stuart Reid

*Manifest Destiny* brings together works by John Armstrong, Jordan Broadworth, Doug Guildford, Sadko Hadzihasanović and Patrick Mahon. These five artists experiment with decorative pattern and ornamentation in their work. Each is in some way interested in the nature of surface, in the process of constructing beauty and in the seductive power of veneer. Pretty floral wallpaper patterns, seraph-like shapes from Victorian gingerbread woodwork, drawings of sea creatures, the perfection of a single rose – all these are privileged in these works which expand what can be considered a conventionally masculine vocabulary. While some of the works in this exhibition engage in direct dialogue with the decorative traditions, others appropriate structure from those arts to better couch critical interrogations of gender, shifts in contemporary culture, personal narrative or the act of artmaking itself. By using floral imagery and pattern in their commitment to creating a decorative surface, the artists in *Manifest Destiny* borrow imagery from the traditionally feminine arts and crafts related to the domestic environment, the private, the everyday. Conversely, public or urban space has traditionally been considered masculine – formal, reserved, unemotional – an architecture unrelated to the living body.

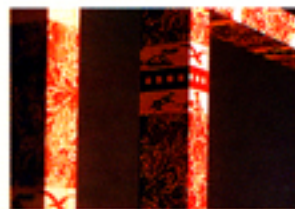
Over the past four years, the Art Gallery of Mississauga has presented several exhibitions by gay male artists addressing concerns about the human body in the face of the AIDS/HIV pandemic. *Regan Morris: Last Works* (1994), *Andrew McPhail: Decorology* (1996) and, most recently, *Philippe Raphanel: Poisons/Phobia* (1998) have all used imagery from the decorative arts, particularly domestic wallpaper and floral studies, as an analogy for the mysterious and frail beauty of the vulnerable body. Sexuality and mortality are intertwined in a dialogue which engages the threat of an untimely death posed by a mysterious, invisible viral disease communicated through sexual contact and the exchange of bodily fluids. Images of the ephemeral beauty of flowers, for example, are charged with irony and poignancy – as Oscar Wilde gestures in the opening quote, “there are tears waiting in the petals of some rose”. These artists’ works invite dialogues on alternative sexualities and the politics and culture surrounding them.



The decorative arts industries attend to the surfaces and materials that house and comfort the body. Domestic textiles, wallpaper, ceramics, wood and iron work, for example, produce imagery that is very often an artistic manifestation of nature's creations, ultimately giving order, pattern and reason to the perfect beauty of organic form. As the AIDS crisis reveals, the natural order of the organic world is in a precarious and ever-shifting balance. Imagery taken from the safe confines of the home, usually rendered in a style reminiscent of a previous, supposedly idyllic time, gives some comfort against the spectre of nature run amok.

The artists included in *Manifest Destiny* do not pointedly address the human body as their primary subject matter, but all use the language of the decorative as a mediator of their specific contexts. The works in this exhibition appear to support the traditional areas of male endeavour as they address less intimate subjects than the body: outward social concerns, issues about work, gender and space. The foregrounding of technical procedure presents artists with a concrete way of locating and codifying what is shifting and undefinable. Often the processes the artists in this exhibition have used speak of labour, as with bronze casting, silkscreen printing and carpentry. Although tattooed with delicate floral pattern, the underlying materials are often industrial. This sense of the material is important in all of the work in the show: the paintings are really about paint; bits of wallpaper are the real thing, not a facsimile; building lumber is decorated, but left in its raw state. In this sense, the politics of the body have not been forsaken for a corporeal interiority: here, we have obvious and quite physical factors implied by labour. Artists are casting, printing, building, painting — all is work, all is ennobled by the dignity of labour. The surface decoration playfully moderates a very "masculine" industry. It insinuates figuration, vulnerability, an awareness of the senses — a reverence for the artist's surroundings, an acknowledgement of natural beauty and of the home as a sanctuary.

Oscar Wilde, imprisoned because of his sexual orientation, wrote the quotation with which I opened this essay, recalling his anticipation of release from the Reading Gaol in 1897. It is also a rhapsodic tribute to the transcendental and erotic powers of nature. At the risk of being heavy-handed with a metaphor, one might read *Manifest Destiny* as addressing the emancipation of this group of male artists from the constricting traditional definitions of masculinity. Their gender,



Patrick Mahon  
*The Palace at 4 a.m., (unfinished):*  
*Studwall Front (detail), 1998*  
silkscreen on wood, hardware  
244 x 244 x 7 cm



Sadko Hadzihanovic  
*Stupidity is Cool (detail), 1997*  
mixed media on wallpaper  
152 x 165 cm

however, can hardly be understood as a prison in the liberal 90s, a time far removed from the severe confines of Victorian England. Social organization has changed dramatically in the last 100 years. A new model of equality between the sexes has been established by the feminist movement: inviting men to re-enter the domestic environment as equal partners, bringing women into the workplace, the urban environment of industry and commerce. Boundaries between the sexes have blurred and new niches have been carved in the gender spectrum for people who are homosexual, bisexual and transgendered as well as heterosexual. It is fitting that the title for this exhibition, the term "Manifest Destiny," be defined as a future event whose occurrence is unavoidable.

*Manifest Destiny* reveals that artists are exploring new sources of imagery without the dogmatic limitations previously imposed by codifications of gender. What we see in the most challenging contemporary art is that gender boundaries are conditional and subjective limits. The works included in this show enter a dialogue with decoration and beauty, and are relevant not because their makers are men (both gay and straight) but because they are observant and insightful artists working in complex times. The so-called information age with its associated digital technologies afford us a new facility in sampling and collaging information and images from disparate sources and historical eras. Scanning, cutting and pasting, borrowing and copying are all functions related to images and words, facilitated by the computer. Several artists in *Manifest Destiny* treat their surfaces like the computer clipboard, borrowing bits and pieces from sometimes random sources, juxtaposing them for the profundities that their coexistence reveals. Conscious of histories, both personal and collective, these artists explore surface decoration as a viable language in addressing their own practice in their chosen media. Unhampered by assumptions that decoration is facile, that ornament and beauty should be associated only with the feminine, they are free to explore this new skin. It is an alluring surface and the artists revel in the mute power of embellishment, relishing beauty for beauty's sake. Oscar Wilde acknowledged that beauty is a heady intoxicant — many contemporary artists show that it is rooted in the very act of artmaking.

In making such broad statements, one must acknowledge that references to decorative arts in this exhibition are culturally specific to people of British and Northern European descent. "Idyllic" times, in this context, would be the late Victorian age or the early part of the 20th century, when



the Arts and Crafts movement flourished, in part as a rebellion against mass production spawned by the Industrial Revolution. Of course, a contemporary artist of First Nations, Asian, African or Southern European descent may have very different reference points for familiar patterns, textiles and decorations. From other perspectives, the decorative arts associated with European culture (both "high" and "low") may connote an aggressive colonial history. For many, apparently benign decorative markings or patterns become violent brandings — evidence of claims made by the conquering culture. This patterning, ironically belligerent and, therefore, masculine in the traditional sense, may be emblematic of cultural assimilation.

Similarly, in the 90s, across all cultural boundaries, the North American home has become colonized. What was once a safe haven has been invaded by the media — a virulent conduit of consumerism. Design and decor have become mere catch-phrases, recast in lifestyle magazines which function as style manuals that dictate what is beautiful, what is in vogue, what we need to be happy. Pattern and decoration have become signals of class consciousness, telling those around us our status in society. The cult of Martha Stewart fills our peripheral vision with garish chintz, screaming middle class stability, adamantly proclaiming validity and worth by way of a trumped-up genealogy. No matter what your cultural background, you too can buy into the trappings of the New England idle rich. Table cloths, sheets, curtains, towels, wallpaper, even clothing can be encoded with the signs of good taste. Everything from a printed Hermes scarf to the kitsch rug depicting dogs playing cards around a table (which has become an icon of trailer-park decor) is charged with information these days. Decoration is loaded, pattern is potent — both are now information and, therefore, marketable.

Several of the artists in *Manifest Destiny* have sampled patterns and designs from earlier periods in history referencing identifiable styles and trends — either from a century ago in Victorian times, or decades ago. This may be a nostalgic glance typical of a *fin de siècle*, or it may be fundamental to an artistic practice which explores the vocabularies found in art history. This exhibition cites painters, sculptors and craftspeople from this century and previous ones, weaving the contemporary work into solid relationships with works that have come before. This type of visual referencing works in the same way that the surface patterning does. Non-verbal associations and



Doug Guildford,  
*Blown Ashore: 100 Pages from  
the Far End of the Beach in  
Nova Scotia (detail)*, 1998  
silkscreen monoprint on Japanese paper  
22 x 32 cm



John Armstrong  
*The Ideal Person or  
an Equal Mixture of the Four:  
Blood, Phlegm, Bile and Black Bile  
(detail)*, 1997/98  
bronze and porcelain  
each rose 1 m long

visual comparisons are all valid and intentional in artmaking. These seemingly benign decorations are potent reminders of the spaces and rooms that we inhabit, textures that we have enjoyed, displays of natural beauty that have inspired us.

The objective of this exhibition is not to prescriptively define or limit the reading of the works gathered as a culturally specific dialogue on aesthetics, or to offer a treatise on the expanding male consciousness, although both are undeniable factors. This is an opportunity to examine five individual bodies of work that overlap in a visually poetic sense, because they draw elements from like sources and share similar concerns. *Manifest Destiny* includes works straddling several media: painting, printmaking, sculpture, drawing and installation. Within such diversity are multiple references to domestic floral wallpaper, historical textiles and ornate surface decoration. There are overt nods to art historical legacies and acknowledgements of traditional techniques and particular art and design genres. Many of the works, as well, share an irreverence for such histories in their unusual use of materials as well as in their physical presentation.

In the opening quote, Wilde speaks of "some spirit hidden of which the painted forms and shapes are but modes of manifestation". In this introduction, I have attempted to identify some of the questions that surround the work from a contemporary context, noting the cultural conditions in which the objects have been made. In the descriptions of the individual artist's works that follow, this catalogue document of *Manifest Destiny* aims to discuss the spirit and intent that have moved the artists to create, to pattern, to decorate and encode their work with resonant meaning.



JORDAN BROADWORTH is interested in the formal tenets of painting; he creates abstract paintings that suggest architectural spaces through the blocking and colouring of his compositions. The vertical elements in Broadworth's compositions are rooted in a horizontal grounding bar that runs across the bottom of each painting. These upright posts are an integral part of Broadworth's building structure — they give it rhythm and divide the painting's surface into an orderly series of rectangles, creating windows, portals and passageways. Painted in rusty browns, steely greys, oil-slick greens and indigo blues, these paintings conjure industrial architecture through colour that is not associated with either floral or decorative sources, in a palette of night rather than day, the urban rather than the bucolic.

As with John Armstrong, Broadworth uses decorative marks as figures on abstract grounds. These marks are exaggerated arabesques derived from the cut-outs of Victorian architectural gingerbread work. These shapes become the body within space, the occupant of the composition. In his 1996 M.F.A. thesis (University of Guelph) entitled *Cause + Effect*, Broadworth discusses the use of these ornaments in his paintings:

"In modernism's forced separation between art and decor, art was awarded full frontal attention, decor was left with the peripheral. In my work I strive to engage the peripheral, not in the installation of the work, but by engaging the sideways pull of decor. I work with decorative 'off-cuts,' the by-product of reproduction Victorian architectural details commonly referred to as 'gingerbread.' I was first drawn to the apparent disarming innocence of gingerbread's basic function: to fill space. Having studied these motifs for a few years I've found they are not formally innocent; they don't just fill space, they seduce it. Each closing leads to an opening, each opening to a closing. Every excess results in a void."

Broadworth's voids are not inactive spaces. The coloured rectangles include dripping, running paint that has been controlled and forced into a repeat pattern. The drip is, of course (along with Armstrong's abstract painting grounds), homage to the action paintings of Jackson Pollock (1912-56) and the history he and his contemporaries began for modern painting practice. The drip is evidence of the artist's consciousness of the nature of his material and the subtleties of the language of painting. Broadworth's drips are applied to a heavily gessoed-and-sanded surface, then are scraped off before they dry. These drips are traces of organic marks, rendering the gingerbread seraphs as "other" — an inhabitant of space rather than part of that structure. There is a push and pull between the ground and the decorative figure that catalyzes the relationship. Paint as a material with meaning and history becomes paramount in these works. Broadworth's harnessing of the brute force and emotion of Pollock's action paintings offers a reconsideration of the muscular gesturing which has characterized this medium for much of the latter part of this century.



Jordan Broadworth  
*Felon (detail)*, 1998  
oil on canvas  
116 x 125 cm

Broadworth also understands the paradoxical laws of compositional dynamism: without asymmetry, there is no symmetry. The artist has cut away the upper right hand corner of each of his canvases, affixing a separate square canvas as a legend or key to its larger mate. The square window gives all the information one needs to read the work; it operates as an independent, fully resolved composition, the genetic key to the larger manifestation. In *Temper, Temper* (1998), Broadworth further complicates this sense of multiplicity by pairing two paintings of the same composition. The mates have accompanying legends, both look much the same. Are we to read this as a negation of the concept of the original, or are we to merely appreciate the subtle differences between the pair? Pattern relies on duplication. Jordan Broadworth shows us that painting does not allow for exact replication and he brings the whole impetus for making unique images into question.



Jordan Broadworth  
*Temper, Temper*, 1998  
oil on canvas  
2 @ 160 x 157 cm



Jordan Broadworth  
Constituency, 1998  
oil on canvas  
162 x 198 cm

#### Credits and Acknowledgments

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Doug Guildford, Sadko Hadzhasanovic,  
Patrick Mahon

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*Blood, Phlegm, Bile and Black Bile, 1997/98, (detail)*

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VICTOR, 1990