

Pattern and Paint: wallpaper as a visual language in fine art

Jennifer Trouton

My interest in wallpaper began in 2005 during the demolition of my late grandmother's home, which had remained untouched since her death in 2000. As the interior was being stripped, I discovered the inside of her airing cupboards were lined with successive layers of wallpaper. These hidden strata felt like intimate archives – each layer marking a moment in time, reflecting her evolving tastes alongside broader shifts in style and society. That encounter led me to think of the many abandoned houses scattered across the Irish landscape, their faded wallpapers peeling yet clinging to the walls, mute witnesses to the lives once lived within. In that moment, wallpaper ceased to be a merely decorative surface and became, for me, a layered repository of memory and cultural history: a site where personal narratives and collective histories meet.

Over the ensuing decades, wallpaper became a recurring motif in my practice. My early projects involved documenting the interiors of abandoned dwellings across Northern

Ireland and subtly reanimating them – tracing the outlines of wallpaper patterns onto crumbling plaster and reintroducing household objects into the rooms. These objects, often broken or displaced, served as quiet provocations, reminders of the domestic past while hinting at moments of disruption or unspoken drama (Fig.1). I often worked directly onto floral wallpapers, employing trompe l'oeil techniques to blur the threshold between the tangible and the illusory. In doing so, wallpaper became more than a decorative skin: it became a charged surface for storytelling, a place where traces of intimacy, memory, and rupture coexist within the same visual field.

My fascination with wallpaper and surface pattern eventually extended into a parallel interest in fabric, another material deeply embedded in the domestic realm, with its own rich cultural and historical associations. The dialogue between these two elements has since become a central thread in my practice. *Huddled Masses: No Place Like Home* is an early example of this convergence (Fig.2). This painted diptych reflects on the intertwined histories of the Irish Famine and the Industrial Age, viewed through the prism of my own family's migration narrative. The wallpaper design, created specifically for the work, marks the beginning of my exploration into wallpaper as an active narrative structure. Within it, a decaying cottage – the birthplace of



Fig.1 Jennifer Trouton, *Tomb*, 2006, oil on board. Private Collection. Photo: Tony Corey



Fig.2 Jennifer Trouton, *Huddled Masses: No Place Like Home I*, 2011, oil on linen. Private collection. Photo: Tony Corey

my great-great-grandmother – stands as a symbol of the abandoned Irish dwellings left in the wake of economic migration. Opposite it, a cotton factory in West Springfield, Massachusetts, represents the industrial sites where many of my emigrant ancestors laboured. The embroidered silk fabric on the left evokes the 'New World', its mass-produced opulence serving as a counterpoint to the handmade textiles of the domestic sphere.

The red and white fabric featured in *Longue Durée* is one such handmade item (Fig.3). Belonging to my grandmother, it was brought back to Ireland by her mother in the early 1900s. Originally crafted by American settlers from fabric



Fig.3 Jennifer Trouton, *Longue Durée*, 2014, oil on linen. Private collection. Photo: Tony Corey

scraps, such quilts were the product of necessity, designed for warmth and endurance. In the painting, the blanket appears to slip away, revealing a toile de Jouy wallpaper – traditionally associated with romanticised pastoral scenes. This particular pattern depicts a fox hunt, with elegantly dressed women in a horse-drawn carriage following the chase. I subverted this genteel imagery by replacing elements of the pattern with engravings from *The Illustrated London News*, portraying Irish women and children enduring hardship. The courting couple beneath a tree becomes Bridget O'Donnell and her children, homeless and starving. A footman arranging a picnic is replaced with figures digging for potatoes. The work interrogates the politics of land in Irish history: for the poor, it was sustenance and survival; for the wealthy, a stage for spectacle, sport and privilege.

In *The Ties That Bind I* puncture the genteel idyll of a stag-hunting toile de Jouy by inserting unflinching images of the peasant classes labouring and often perishing on the land (Fig. 4). The idealised countryside fractures, exposing the social truths it was designed to obscure. In the foreground, imported embroidered textiles evoke the New World and its boundless promise, their decorative opulence standing in deliberate contrast to the handmade, functional fabrics of the Irish domestic sphere left behind – spaces like the crumbling two-room home of my great-great-grandmother, now dissolving into the landscape. Twine



Fig.4 Jennifer Trouton, *The Ties That Bind*, 2013, oil on linen. Private collection. Photo: Tony Corey

and candlesticks, once belonging to my great-grandmother, serve as quiet witnesses to cottage industries erased by the industrialisation of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Through its layering of material, memory and history, *The Ties That Bind* explores the tensions between the landed gentry and the working classes, global trade and local loss, between the seduction of the decorative and the weight of lived experience.

Moving forward to October 2024, my solo exhibition, *In Plain Sight*, was presented at the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts, Dublin. The work forms part of a larger body of practice I have been developing since 2016, emerging from a collaboration with historian Dr Mark Benson. His 2017 PhD at Queen's University, titled *The Provision of Abortion in Northern Ireland 1900–1968*, examined a history in which the UK's 1967 Abortion Act, introduced in 1968, did not extend to Northern Ireland. Abortion provision there remained severely restricted until its decriminalisation in 2019. Benson's research granted him access to sealed court records containing harrowing accounts of women who suffered and sometimes died attempting to end unwanted pregnancies. These stories revealed how, in the absence of legal provision, women sought to control their bodies using the tools available within the domestic sphere. Knitting needles, soaps, washing powders and herbal teas – objects imbued with care and comfort – were repurposed as instruments in the struggle for autonomy. I was struck by the dissonance between the gentle familiarity of these objects and the brutality they conceal, a darkness that nostalgia often erases. *In Plain Sight* seeks to bring these women's stories out of the archive and into the public realm, confronting the intertwined forces of church and state that denied them choice.

The first piece in the series, *One of Many*, comprises 126 works spanning 22 metres of wall, realised over four years (Fig.5). On the surface, *One of Many* presents a collection



Fig.5 Jennifer Trouton, *One of Many* (detail), 2016–2020, mixed media installation
Photo: Ros Kavanagh



Fig.6 Jennifer Trouton, *One of Many* (detail), oil on paper mounted on board
Photo: Ros Kavanagh

of seemingly modest household artefacts, rendered in a gently nostalgic colour palette. Yet, taken together, they form a narrative map of women's lives, compiled through the objects that bore witness. Each individual item carries its own story, speaking to, or directly enacting women's struggles for bodily autonomy. Wallpaper provides the structural framework around which all elements are carefully balanced. Works are painted on wallpaper lining or solid-colour wallpaper, with artefacts perched in front of bespoke patterns painted directly onto circular shelves. For *One of Many*, I deliberately referenced the designs of William Morris, the iconic 19th century wallpaper designer whose patterns remain widely recognisable. Placing the objects against Morris's wallpaper frames personal and historical stories in a familiar visual context, contrasting decorative comfort with the darker histories they carry. I selected Morris designs featuring floral or fruit motifs for their classical references to fertility and fecundity. These patterns were painted directly onto wallpaper lining or solid-colour wallpaper, with subtle line images of Christian iconography added at the centre. These included female patron saints associated with women and daily life, such as Mary Magdalene, the patron saint of women and repentant sinners, integrated into Morris's *Larkspur* pattern (Fig.6). This incorporation of Christian imagery acknowledges the pervasive presence of religion in Irish homes, woven into the fabric of daily life, while inviting reflection on the complex relationship between religion and women's fertility.

During my research, I encountered an abortifacient recipe recorded by the 11th-century Italian gynaecologist Trota of Salerno, widely regarded as the first female professor at the renowned medical school of Salerno. Her writings remain



Fig.7 Jennifer Trouton, *Trota's Recipe* wallpaper, acrylic on paper
Photo: Simon Mills

among the most significant medieval sources on women's medicine. Drawing upon the complete list of ingredients she prescribed, I developed a wallpaper design that reinterprets William Morris's *Lily* pattern (Fig.7). Within its ornamental framework a pelvis emerges, assuming the form of a butterfly, while the uterus and ovaries unfurl as tubular blossoms. By weaving these hidden symbols of reproductive knowledge into a decorative surface, the pattern shifts from passive embellishment to an act of creative resistance.

This recipe wallpaper became the focal point for a large-scale diptych titled *The Last Supper: Original Sin* (Fig.8). Drawing on the traditions of classical still life, the work appears at first to be conventional: commonplace domestic objects displayed across a sumptuous William Morris fabric. The pattern features peaches, oranges, lemons and ripe pomegranates – the latter split open to reveal a vulva-like form. Yet each familiar object placed upon the fabric is



Fig.8 Jennifer Trouton, *Last Supper: Original Sin*, 2020–2023, oil on linen.
Ulster Museum Collection. Photo: Simon Mills

taken from *One of Many* and connects directly to women's attempts to control their bodies within the home. Against this surface, Trotta's recipe wallpaper unfurls as an opulent green backdrop, a quiet act of resistance concealed in plain sight.

In the right-hand panel, the recipe wallpaper is transposed into fabric while the William Morris design becomes the wallpaper. A white enamel bowl brims with green apples balanced on a tall wooden stool. Below it, a single red apple lies split open, its flesh suggestive of the female vulva. This image recalls Eve's act of taking the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The fallen apple on the ground speaks to the notion of the expelled or 'fallen woman', linking biblical myth to the lived realities of women denied agency over their own bodies.

I later transformed the painting of Trotta's recipe wallpaper from *The Last Supper* into rolls of wallpaper, using it as the backdrop for a series of watercolours titled *Mater Natura: The Abortionist's Garden* (Fig.9). This series comprises 32 delicate paintings of common European herbs and flowers traditionally used to induce abortion. Ghost-like images hover like watermarks behind the plants: on close inspection some plants reveal themselves to be growing through the female pelvis, uterus, lungs and heart, while others take root in or grow across the map of Ireland. The number 32 is significant, echoing the number of counties on the island of Ireland. Framed against the Victorian green palette of

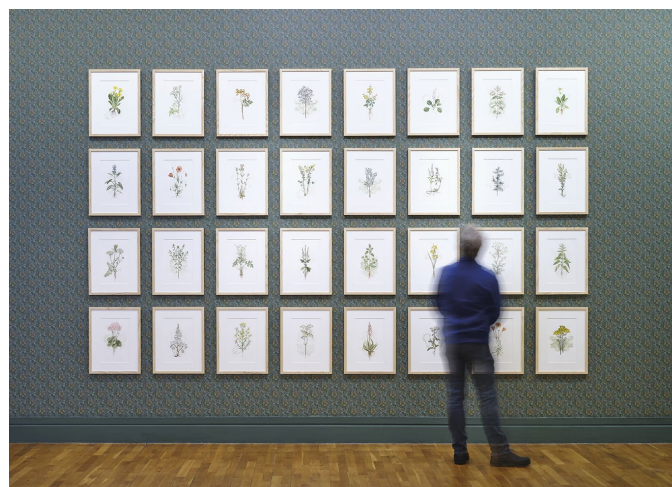


Fig.9 Jennifer Trouton, *Mater Natura: The Abortionist's Garden*, 2019–2020, watercolour on paper. Irish State Collection. Photo: Ros Kavanagh

Trotta's recipe wallpaper, the watercolours acquire a sense of grandeur that belies the darkness hidden within. Their subversive symbolism speaks to women's experiences without resorting to explicitness. As the English polymath John Ruskin observed: '*It is in this power of saying everything, and yet saying nothing too plainly, that the perfection of art consists*'.¹

Hung beside *Mater Natura: The Abortionist's Garden* is *Six Months Gone* (Fig. 9). Once again combining William Morris's *Fruit* wallpaper with Trotta's recipe pattern, this time

reimagined as draped silk fabric, the work presents a wilted peony and a bleeding pomegranate lying portentously in the foreground. *Six Months Gone* draws on the ancient Greek myth of Persephone. While gathering flowers, Persephone was seized by Hades and taken to the underworld. In her absence, her mother Demeter, goddess of agriculture, grieved so deeply that nothing grew. Unaware of the consequences, Persephone ate six of the 12 pomegranate seeds offered to her in the underworld. As punishment, Zeus decreed she must spend six months each year below with Hades and six months above with her mother. Her descent and return became a mythic explanation for the cycles of fertility and barrenness, the changing of the seasons. At the centre of the work lies the pomegranate, a fruit steeped in symbolism across cultures. Believed by many traditions to be the true fruit of Eden rather than the apple, it continues to appear in rituals and ceremonies today. Its meaning is often bound to fertility yet it carries a dual identity, standing equally for birth and for death.

The wallpaper backdrop of *Six Months Gone* is composed of plants drawn from the *Mater Natura: The Abortionist's Garden* watercolour series (Fig. 10). Like the pomegranate, these plants hold a double life: herbs such as sage and chamomile can support health during pregnancy when taken with care, yet in other contexts have long been used to terminate pregnancies. This duality – nurturing and destructive, protective and subversive – underscores the fragility and complexity of women's relationships with nature, medicine, and control over their own bodies.

Following in the lineage of William Morris and the generations of pattern-makers before him, I continue to hand-paint my designs. Though digital tools promise speed and precision, my process insists on beginning with the intimacy of a hand drawing. Only after a period of digital refinement do I return to paint, where the work finds its final form. From these hand-painted origins, designs may later be documented and translated into fabric or wallpaper, yet it is their handmade origin that gives them weight and anchors them in tradition.

For me, tactility and individuality are essential. A computer can replicate precision, but not the quiet presence of the imperfect mark – subtle slips, overlooked details, the quiet evidence of human touch. These small irregularities, often noticed only years later, are not flaws to be corrected but qualities to be embraced. They speak to the uniqueness of the work, its refusal of mechanical perfection. As John Ruskin observed:



Fig.10 Jennifer Trouton, *Six Months Gone*, 2024, oil on linen. Photo: Simon Mills

No good work whatever can be perfect, and the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art.²

It is in this embrace of imperfection – in the weaving together of memory, material and history – that the work finds its power. What appears decorative or familiar opens onto darker truths, offering not perfection but presence, not resolution but resistance.

Jennifer Trouton (b. 1971, Co. Armagh) is a Belfast-based artist whose paintings incorporate embroidery, wallpaper, and textiles to explore memory, history, and gender. Reframing still life traditions, her award-winning work features in major Irish and UK collections. A graduate of the University of Ulster, she received the Arts Council of Northern Ireland Major Individual Artist Award in 2022.

1 J. Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. 2, *The Sea-Stories*, Smith Elder, and Co, 1853, p.195

2 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol. 4, *Of Mountain Beauty*, Smith Elder, and Co, 1860, p.352