

Review by Kate Wilson

The Arts and Craft House: Then and Now

June 27th-September 13th 2015

Compton Verney

Warwickshire

CV35 9HZ

Who doesn't like a bit of William Morris? Wallpaper, fabric, furniture design and manufacture and a philosophy for life of biblical proportion to many a designer and craftsman but consequently susceptible to over familiarity and misplaced application-the tea towels, the aprons, the mouse mats..... It is therefore refreshing to be able to examine the work of Morris and Co and the broader concept of the Arts and Crafts Movement alongside that of a group of contemporary artists currently showing at the art museum, Compton Verney, located in rural Warwickshire. The archetypal Georgian architecture and confected landscape of Compton Verney house and grounds create an interesting juxtaposition both physically and philosophically to that of the Arts and Crafts Movement, from order and symmetry to the natural and the 'handmade' and yet all reflective of idealism and craftsmanship.

Described as a 'Summer of Arts and Crafts', three simultaneous exhibitions explore and celebrate the continuing relationship between home, garden and designer. *The Arts and Crafts House Then and Now* features some Morris and Co originals, contemporary furniture design and household tools as well as the specially commissioned work by the ceramist Rosa Nguyen; *The Hart Silversmiths: A Living Tradition* exhibits a selection of silverware handcrafted by the Hart family, a business originating from the Arts and Crafts Movement set up in 1902 and still going strong from the same workshop in Chipping Camden; *William Morris Wild Flower Meadow* (2015) completes the lineup, a large scale outdoor commission by the garden designer Dan Pearson. Based on Morris' *Trellis* pattern wallpaper Pearson's design is literally mown into a wild flower meadow, abundant in wild grasses but sadly lacking in wild flowers when visited for this review, however still a spectacular sight viewed from the various vantage points offered around the house.

The several exhibition areas are dedicated to architectural drawings, garden designs and photographic records of Arts and Craft houses and their gardens, interspersed with crafted artefacts from prominent figures in the Arts and Crafts Movement and thoughtfully curated

alongside the work of contemporary makers. There is even the recreation of an interior of the house *Beechanger* (c.1902/3) belonging to the architect and designer Sidney Barnsley, incorporating original Arts and Crafts furniture with work by contemporary ceramists Michael Eden and Andrew Wicks. Eden's *A Twisted Oval Wedgwoodn't Tureen*, 3D printed in what is described as artificial bone and arguably one of Eden's more organic forms, sits comfortably in the space. A group of Wicks' thrown and carved porcelain vessels sit high on a mantelpiece with additional similar forms contained within a cabinet designed by C.R Ashbee (the founder of the Guild of Handicrafts in 1888). The carved porcelain creates an interesting texture, strangely reminiscent of 3D printing or even the woven work of Lloyd loom. Collectively Wicks' various forms assume a quality akin to nature and contrast well with the warmth of the oak cabinet.

A fascinating table top installation by *Objects of Use*, a contemporary craft company retailing principally British made household 'tools', championing Morris' ethos of "having nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful", showcases thrown tableware, Japanese inspired brass trivets, hand carved chopping boards and small gardening tools amongst a myriad of other hand crafted objects. Hanging on the adjacent wall are a selection of line engravings depicting rural crafts by the artist and printmaker Stanley Anderson (1884-1966) drawing upon the passion and concern for the survival of rural crafts of garden designer and horticulturalist Gertrude Jekyll.

The newly commissioned work of Rosa Ngyuen, *Gardening with Morris* (2015) is described in the museum text as delving "deep into William Morris' designed plant forms, returning them to nature, soil and weather". As with Dan Pearson the ceramist Nguyen has directly responded to Morris' love of gardening and natural forms. Using a selection of familiar Morris designs, for example *Willow Bough*, *Scroll*, *Chrysanthemum* and *Daisy*, the 9 metre long wall was first hung in Nguyen's own designs physically silk printed onto *Morris and Co* wallpaper, before arranging an array of glass, ceramic and natural forms across it. The heavily patterned Morris designs are reduced to various exposed areas masked by the application of flat colour in the printing process; blocks of pale yellow, light and dark grey facilitate intriguing shadow play, especially with the ethereal glass forms and further enhanced by relatively large printed orange petal shapes irregularly dispersed across the wallpaper. Equally inspired by the natural world her objects three-dimensionally reconstitute what Morris had laid flat, creating an installation as natural as sundried seed heads wafted in on a late summer breeze. Nguyen's sensibilities of arrangement, unafraid to give every form

its space, while still functioning collectively as a vertical landscape, allows each to be examined individually-and they should be. Every form is crafted; glass is organic, softly coloured and etched and ceramic is glazed with subtle edges of colour and tone achieved through a variety of firing techniques; organic material soaked in slip, its ghost preserved in the fired porcelain body contrast with actual, but hand painted natural forms, some contained in ‘vessels’, others hung on their own. The array of organic forms and seemingly random arrangements manifest as a tableau of nature and a thing of beauty. A focus for contemplation, its apparent effortless masking the thoughtful choreography of the work, referencing the spiritual engagement of shape, line and form practiced in the art of *Ikebana*, a philosophy Nguyen utilizes in her practice, that is the Japanese Zen form of flower arranging. Nguyen’s unique interpretation of William Morris offers a fresh perspective of what is very familiar to many-a bonus to enjoy both the old and the new.

Antonia Harrison, Compton Verney’s exhibition curator, has gathered a huge and comprehensive amount of visual material and artworks for their ‘Summer of Arts and Crafts’, a great deal to consume in one visit but fascinating for anyone remotely interested in the Arts and Crafts Movement. One very slight criticism is the lack of natural light for much of the exhibition space but it does not detract from the quality of the historic artefacts nor that of the new; equally conscious of design, process, material and craft ideals.