

Drift

Lyndall Phelps often seeks inspiration for her multi-media installations in the left-behind, disused objects found in junk and antique shops. She follows their trail, gathering a string of anecdotes about their original function, design, status and significance. When she is hooked by a narrative, Phelps pares it away leaving a simulacrum of the object in her installations. Her practice echoes work by Ann Hamilton and Cornelia Parker, using extreme care to craft her objects, letting the cultural and historical essences seep through by uncanny association, as if from latent memory. By condensing what attracted her to the object – be it a witches' ball, or a surgical cap – she makes it a fetish, a potent symbol of archetypal fears and dreams.

Drift, Phelps' layered commission for the Great Eastern Hotel, grew out of extensive research of the site's history. She was initially struck by the sombre corporate architecture of the hotel, which was renovated in 2000. Many of the ornate features had been removed to create a continental, sophisticated minimalism, which said little of its origins as a grand Victorian railway hotel. Phelps was also astonished by the flower arrangements in the public spaces, where bunches of red roses were tightly crammed into narrow-necked vases, allowing no movement or play of light. She wanted to restore the former decorative richness to the contemporary space, linking features remaining in the 1884 building to the recent restoration. Her research led her to Gertrude Jekyll, a garden designer who was at the height of her popularity in the 1900s, and to Cole & Son, the wallpaper manufacturers who produced and installed wallpaper in the hotel in the '60s and '70s.

Drift harnesses these elements with elegant inventiveness and stunning visual beauty. The title suggests the movement back and forth of the hotel guests, but came directly from Gertrude Jekyll's book, *Colour Schemes for the Flower Garden*, first published in 1908, in which she recommends 'long-shaped plantings' or 'drifts', as opposed to 'block-shaped patches' of flowers.

In Jekyll's passionate and eloquent '*study of colour beauty*', she describes hues of colour with a painter's eye, considered gardening a fine art, not a mere '*collection of plants*'. In one hilarious passage she advises a garden of azure blue and blue china asters, and then goes on to complain how seed lists falsely call these shades blue when '*the word blue should not be used at all in connection with these flowers. There are no blue china asters...azure blue,*' she insists, '*is tender pale lavender-lilac.*' (1)

Phelps commissioned Cole & Son to produce wallpaper inspired by the colours favoured by Jekyll – soft pastel apricot, a quiet dusky red, flocked in a white floral pattern known as *Dorothy*, which dates from the late 1800s. This wallpaper, gradated in twelve colours, from cool to warm tones, enveloped the first floor balcony of the rotunda, the hotel's most striking contemporary architectural feature. It brought the freshness of an English summer garden into the hotel, re-introducing femininity and the organic into the formal, straight-edged space. It also questioned how we look at wallpaper, commonly the background décor to a room and here at the fore, emphasising the graceful simplicity of the architecture, forming a crown of unexpected colour above the foyer. Phelps encouraged spectators to touch the flocking, to maximise its sculptural sensuality.

Drift challenged our perceptions of flock wallpaper as tacky. Here it appeared to hover suspended above the unusual, carefully considered planes of colour, like a heat haze above a garden. Flocking was originally introduced into England in the late 17th century as a way to imitate damask or velvet. Phelps discovered that flocking was formerly known as postick, an archaic term for counterfeit and enjoyed bringing another level to the work's meaning in an environment she had found false.

To extend the garden metaphor and alter the way the space was perceived, Phelps painted a ring of colour around the rims of the balconies on each floor, creating a bold telescope of colour where there had been none.

Phelps also discovered in reading Jekyll, that amidst her passion for creating a '*treasure of well-set jewels*', lay a wry innuendo of enticement and anticipation, which related to the deftness of touch required by the seductive pleasures associated with hotel rooms. In talking about her lack of space for a bed of flag iris, Jekyll advised, '*though I am denied this pleasure myself, I should like to suggest it to others.*' Phelps isolated five of these demure quotations to reproduce on postcards accompanying the installation, one matching each of the five painted upper balconies. The tone and formality of the text – '*there is always a pretty little play of pretending...*' cleverly and succinctly evoked the era when the hotel was in its glory days and delicately nodded to what happens behind its closed doors. By isolating elements of the *Dorothy* pattern and printing them with a gloss varnish a tone darker than the matt finish of each card, Phelps echoed the texture of the flocking and ensured that the patterns caught the light.

By bringing aspects of the natural world into the sterile atmosphere of a corporate hotel, *Drift* seduced the spectator with the visual harmony of colour, delighting the eye, stimulating the senses, and providing contemplative beauty – qualities desired of any splendid garden.

Cherry Smyth
Curator and poet

Commissioned by Commissions East as part of *Stay*, an exhibition by Escalator artists at the Great Eastern Hotel, London, 2005.

1. Gertrude Jekyll, *Colours Schemes for the Flower Garden*, Country Life, 1912, p.80