

Off the Wall

New wallpaper designs bring together technology and creative spark to produce one-of-a-kind art that hangs on your walls



[**DESIGN UNLIMITED**] In 1996, Tyler Brûlé founded a design and lifestyle magazine for up-to-the-minute modernists and, with a knowing wink to his readership, called it *Wallpaper*. Its tagline was “the stuff that surrounds you.” But by 1996 no self-respecting trendsetter was leafing through thick, gluey-smelling sample books down at the hardware store, trying to decide which would look better in the bathroom: a foil-backed floral or the geese with ribbons tied around their necks.

On a recent afternoon in Cambridge, Ont., I had to accept the fact that 1996 is now ancient history. In the fall of 2009, Cambridge Galleries, Design at Riverside, a gallery located in the building that houses the University of Waterloo’s architecture school, presented an eye-opening show titled *The Art of Wallpaper*. Its central message was this: Not long ago, a perfect storm of technological and philosophical change converged on the staid world of wallpaper, which has emerged from the experience revitalized but profoundly changed.

When Esther Shipman, the architecture and design curator at Cambridge Galleries, began assembling the show, she realized that the biggest change in the recent history of wall adornment has been the rise of small, designer-driven studios. Capitalizing on the latest advances in digital technology, they produce and market their wares in ways that are radically different from those of mass-market wallpaper manufacturers.

“For some designers, each project is a one-off, custom thing,” Shipman says—the entire process is digital, and the designer prints off only what is needed for one particular installation. (Some enlightened man-

B Y P A M E L A Y O U N G

ufacturers, such as Manhattan-based Wolf-Gordon, will now work with designers, providing the technical expertise, machinery and materials to realize these one-off projects.) And then there are the designer/entrepreneurs who use digital technology to create the images for stock patterns that they print with their own traditional presses or silkscreening apparatus. “A lot of them are just marketing their products over the Internet, or selling through independent design retailers,” says Shipman.

Compare that kind of minimal overhead with the traditional model of producing expensive wallpaper sample catalogues, distributing them to home reno stores across a continent and having to have huge quantities of stock on hand, and it’s easy to see why hard times for mainstream wallpaper manufacturers are coinciding with this upstart upsurge. “To justify putting a pattern into production, the big companies have to do huge volumes,” Shipman says. “Every part of the process is expensive for them, and they’re not nimble enough to be able to change direction quickly.”

As the title of the Cambridge show suggests, the boundary between wallpaper and art isn’t as sharply defined as it once was. Instead of serving as a room’s wraparound background, many progressive papers are





Created by Kathryn Walter of Felt Studio, in Toronto, Disk-o is made of reclaimed 100 per cent wool industrial felt. The felt disks and backing are remnants—the centres of die-cut gaskets and post-industrial discarded yardage.

designed to take centre stage—they're accents or focal points. A roll of paper by British artist Tracy Kendall, founder of Tracy Kendall Studio, can depict a single fork, weed or pigeon feather blown up to wall-size proportions. She also produces a three-dimensional Bespoke collection, in which hundreds of jigsaw-puzzle pieces, buttons or sequins are hand-attached to each roll.

Gone are the days when wallpaper had to be flat and made of paper. Toronto's Felt Studio creates wall coverings and personal accessories made of felt. Disk-o, a design by the studio's founder, Kathryn Walter, blankets walls with three-dimensional felt disks that create interesting texture while diverting waste from landfills—the disks are remnants from an industrial die-cutting process.

Shipman's curatorial choices also revealed that what goes on the wall has gone interactive. Take, for example, Souvenirs, by Boym Partners Design of New York City. A form of sticker art for well-heeled grownups, it consists of adhesive-backed silhouettes of bottles, figurines and other knickknacks, along with the 2D 'shelves' to park them on. If you purchase Souvenirs, you get to decide where everything goes.

Best of all, wallpaper has gone nasty. The Art of Wallpaper included patterns by Scotland's Timorous Beasties. At first glance, London, from their Toile Collection, looks decoratively bucolic, just like traditional toile textiles from France. But then you notice that the figures in these stylized landscapes are boozing layabouts in city parks, or muggers and their victims.

Vancouver-based Rollout Custom Wallpaper collaborated with Bandit, a stencil artist working in Belgium, on Killed Bill, a design that interweaves skulls and paper currency to highlight the paradox of those who identify themselves as 'street' artists and attack the status quo in their work, but nonetheless get rich by exhibiting in fashionable galleries. In place of "In God we trust" or some other upstanding motto, the bills in Killed Bill are emblazoned with "I don't judge people who don't know much about art as long as they buy my shit."

When you read the writing on the wallpaper these days, it's become quite clear that a traditionally bourgeois commodity could have an engagingly subversive future.

Pamela Young is a senior Applied Arts writer based in Toronto and a devoted aficionado of all kinds of design (pamelayoung@sympatico.ca).



Clockwise from left: Jigsaw, the most renowned Bespoke design, created by Tracy Kendall Studio, London, England. B-A-N-A-N-A-S! by Michael Angelo for Flavor Paper, N.Y. Killed Bill by Rollout Custom Wallpaper, Vancouver, and Bandit, Belgium.