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The Fundamentals of Printed Textile Design

Alex Russell

ava academia

awareness/ reflection/ debate

Ethical:

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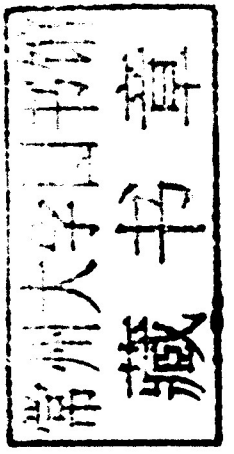

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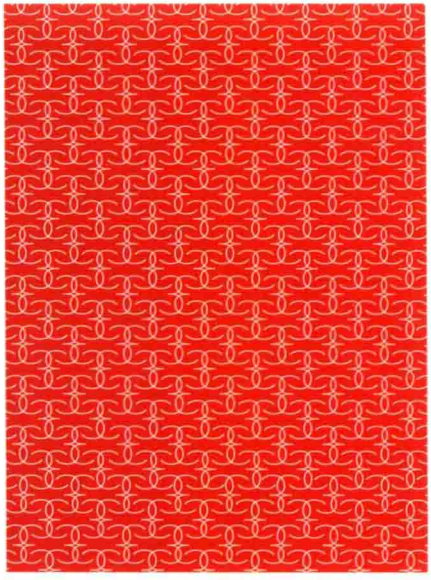

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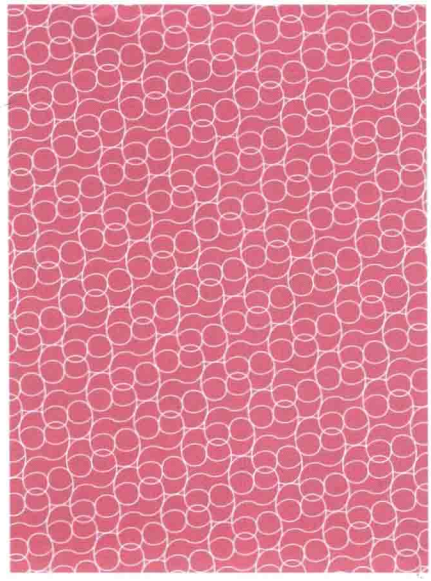

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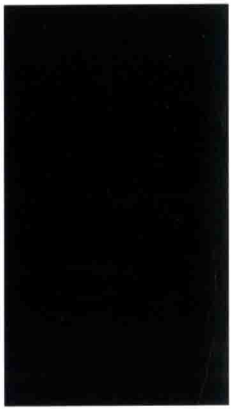

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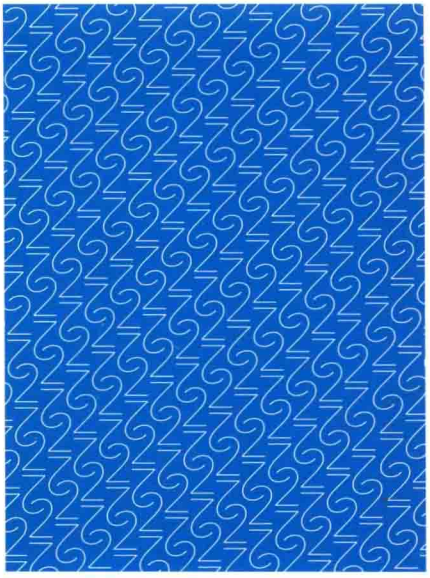

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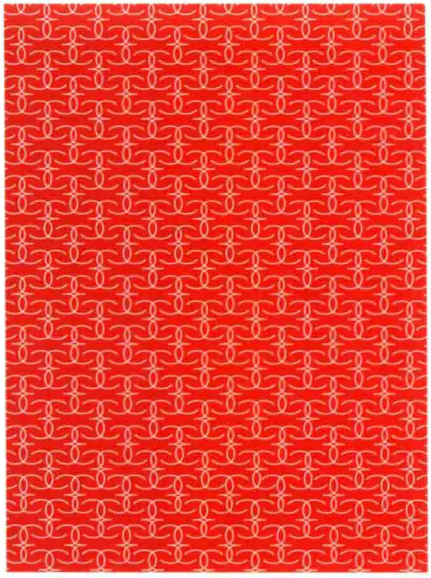

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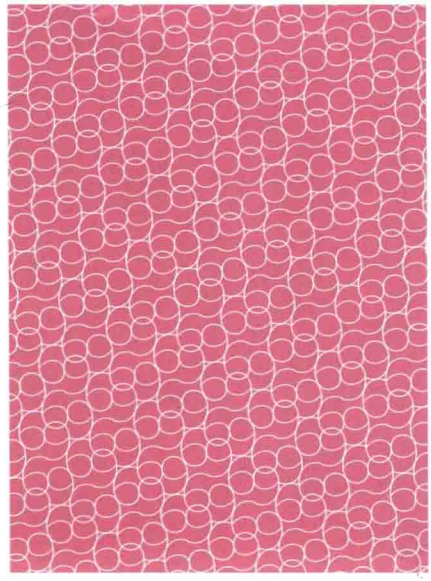

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Opposite:
The infinite variation in printed textile design makes it a fascinating world in which to forge a career.

Introduction

This book is about contemporary practice in printed textile design. It provides an introduction to the creative skills, techniques and processes required by designers in order to produce a professional, creative and commercially aware portfolio. In order to design effectively, print and pattern practitioners need to understand not only how the industry works but should ideally also be aware of, for example, the cultural and economic factors that can shape what future clients or consumers will require. The book suggests strategies for developing an understanding of these contexts within and beyond the fashion and textiles industry. It explores the key elements of the subject to provide an innovative resource for the designers of today and tomorrow.

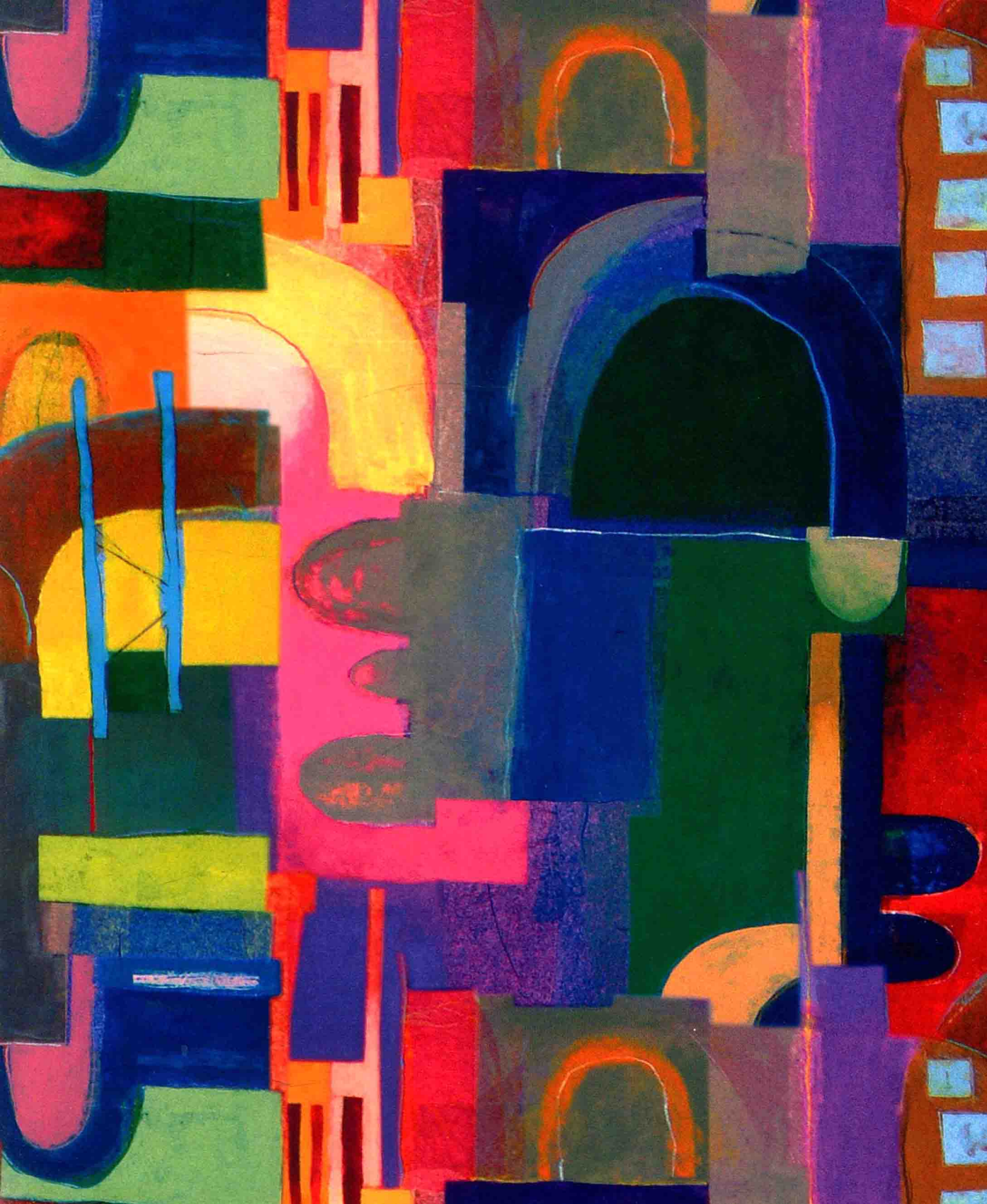
Trying to describe what printed textile designers do is not quite as straightforward as it might at first appear. Taken at face value, printed textile design is the creation of imagery or pattern to be applied to cloth. In fact, the definition is slightly misleading, as its practitioners may also design for other surfaces such as wallpaper, gift-wrap or any other product which may be printed on or embellished. They may describe themselves as surface pattern designers or graphic designers for fashion; even if the word 'textile' does appear on a business card or within a job description, the role may not involve actually working with fabric on a day-to-day basis.

However, in amongst this tangle are a few key points that unite design practitioners in this field. They are creating decoration or ornament that is applied to a product in order to add to its value in some way. The form and content of their designs are framed to a large degree by both the nature of the product and the printing technology used to embellish it. They are most frequently employed by the fashion, home / interiors or giftware / stationery sectors.

Getting started as a professional designer requires hard work and patience. A major part of this book is devoted to showing what skills are required to break into the business and how best to communicate design talent in order to do so. It aims to present an honest and balanced overview of how the industry works and what it needs from designers.

You may find your own experiences do not reflect some of the content of this book. The design process is not linear or prescriptive; from any given starting point, ten designers would probably come up with ten very different design outcomes about which ten different clients would have very differing opinions. There is no substitute for putting in the hours to get good at the skills or in actively researching how the part of the design world that interests you actually works. The infinite variation out there is part of what makes this such an exciting world to forge a career in. All this book is trying to do is nudge you in the right direction.

Work hard, don't mess with copyright, have fun.



The framework

In order to develop an understanding of contemporary printed textile design, it is important to know about its context. This area of design has a rich history that has a significant influence on current practice. In particular, this affects both the imagery that designers work with and the requirements of the methods by which designs are printed or applied to fabric (or other substrate). This chapter starts with a brief overview of past practice, exploring the multicultural mix of design elements that inform the visual language of print and pattern.

The next step is to look at how the industry works today, exploring how designs are used on products, and the part practitioners play in what may be a lengthy and complex process. This leads into looking at the future of the discipline – how digital technology is likely to affect manufacturing once digital fabric printing becomes more common than rotary screen printing, and other significant factors on the future such as sustainability and ethical issues.

Printed textile design history

Printed textile design has a long history. Images over 4000 years old in Egyptian tombs show patterned clothing and there is evidence that similar fabrics existed in the same period in Eurasia. Whilst it is likely that these would have been hand painted, the use of blocks to stamp pattern onto cloth is believed to date back at least 2000 years in India; similar technology existed in China at the same time, although it is unclear if this was specifically used for printing textiles.

It might be easy to assume that it is only recently that the design and manufacture of printed textiles became a global business, but fabric has actually been a staple of trade routes for centuries. It wasn't until the eighteenth century that European print design came close to matching the quality of pattern from Asia, not least due to the development of copper plate printing. Despite the advances in technology in the West, the influence of Asian design, both in style and in content, formed the bedrock of European design and is clearly visible to this day.

Even the briefest look at printed textile design's past demonstrates two highly significant influences on the practice: Firstly, that a significant proportion of new designs are updated or adapted versions of existing designs, some based on patterns that are thousands of years old. Secondly, that the technology used to print the designs has a profound effect on the practice of creating print and pattern design.

Dyeing techniques

In most printing techniques, the design is applied to the substrate by printing colour onto it. This sounds obvious, but some of the oldest methods of getting pattern onto cloth used a different method. This involves applying the design using either a resist or a mordant.

Resist printing

In the resist method, the textile is painted or printed with some form of substance that acts as a mask when the fabric is subsequently dyed. For example, the Indonesian batik technique involves applying melted wax to the cloth, either by brush, by special pen-like tools called tjantings or by tjaps, stampers generally made of strips of metal. The wax cools almost immediately to form a barrier. When the fabric is (cold water) dyed, all the untreated bits of fabric pick up the colour, but the areas protected by the wax remain as they were. The textile is then boiled, which melts the wax out of it, revealing the design. Different versions of the batik process can be found in Africa, Europe and other parts of Asia.

A number of alternatives to wax can also be used. These include pastes made of rice or other starch-based ingredients and clay. In Nigeria, the Yoruba people create designs on fabric called adires using starch paste. The fabric is hand painted with the paste and then dip dyed in indigo. The cloth may then have additional areas masked out by the starch and be re-dyed. This process gives a range of different blue tones.

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