

*Toil*

Anthea Hamilton, Tom Humphreys, Matthew Peers, Hayley Tompkins, with furniture by William Morris & Philip Webb

Presented by Rob Tufnell

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William Morris (1834–1896) occupies a strange place in our cultural history. His influence was significant inspiring successive generations of artists and designers, including the Wiener Werkstätte, but his legacy is more complicated. Recognised in his lifetime primarily as a poet and political radical, he is now mostly remembered for wallpaper and textile designs favoured by the bourgeoisie. His most prominent product is the ubiquitous white skirting boards found in most UK homes (although few are aware that this was his innovation). And then there's the famous essay 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil' (1884) where he made the assertion that if manual labour didn't exercise "the energies of [the] mind and soul as well as of his body" and "the thoughts of the men of past ages" it was dehumanising.

Morris believed there were three social classes in nineteenth century Britain: "a class which does not even pretend to work, a class which pretends to work but which produces nothing, and a class which works, but is compelled by the other two classes to do work which is often unproductive". He placed artists in the second category, a category he expounded as those who "consume out of all proportion to their due share... [spending] their lives and energies in fighting amongst themselves for their respective shares of the wealth which they force the genuine workers to provide for them." Whilst his Marxist understanding of society makes for uncomfortable reading, the suggestion that the creation of subjectively beautiful, crafted objects could be politically subversive offers some light relief.

Most of what Morris said and did can be seen as a response to the English Industrial Revolution. But how would Morris respond to the post-Industrial, neo-liberal off-shoring of so much of the toil, the threat of imminent environmental collapse and the Digital Revolution which will see so many 'unproductive' service roles replaced by artificial intelligence? Famed for his tantrums perhaps faced with today's ills he would become an iconoclast rather than an idealist. Perhaps he'd celebrate contemporary artists' rejection of traditional notions of beauty and craft skills.

This exhibition features works in wood, metal and ceramics—all materials that Morris and his associates used to create their artisanal, Medieval-inspired, applied art. But this is not an exhibition of that. Tom Humphreys' (b. 1972) ceramic tiles are decorated with vermin. A work by Hayley Tompkins (b. 1971) repurposes a wooden mallet as a ground for abstract painting. Matthew Peers (b. 1991) literally tears up the floor of his studio to cast it in aluminium or adorn it with glitter. And Anthea Hamilton (b. 1978) offers an adapted Medieval cure for cataracts. These are accompanied by a pair of chairs. One warped, the other worm eaten, respectively commissioned from Morris by Liberty and by Morris from Philip Webb (1831–1915).

- Rob Tufnell

