

April 10 - May 9, 2015

Opening Reception: Friday, April 10 | 6:30 - 8:30 pm

# Embellish

Barbara Balfour, Claudia Bernal, Doug Guildford,  
Denise Hawrysiw, Marlene MacCallum, Monique  
Martin, Liz Parkinson, Jeannie Thib & Meichen Waxer



Jeannie Thib, *Archive #13*, 1995, screenprint on Washi, 36"x 28"

## Open Studio

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## Touching, Tracing and Embellishing – One Thing After Another The Gestures of Jeannie Thib, Eight Print Media Artists, and the Workshop of the World

by Patrick Mahon

In a famous public speech that William Morris delivered in 1889 entitled “The Arts and Crafts of To-day,” the English designer and social activist argued for the necessity of the work of skilled craftsmen [sic] in the increasingly industrialized British society of the time. Invoking the values of the cooperative arts of the Middle Ages, Morris criticized the modern allure of mechanized production, favouring another form of Modernism wherein the beauty and ornament of the handmade offered pleasure to the consumer, and importantly, to the producer—whose labours were ultimately enhanced by their alliance with refined aesthetics. Morris implied that an alternative “utility” was borne via artisanal work, one that countered the increasingly widespread emphasis on the apparent advantages of machine-based manufacturing.

My interest in bringing William Morris into conversation with an exhibition entitled *Embellish*, which focuses on a selection of works by eight artists chosen from well over one hundred submissions in response to a call for projects that echo the luminous works of the late Jeannie Thib, may seem curious. Morris is often only considered a nineteenth century friend of the Luddites, a mere proponent of the Western-centric crafts of the past; attributes that hardly describe the forward-minded, and elegantly analytical curiosity evident in Thib’s practice. Yet, William Morris was also an advocate of art-making collectivism, and of looking to the future through history, and those were things Jeannie Thib stood for as well. She was also a great supporter of other artists, whether long-established or just beginning, and Morris was, too—though he was given to conferring his approval on his official “acolytes.”

On thinking about how to make sense of the concise group that was culled from the stack of wonderful submissions in honour of Jeannie, some lines found in the essay mentioned, referring to the artist ideal, come to mind. “[T]he field which [the artist] has to dig is not a part of a primeval prairie, but ground made fertile and put in good heart by the past labour of countless generations. It is the apprenticeship of the ages, in short, whereby an artist is born into the workshop of the world.”<sup>1</sup> The world Morris was concerned with in the Victorian era was a context in which advanced and advancing technologies seemed to be undermining the ostensible humane motivations of so much previous artistic tradition. Some would say that, in response, he was intelligently fighting what he thought of as the attendant waning of “higher” aesthetic values. Nonetheless, it should also be said (including in context of Thib’s own “artistic intelligence”), that other artists and theorists around that time, including European Modernists such as Mondrian, were ultimately demonstrating the formidable capacities within so much Modern artistic aspiration to

plumb traditional aesthetic depths while simultaneously forging exhilarating new heights.

Regarding the tension between the past and the future alluded to with the foregoing, it seems valuable to remind ourselves here that in each new era since Morris held forth, technological shifts have both excited and troubled artists. Painters have had to do battle with and also befriend photographers, and printmakers have clearly made both war and peace with “Photoshoppers” and their ilk. The works Jeannie Thib produced eloquently acknowledged their debt to the print practices of old while demonstrating affinities for the new and the mobile that only a world of CAD programs, laser cutters and digital repeatability could have enabled. Thib seemed to locate herself within a “workshop of the world” that celebrated temporal complexity, and human persistence and inventiveness, with an increasingly outward-looking attitude that also recognized the post-colonial cultural context of our time. Materially speaking, her work showed the trace, the cut, and the embellishment as gestures that speak of delicately vigorous engagements with what can alternately be seen with the eyes and also known through the touch of the artist’s hand. Beauty was always there, in a fearless way that suggested the aesthetic to be a useful tool of thought rather than the mere “prettifier” of artist’s products.

The eight artists presented in the exhibition alongside Thib’s wonderful print *Archive #13* (1995), describe a version of the “workshop of the world” that takes up embellishment in a myriad of ways linked by a quality of rigour and a spirit of originality. Yet their projects also bear a consistent lightness of touch that unmoors the “decorative” from its freighted associations with tired histories or anti-modernist and culturally delimited sentiments.

The title of my essay repeats the name of Barbara Balfour’s suite of three lithographic prints, *One Thing after Another* (2014), to allude to a persistence of embellishment that could be said, paradigmatically, to bespeak the practices and processes of artists of all kinds. Balfour’s elegant, repeat cursive lines here, rainbow rolled in subtle grey lithographic ink that threatens to fade away at times, are a cipher for the daily labours that workers everywhere enjoy to legitimate their social worth, and also a comment on artistic making as a necessary if mysterious form of continuous engagement. Balfour’s sustained and intentionally belaboured approach conjures some of Jeannie Thib’s own Sisyphean undertakings, including the remarkable hand-cutting that resulted in the miraculous floral rubber curtain, *Fret* (2000).



**Open Studio** — Canada’s leading printmaking centre since its founding in 1970 — is a charitable, non-profit, artist-run centre dedicated to the production, preservation and promotion of contemporary original fine art prints. Open Studio offers affordable and equal access to printmaking facilities, programs and services for artists and the public – from across Canada and abroad. Open Studio’s priority is to provide support and professional development opportunities for its membership and the broader community of printmakers.

**Patrick Mahon** is an artist, writer and a Professor of Visual Arts at Western University, in London, Ontario. Mahon’s artwork has been exhibited widely in Canada at: Museum London, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Kamloops Art Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art. He has recently exhibited internationally in China and France and at numerous print biennales. Patrick has participated in residencies at the International Studio and Curatorial Program, (New York); Frans Masereel Centrum (Belgium); and at La Maison Patrimoniale Barthète (France). Recent Canadian exhibitions include McMaster Museum of Art (2013); Wilfred Laurier University (2013); Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg (2014); and Rodman Hall, Brock University (2014). Patrick lives in London, Ontario, and is represented by Katzman Contemporary, Toronto.

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EDITING & TYPESETTING Sara Kelly

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Other works in the exhibition further the emphasis on artistic labour and process, sometimes foregrounding the notion that through repetition a work may become many-layered to call up the idea of natural and human history as “sedimented”—the artwork itself acting as the sum or measure of the artist’s dedications. Doug Guildford’s wonderfully excessive *Requiem* (2009), a large-scale, sculptural, multi-panel screenprinted work on washi, does this eloquently. With

it’s seemingly mobile, tumbling, quality, *Requiem* calls up Jeannie’s extravagant *Spill* (2002), appearing to want to move beyond the confines of a zone of dignified comportment, and into the world.

Monique Martin’s *Never-ending* (2014), a charmingly decorated Möbius strip-based sculptural print, furthers the idea of creative work as ongoing, suggesting it as subject to measurement in a manner that is by turns beautiful and comical, yet hard to think about. Proposing that gestures of ornamentation may be somehow endless, and logically internalized for the maker even as they become external for a viewer, Martin’s work provides an aestheticized “question” that elegantly problematizes the premise of embellishment at its core.



In many works by Jeannie Thib, “nature” as both a domain of poetic escape and repose, and of an encounter between wildness and the human impulse to order, was a significant presence. In this regard, *Embellish* contains several works that echo such preoccupations. A single piece from Liz Parkinson’s expansive *Taraxacum officinale* (*Morphology and Naturalized*) (2003-14) presents itself as an oddly surreal botanical where

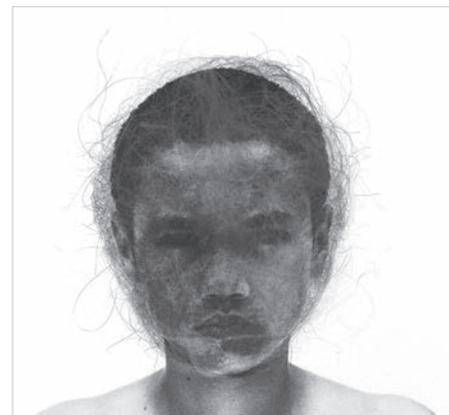
the unlikely examination of dandelions is paired with a reflected and repeated—yet somewhat disruptable—pattern, produced with red flock. The work seems bent

on toying with our attraction to images of nature’s stories, presenting us with a large-scale drypoint rendering of weeds, and also playing with our contemporary skepticism, or perhaps our sense of “distance” regarding such pursuits. The fuzzy red dots propose a system of ordering (with one dot expanded far out of line), that nevertheless hovers in the foreground, annihilating the apparent naturalness of the implied scientific procedure.

Meichen Waxer’s *Untitled* (2014) is a remarkable vertical panel made from carbon paper, with a spare geometric pattern that harkens back to many of Thib’s more reductive though nature-related patterned works, notably the memorable *Façade* (2006), produced at the Maison Patrimoniaire, a tile museum in Barthele, France. Waxer’s work combines a reference to “William Morris’ Evenlode Chintz with girih tiles (a series of geometric shapes prevalent in Islamic architecture in which motif is overlaid) in a carbon transfer to simultaneously acknowledge a possible history while proposing new possibilities of interaction.”<sup>2</sup> The suspended piece hovers in a zone where decoration and utility enjoin and aesthetic histories interweave to evoke the complexity of the colonial project and its aftermath, conversations that ornamental pattern readily emblemizes.



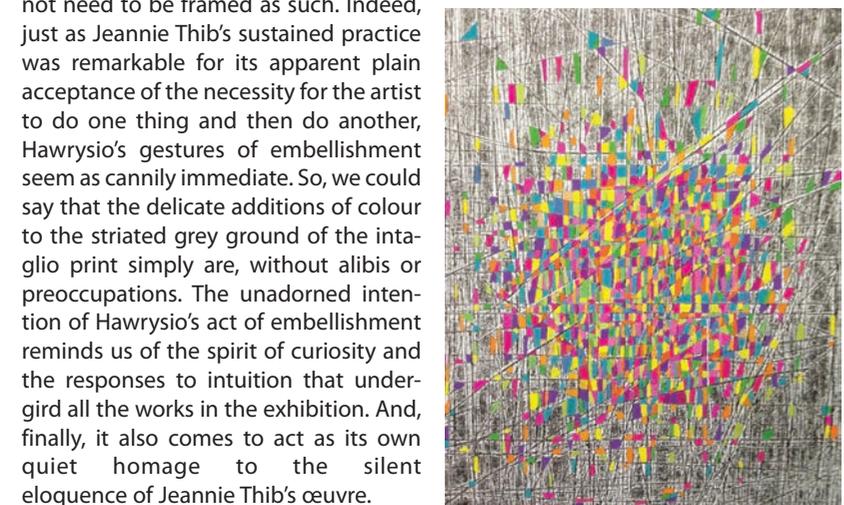
A more overt reference to the potential for embellishment in art as an invocation of politics circulates in Claudia Bernal’s work. A selected portrait from a series of three inspired by the characters from the short story entitled “Bitterness for Three Sleepwalkers,” by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, was originally part of a performative installation entitled *Les envers des îles blanches* (*The Other Side of the White Islands*) (2014). Resonating with histories of forced displacement of women due to armed conflict in Colombia, the work in *Embellish* shows a head obscured by a hairy, photo-generated cloud that movingly emphasizes disempowerment and silencing. Rather than showing the artist as “marking the surface” in a gesture of decorative enhancement, this embellishment is a stirring critique and an exposure of a damning truth.



Marlene MacCallum’s printed bookwork, *Wall Stories* (2014) though not similarly rife as an exposure of the turbulence of the public world, is no less dedicated to linking a deeply invested narrative with the surface of things. MacCallum’s carefully orchestrated photo-based work is a collaboration with

Newfoundland writer, Jessica Grant. That author’s written text, “The Great Indoors,” interacts with McCallum’s image “to create a celebration of interior life with special attention to the adornment of surfaces.”<sup>3</sup> McCallum’s sensitive book project relies on acuity with subtle rhythms and pacing that are reminiscent of so many of Thib’s projects, including a recent folded wall construction shown in the group exhibition, *Paper Doll* at the Owens Art Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick (2011).

The artists that constitute this exhibition’s suggestion of a “workshop of the world” are held together through their affinity with the work of Jeannie Thib that emphasizes labour and process, addresses nature, acknowledges our post-colonial moment and thrums with narrative rhythms. A work not yet mentioned here, the elegant, albeit unpretentious, painted print by Denise Hawrysió, *Embellishment in Bright Colours* (2014), could be said to take on many of those qualities, too. But perhaps the argument for this work’s adherence to the spirit of the exhibition does



not need to be framed as such. Indeed, just as Jeannie Thib’s sustained practice was remarkable for its apparent plain acceptance of the necessity for the artist to do one thing and then do another, Hawrysió’s gestures of embellishment seem as cannily immediate. So, we could say that the delicate additions of colour to the striated grey ground of the intaglio print simply are, without alibis or preoccupations. The unadorned intention of Hawrysió’s act of embellishment reminds us of the spirit of curiosity and the responses to intuition that undergird all the works in the exhibition. And, finally, it also comes to act as its own quiet homage to the silent eloquence of Jeannie Thib’s oeuvre.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>William Morris. “The Arts and Crafts of To-day.” Presidential Address, Applied Art Section of the National Association for the Advancement of Art. Queen Street Hall, Edinburgh. 30 October 1889. Transcript: <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1889/today.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup>Meichen Waxer. *Artist Statement*. 2014

<sup>3</sup>Marlene MacCallum. *Artist Statement*. 2015

## Image Credits

p. 2 - Barbara Balfour, *One Thing After Another* (detail), 2014, lithography, varied edition of 40 prints, each 21” x 15.5”.

p. 3 - Doug Guildford, *Requiem* (detail), 2009, screenprint on 18 hinged sheets of washi, 1/1, 17” x 18” (folded), 17” x 306” (fully opened).

p. 3 - Monique Martin, *Never-ending* (detail), 2014, ink on Masa paper, double-sided prints on 15 Möbius strips, 1/1, 14” x 9.75” x 7.75”.

p. 3 - Liz Parkinson, *With Emphasis (Morphology)*, 2003-14, drypoint with flocking, 35.5” x 47.75”.

p. 4 - Meichen Waxer, *Untitled* (detail), 2014, waxed carbon paper, 2’ x 8’.

p. 4 - Claudia Bernal, *Sleepwalker I*, 2014, digital print on Arches paper, 24” x 36”.

p. 5 - Marlene MacCallum, with text by Jessica Grant, *Wall Stories*, 2014, hand-bound accordion book with dust jacket, inkjet on digital Aya paper, 10.25” x 8” x 0.5” (closed), 10” x 15.5” (page spread), 10” x 154.75” (fully expanded).

p. 5 - Denise Hawrysió, *Embellishment in Bright Colours I* (detail), 2015, relief print and watercolour, 1/1, 20” x 26”.

## Medallion Portfolio & The Jeannie Thib Memorial Fund

In the spirit of Jeannie Thib’s remarkable contributions to Canadian art, Katzman Contemporary has released *Medallion*, a portfolio collection of editioned multiples, inspired by the artist’s last unfinished work of the same name. Thirteen of Thib’s close friends and artists from Canada, Australia and the Netherlands contributed to this portfolio. In conjunction with *Embellish*, and in partnership with Katzman Contemporary, the *Medallion* portfolio is now available at Open Studio. Proceeds from the sale of the portfolio will go towards the Jeannie Thib Memorial Fund at Open Studio, which has been established to fund future print media opportunities for artists at Open Studio.

## Embellish Panel Discussion - May 7, 2015, 6:00 pm

Hosted by Katzman Contemporary

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In conjunction with *Embellish*, a panel discussion will take place May 7 at Katzman Contemporary, looking at the broad themes of embellishment, graphic patterning and ornamentation that lay at the core of Jeannie Thib’s and other print-based artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies across a variety of media, just as Jeannie’s practice itself ventured into sculptural and installation-based work.