



lori waxman

## Wallpaper: the stuff that surrounds us

photo: Paul Litherland

*Space Contains No Threats* - 2000  
Lisa Hecht

Wallpaper, much like carpeting, can be a hideous, inescapable thing. In its worst incarnations, it is nothing but a mass-produced migraine, insulting smooth plastered walls, large fields of monochromatic paint, and the integrity of clean lines. Modernists loathe it. Louder than the people who stand in front of it, clashing with the furniture that leans against it, wallpaper can deeply affront the senses, as deeply as the years of liquids, solids and unmentionable accidental substances that seep into the wall-to-wall carpeting of a motel bathroom.

360 degrees of influence, the space that surrounds us, gives wallpaper this power to offend. And offend it does. Artist Lisa Hecht refuses to so much as talk about the heinous multitude of peach, green and white floral patterns that clashed on the walls and ceiling of her childhood bedroom. But skipping the pumped-up super heroes of little boys' bedrooms, the mirrored disco swirls of 1970s powder rooms, and the paisley tangles of grandmotherly sitting rooms, wallpaper can enchant and entrance and subtly move its subject into a room well beyond its borders.

In her installation *Space contains no threats*, Hecht imprisons the viewer within an illusory cage dictated entirely by the paper she has hand-printed and glued to its walls—a paper which also opens up the gallery space into an infinite and completely other one. She uses a process that hearkens back to the Golden Age of wallpaper, long before it became the bane of suburban rec rooms, when wealthy Europeans who could afford to do so paid artists to hand-paint paper for their walls, and later to hand-print it using wood blocks. In Montreal-born Hecht's updated version, each wallpaper sheet is first covered with a latex background colour, and then silk-screened with the same computer-designed pattern, one colour at a time. Though the installation depends on the wallpaper being taken as a uniform whole, each separate sheet is in effect a hand-produced multiple, nearly—but never entirely—the same as the sheet it hangs next to.

The affective force of Hecht's wallpaper depends on a number of factors, one of which is the near absence of distractions from the paper itself. Partly because La Centrale is a typical white cube gallery space, and mostly because Hecht has chosen to fill that space with nothing other than two easy-to-ignore white wooden ladders, *Space contains no threats* does not do as wallpaper usually does: to simply add another layer of noise to whatever cacophony already exists in the room by way of its furnishings, carpeting or activities. Rather, *Space contains no threats* is the only sound the room makes, save for the breath and heartbeat of the viewer. Without the competition and confusing presence of related or unrelated physical distractions (though one wonders what effect the opening day crowd had), the wallpaper with which Hecht has covered the gallery walls becomes the physical and psychological container of a three-dimensional space, in which the viewer is implicated, and over which it has complete affective control.

From the centre of the gallery, the walls appear covered in a traditional, elegant pattern of interlocking light blue diamonds outlined in gold. Uneven and faded in spots, the paper seems worn with age, aiding any associations made between it and the wallcovering one might find lining the parlour walls in a grand old house. As the viewer moves towards the walls themselves—pulled in by the pattern's unevenness and the nagging feeling that it can't just be a pretty pastel abstraction—the parlour-room illusion disappears. The real pattern reveals itself to be its very opposite: chain-link fencing backed by a light blue sky.

Jumping from proper sitting room decor to urban close-up is a blow softened only slightly by the pleasantness of being surrounded on all sides by a cloudless sky. But however freeing and limitless a perfect blue sky is, it cannot overcome—and in fact, may serve only to intensify—the sensations engaged by the realisation that one is trapped on all sides by metal fencing that doesn't end until it hits the ceiling. The endless taunt of visually penetrable but physically impenetrable mesh metal fencing might put the occasionally stifling atmosphere of an uptight sitting room back in its decorative place. Alternately, it suggests a metaphorical similarity between two socially disparate, indoor and outdoor settings. Much like those drawings in psychology textbooks that are rabbits or ducks, old hags or young ladies, depending on how you look at them—it is as impossible to simultaneously read the wallpaper as both diamond pattern and chain link fencing, as it is to forget, when seeing it as the one, that it is also the other. The sentiments raised by one environment consequently resonate in the other, as if by osmosis.

By seamlessly creating a surprise space of urban tension around the viewer, who minutes before thought she was in an empty parlour room, Hecht succeeds in jarring the viewer into a wholly different environment. Catching the viewer unawares and unprepared for this transmigration intensifies the viewer's shock and the disparities between the two described spaces.

The near absence of furnishings in the gallery space helps locate the viewer at the centre of this new space, as the object that is enclosed by the chain-link fencing by the constraints of a formal drawing room. The floor-to-ceiling ladders, hung straight up by the entryway and the gallery's central column, are merely the exception that proves the no-distractions rule. And they are only a tease: though they offer an ostensible escape from the enclosure, they are too unstable to be climbed and they dead-end at the ceiling (and anyway, since when are you allowed to climb the art in a gallery?) The viewer is left as the prisoner of an illusory space which, unlike the promise of its title, contains the threat of no escape.

*Lisa Hecht emprisonne le spectateur dans une cage de papiers peints. Selon Lori Waxman, la force affective de Space contains no threats réside dans ces papiers qui délimitent un espace vide. Cet espace, à son tour, envahit le spectateur et l'entraîne au-delà des murs. Des motifs boudoir des papiers peints surgit une clôture métallique sur fond de ciel bleu. De l'intérieur à l'extérieur. Deux mondes coexistent et se juxtaposent en un clin d'œil. Des échelles inutilisables laissent le spectateur prisonnier d'un espace illusoire et sans issue. Espace inoffensif ?*