

*LOST
NARRATIVES*

The Work of
Catherine Bertola

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The Pattern of Work

Judith Flanders

In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, the author describes: 'Two pattern young ladies, in pattern attire, with pattern deportment.' 'Pattern' was a 19th century term of approbation, a way of commending all that fitted, was neat, did not obtrude – was, in fact, a 'model', often of femininity, or of feminine behaviour.

Catherine Bertola approves of pattern too, even if it is not in a way that Charlotte Brontë would recognise – or would not recognise at first. For Bertola is as interested in domestic life, in the idea of domesticity, as Jane Eyre was. But Bertola shows that the mad woman in the attic was closer to Jane – and to all of us – than we sometimes care to think.

One of the totemic signs of a 'proper' housewife – a 'pattern' housewife – in Victorian England was the whitened front doorstep. The housewife (or her servant) used soap and water to scrub down the stairs leading to the front door. She then applied a layer of a white, chalky, paste-like substance and buffed it up. This was not a weekly task, but one that had to be performed daily. When it was finished, the steps were spotless, gleaming – but only until someone walked up them. Then they were irretrievably marked. By lunchtime each day the whiteness was scuffed to nothingness, stepped into the surrounding dust. Yet it is important to remember that the whiteness was only a symbol: it was soap and water that actually made the steps clean, and that was invisible. The whiteness was a way of indicating that the soap and water had been used, a marker or sign of cleanliness: it was not cleanliness itself.

Bertola's work revolves around these symbols, around the ideas of housework and domesticity. With no domestic machinery, no chemical detergents or cleansers, no electricity – often no running hot water – housework was hard labour for the Victorians; it was an endless, cyclical grind, a constant repetition of the same physically demanding chores. Bertola hones in on this, exploring aspects of both the laboriousness and its cyclical nature. In *Sweeping it Under* (1999), the artist collects dust, and then, instead of disposing of it, creates a rug, a pattern, out of the detritus. The carpet of dust is no more useful, and every bit as transient, as the housewife's whitened front stairs: once a foot is placed on either, they are irretrievably destroyed. For the 'carpet' or the white doorstep to reappear, the whole routine would have to be performed again, in order to produce a new 'carpet'.

While cleanliness can vanish at the scuff of a foot, dirt recurs without effort. *Switched* (1999), a collection of prints taken from light switches in a house, uses forensic techniques to lift the evidence of lives being lived inside the house. This is evidence indeed, for it would certainly have been a crime for a Victorian housekeeper to have missed these fingerprints. Bertola traces the comings and goings of the house's occupants; a housekeeper can trace the occupants in the same way, by the dirt they leave behind.

Dust, to us, is, at worst, an irritant. People (particularly those who avoid the cleaning) like to quote Quentin Crisp: 'After three years [of neglect] the dust doesn't get any worse.' That is as may be, but Crisp's

Victorian mother would have known what that meant, what it was that he was breathing in. The London Medical Officer for Health in the 1880s warned his readers: 'Household dust is, in fact, the powder of dried London mud, largely made up, of course, of finely divided granite or wood for the pavements, but containing, in addition to these, particles of every description of decaying animal and vegetable matter. The droppings of horses and other animals, the entrails of fish, the outer leaves of cabbages, the bodies of dead cats, and the miscellaneous contents of dustbins generally, all contribute ...'

In the mid-19th century a surgeon wrote a letter to *The Times*, telling of his experiences to encourage others to cut down on those aspects of interior decoration we find the most stereotypically 'Victorian':

I had furnished the house in the way common to habitations of its class. There were window curtains in the dining room, window curtains in the consulting room, window curtains in the drawing room, window curtains in the bedrooms. There were carpets on all the floors; there were unprotected papers on the walls; there were wardrobes and other pieces of furniture, which had their apparent height increased by cornices, within which were hollow spaces, seemingly made on purpose to form harbours for dirt. There were ponderous bookshelves, containing a formidable amount of printed lumber, and a still more formidable amount of dust. The walls were old with uneven surfaces, and to these uneven surfaces

dirt clung with an almost touching tenacity. There were all sorts of fluffy things about, which were supposed to be ornamental, fancy mats and the like, and which blackened the fingers of anyone bold enough to touch them ... Upon all these things the dirt of a London street poured in without intermission. In dry weather the dust found its way through every chink; in wet weather the feet of visitors brought in mud, which dried into dust speedily. If the children romped for ten minutes in a carpeted room, the dust would lie in a thick layer upon the tables and chairs when they had finished. Dirt seemed omnipresent and all pervading. It was plentiful in the air we breathed; it mingled with the food we ate and with the liquids we drank. The house, thus arranged, was a scene of perpetual malaise and ailing. Somebody always had a 'cold' or a headache, the former malady being now supposed to have little to do with temperature or with chills, but to be produced by the poisonous influence upon the mucous membrane of the respiratory passages of the septic dust which people breathe, and which, in the majority of instances, they trample out of their filthy carpets.

Take that, Mr Crisp.

He continued that, 'after losing children and wife by seemingly untraceable causes', (one wonders with morbid fascination just how *many* children he lost to reach this stage), he decided dirt could only be got rid of by getting rid of the things that held dirt, including the many

layers of curtains (nets, cotton, wool or heavy brocade) that surrounded the Victorian windows, and the many heavy carpets that could, before vacuum cleaners, only be lifted and beaten once a year – if that. Another writer described how 'ordinary [carpet] cleaning has been done by sweeping over the surface, by which a certain amount of dust and fluff has been removed; but by far the greater portion; after helping to make the room foul for a while with clouds of filthy particles of accumulated dirt held in suspense in the air, settles again, in part on its original resting place, and in part on every piece of furniture and every ornament and projection in the room, necessitating constant labour in cleaning.' Carpets were beaten, the dirt rose in the air, and settled back on the carpet: carpets of dust, carpets of dirt.

For the dust of ages is also the dirt of ages. Occupied houses leave traces in the dust of their owners. Houses that have no one living in them, like George Stephenson's office at his locomotive works, have a different kind of dirt, dirt of abandonment and desolation. *Hearth* (1999), where Bertola created a period wallpaper pattern by cleaning sections of dirt off a chimney breast, shows the fugitive nature of our lives, and our domestic spaces. Ghosts stalk the room, as the light changes and the wall registers, now dirt, now wallpaper.

Wallpaper suited the Victorians for two reasons. They adored being able, with the advent of aniline dyes and new printing processes, to purchase cheaply what had previously been available, in hand-painted form, only to the rich. They also liked the 'craft' aspect of the paper, the

way it chimed with so many of the hobbies that wealthier middle class women could now indulge in.

With more and more servants available to the newly prosperous middle classes, many Victorian women retreated from the drudgery of housework. But the avenues that had been open to them in previous centuries – acting as their husband's secretary, or assistant, or running shops and sometimes even whole businesses of their own – were now closed off. Instead industries grew up to provide these newly unoccupied, newly bored women with ways of killing time. Hobbies – or, as women rather sadly referred to them, their 'work' – were mostly craft-based, and entirely focused on the home.

Yet although they were craft-based and domestic, these hobbies were reliant on manufacture. Despite their 'home-made' appearance, which was what made them seem so attractive, hobbies relied on factories to produce the raw materials. For example the mid-century 'fern-craze', where women collected or grew ferns, might seem to be an outdoors, inexpensive pastime, but in fact ferns were more often bought than reared; they were nurtured in expensively purchased glass cases, often decorated with 'grottoes' and 'caves' manufactured out of Portland cement. Even the seemingly hand-made albums and screens decorated with scraps of printed paper had industry and advertising behind them. In theory, the women cut out the scraps from a variety of printed sources – from sheet music, Christmas cards, coloured prints that were either sold separately or appeared in magazines. This hobby relied on the new

cheap printing processes that reduced the price of these items until they could be regarded as waste paper. And if all that clipping was too much trouble, magazines carried advertisements for 'Coloured Scraps for Screens and Scrap Books – Flowers, Figures, Fruit, Birds and Landscape in great variety from 1s. per sheet. One dozen assorted, 10s. 6d.' The purchaser received a supply of paper pictures, which she could use to fill in a blank book (also purchased) or cover a screen (purchased). Another company, which made inks and dyes, pointed out that: 'Ferns, grasses, flowers and seaweeds may be dyed the most exquisite colours: green, crimson, purple, scarlet, &c.' So the ferns were bought, the seaweeds and grasses were bought, the dyes were bought, and the resulting decorative pieces were stuck down into bought albums.

Thus the home-made work of these Victorian ladies had as much of an industrial element as the 'curtains' in Bertola's *Home from Home* (2002), where net curtains were screenprinted onto PVC. *Home from Home* rather scarily echoes a hobby recommended for women by *Cassell's Household Guide: Being a Complete Encyclopaedia of Domestic and Social Economy* (1869). 'Diaphanie', it explained, is 'the art of imitating the most beautiful and costly stained glass by the inexpensive and exceedingly simple process of transferring a species of chromo-lithograph in transparent colours to the surface of an ordinary pane of glass.'

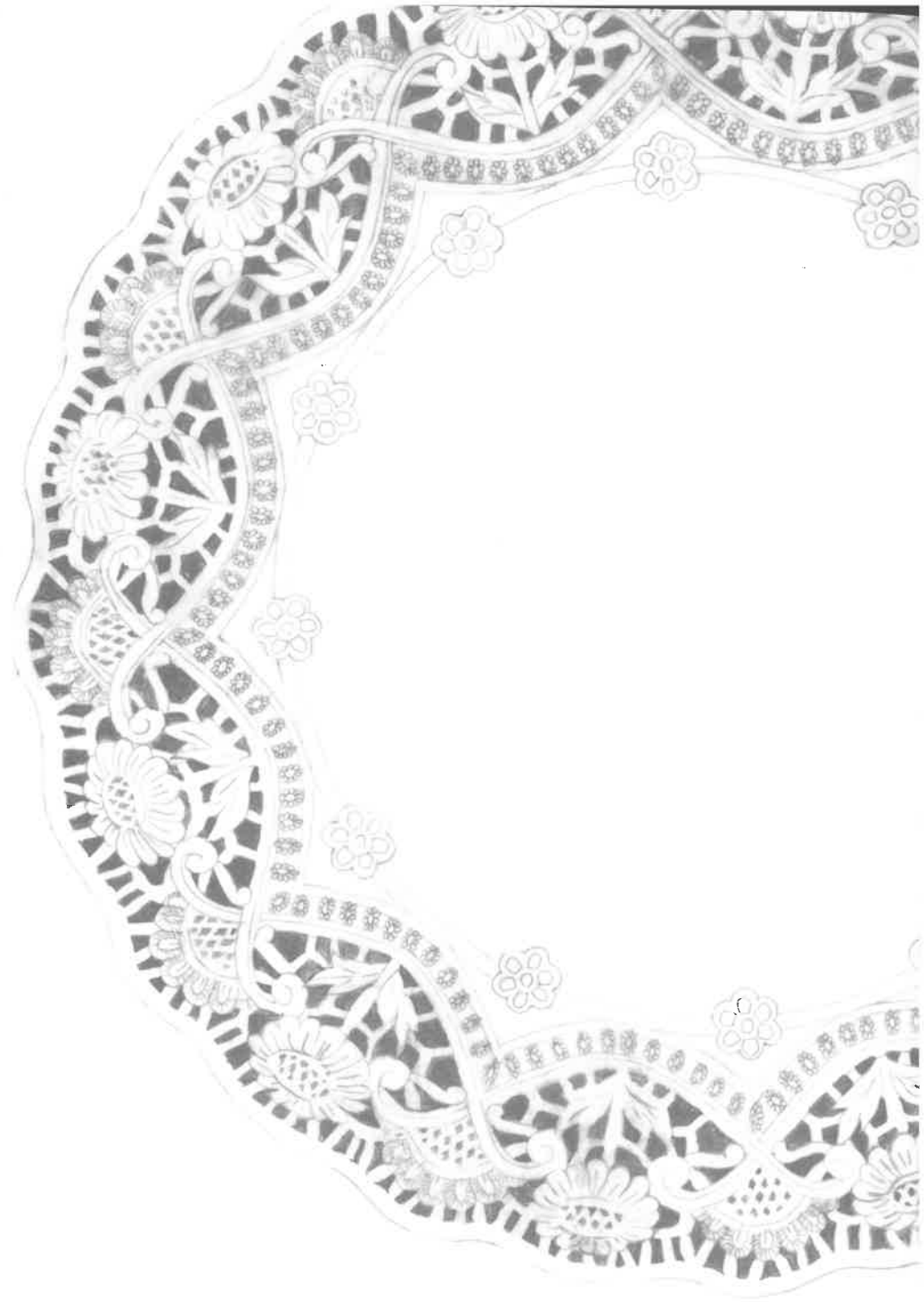
At least Diaphanie had a purpose, to create privacy for windows that were overlooked – the front door, the newly installed bathrooms. But most hobbies were not only time consuming and often tedious, but also

the end results were perhaps as useful as a PVC net curtain. One magazine suggested various 'useful' objects for the housewife to produce: a guitar made from cardboard and silk scraps; a Turkish slipper made from 'a couple of old visiting cards' and more silk scraps; a wheelbarrow of card, ribbon and gold paper; or a pen-wiper shaped like a hand with the motto 'No Hands should be Idle' embroidered on it in beading, which, of course, rendered it incapable of wiping pens.

The possibilities for hobbies were endless, a list-maker's dream. A very small, partial selection might include: dozens of types of needlework (embroidery, appliqué, knitting, lace-making, crocheting, macramé, tating, wool work of all sorts, *petit point* and other forms of tapestry-making), where the housewife could produce decorated fire screens, foot stools, piano stools, cushions; or make slippers, pen-wipers, needle covers, watch guards; also antimacassars, doilies, mats, table covers, lampshades, draperies; beadwork, including more outré forms such as bead mosaics (where the beads were set into cement); painting on glass, textiles, china or tiles; painting with shells, feathers, hair, seeds, pods, mosses, grains, cones, fabric, cork, dried flowers; or producing pictures via spatter work, poker work, sand painting, etching or leaf work; modelling in gutta-percha or leather ('these arts combine usefulness and elegance'); various forms of decorating objects (decorating with paint, wool, shells, dried flowers, twigs, leaves, seeds or moss, feathers, cut paper or *découpage*, making wax fruit or flowers, cork models, wool 'gardens'); making moulds of leaves or plants; making baskets; decorative napkin-folding; making albums for drawings, photographs, *cartes de*

visite, inspirational quotes or autographs – or even ornamental frames for match stands (I am not making this up – one (male) writer recommended copying a stoup 'common in ecclesiastic Gothic architecture').

With lists such as these, the world of Victorian domestic life can seem infinitely remote and deeply bizarre. We are glad we have left it behind, even while we find its very oddity, its reassuringly repetitive (if gruelling) nature, has charm, of only in retrospect. Mostly, however, the housework of past times is invisible. It is all too easy for people of any age to think that everyone lived as they do: that their life is 'normal' for all time. By focusing on something so 'ordinary', something which its very ordinariness usually renders invisible, by noting both its differences and its similarities, Bertola has produced new art out of old drudgery and boredom – a remarkable transformation, and one that would have fully satisfied the serried ranks of housekeepers receding into the past, moving back, ever more ghostly, through the centuries.



Posh Daily (2003), pencil on paper

CATHERINE BERTOLA

Born 5 July 1976, Rugby, UK

Studied at Newcastle University (BA) 1995–1999

Solo Exhibitions

2005 *Domestic Landscapes*, International 3, Manchester

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1995 *New Visions*, Dean Clough Gallery, Halifax
- 1998 *Zest*, Cross House, Newcastle upon Tyne (part of VANE 98)
- 1999 *Art in Academia*, Bonhams, London
Inside Out, Adhoc Gallery, Wallsend
Rocket 2, Stephenson Works, Newcastle upon Tyne (part of VANE 99)
There and Not There, Globe Gallery, North Shields
Graduates 99, Stroud House Gallery, Stroud
- 2000 *Site*, Barrack Road, Newcastle upon Tyne (part of VANE 2000)
Pattern Transfer, Waygood Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne
Take a Peek, Newcastle Playhouse, Newcastle upon Tyne
- 2001 *Up the Garden Path*, North Farm, Hallington
REPRO, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne
- 2002 *Pattern Crazy*, Crafts Council, London
CAPITAL, various venues in Newcastle upon Tyne. A VANE project
- 2003 *Space Between Us*, Friar House, Newcastle upon Tyne. A VANE project curated by SMART Project Space, Amsterdam
Workplace, Art 2003, Business Design Centre, London
- 2004 *Floral Habitat*, Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery, Bury St Edmunds

Commissions

- 2002 *Scratching at the Surface*, commissioned by Locus+, Newcastle upon Tyne
Venetian Blind, commissioned by Globe Gallery, North Shields
- 2003 *Posh Doily*, drawing commissioned by Locus+, Newcastle upon Tyne
- 2004 Commissioned by General Assembly, London, for the launch of Marks & Spencer Lifestore; exhibited in the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead

Residencies

- 2002 *Further Up In The Air*, Liverpool
- 2003 Batiscafo Projects, Havana, Cuba. Organised by Gasworks and Triangle Arts Trust, London

Bibliography

- 2003 *Further Up In The Air*, published by Further Afield Publications
- 2004 *Workplace*, published by Art Editions North. Essay *Rescued Narratives, here today, gone tomorrow: transient materiality*, Linda Sandino for the *Journal of Design History*, Volume 17 Number 3, published by Oxford University Press
Furthermore – A Book of Proposals, published by Further Afield Publications

Collections

Simmons & Simmons, London and private collections

Art Editions North
Peter Davies and Robert Blackson

First published in 2005 by Art Editions North, c/o School of Arts, Design,
Media & Culture, University of Sunderland, Ashburne House, Ryhope Road,
Sunderland SR2 7EF. t. 0191 515 2128, e. galleryinfo@sunderland.ac.uk

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retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic,
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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A British Library CIP record is available

ISBN 1 873757 45 X

Editor: Jon Bewley
Design: Joanna Deans at identity. email: id.identity@ntlworld.com
Printing: Statexcolourprint. www.statex.co.uk
Copy Editor: Eileen Daly

Distributed by Cornerhouse Publications
70 Oxford Street, Manchester M1 5NH, England
tel: +44 (0) 161 200 1503
fax: +44 (0) 161 200 1504
email: publications@cornerhouse.org
www.cornerhouse.org/publications

Published in association with Work & Leisure International, Manchester

The artist would like to thank the following people:
Berni and Janet Bertola, Jon Bewley, Jo Deans, Leo Fitzmaurice, Neville Gabie,
Laurence Lane, Rosamond and Michael Previt , Matt Stokes, Paul Stone,
Paulette Terry Brien and all those who have supported me personally and
professionally over the last six years.



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