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1.

In 2010 my design partner Beca Lipscombe spent some time exploring archives relating to Scottish cashmere intarsia as part of her research for a project entitled *The Inventors of Tradition*. The project would not only present material from those archives, but try to test the current possibilities for the knitting technique by using it as part of a fashion collection under our moniker.

Like its counterpart in wooden marquetry, intarsia for knitwear involves the creation, piece by piece, of complex images and patterns from a detailed chart. Explaining the beauty of cashmere intarsia is much easier if you have some in your lap, and Beca was aware of this while working on her own knitwear pieces. The image she gave to the manufacturer for a possible prototype was of the corner of a hand-painted wooden sculpture that she had scanned from one of MCC's catalogues. She knew that this artwork was an ideal model for exploring intarsia, its own inspiration being very possibly the kind of anonymous applied pattern found on mass-market jumpers anyway. She did not ask his permission; she just used his design to see if something could be made today as beautiful as the examples she found in the archives.

His reaction when we presented him with the first samples suggested that for him the co-option of his work in this way was neither outrageous nor obsequious. Sure, it had potential, but it was not in itself remarkable. Like us, he seemed to recognise that the

desire to tidily apportion ideas and ascribe ownership between friends and colleagues shuts down possibilities, and that if you are confident in your project the ambiguity is worth the risk. And besides, having a readymade prototype good to go also shows that your proposition is serious. What all this means is that if you are going to appropriate, then you have to do it with conviction, and without feeling constrained by accepted codes of conduct. Indeed, having contact with an artist with this kind of sophistication and tolerance merely egged us on. His only stipulations for the jumpers were that they should be produced according to the sizing of his own favourites – Marks and Spencer in both cases – and that the areas of black should be replaced by a shade of brown equivalent to 90% Dark Chocolate.

MCC's collaborations with commercial manufacturers of wallpaper and ceramics are few and specific. The components of his installations that function as applied art, such as rugs and furniture, are fine art first and foremost, while still operating as mediators between categories. It is the analytical way that MCC examines the relationship between art and design that constitutes the radicalism of his practice, not the mere use of design itself. He works with ornament, desire, difference and repetition, but subverts easy commodification by dictating the strict terms in which those populist modes operate. MCC's work is influential among young artists because of its autonomy, as well as its legibility as an aesthetic totality. He does not, for instance, design interiors to order for the homes of private collectors, high-end brand boutiques or institutions. When he does work within a domestic context it is only those that he considers stimulating. When, as the result of a legal dispute,

Condé Nast ordered the pulping of his *The World of Interiors* catalogue (produced with the Migros Museum in 2006), it became clear just how little his work is affiliated with orthodox design culture. A collector had complained about seeing his company's advert in the book, which was an appropriation of the issue of *The World of Interiors* magazine that had included an article on MCC's house in Camberwell. Design, while democratic and functionalist in its own domain, is subversive within art where it remains independent.

2.

Two chairs: the Knieschwimmer by Adolf Loos and the Ingram by Charles Rennie Mackintosh (though for this we could substitute the Arygl or Willow chair, both of which were, like the Ingram, designed for Glasgow tearooms, the only equivalent at the time to the café culture of Loos's Vienna ...). Two chairs: one to recline in at home, the other for socialising, neither allowing you to do anything of the sort.

The 1973 Milan Triennale facilitated the first major re-evaluation of Mackintosh by including an exhibition entitled *The Chairs of Charles Rennie Mackintosh*. This featured for the first time commercial replicas, newly fabricated by the furniture company Cassina. Concurrent to the Triennale, the company's showroom on the Via Durini had a special installation of the chairs, exhibited below a three-metre portrait of the designer. It was the first time Mackintosh's image has been elevated to the status of an icon, and the products were presented in a way that gave emphatic prominence to one very specific quality. By raising them on plinths and lighting them to

accentuate the formal differences between them, the organisers transformed them into discreet minimalist sculpture, or at the very least exercises in geometric abstraction. Back in Glasgow, huge posters of Mackintosh were still a thing of the future; in the early 1970s the tearooms that the chairs were originally designed for were condemned buildings, and his work was regarded as a burden by the bankrupt City Corporation. But in Milan, Mackintosh's chairs were being re-invented as symbols of Modernism, objects to be contemplated rather than used.

And the Knieschwimmer? Loos's idiosyncratic personal philosophy embraced not just architecture and design, but the surgical modification of women's bodies in conformity with his notions of ideal proportion. His domestic architecture created a frame for bourgeois life as if it were a chamber drama enclosed within ordinary walls, with family dysfunction physically embodied in walnut and marble panelling. If you consider interior design as a text to be deciphered, experiencing his work first-hand makes the sub-currents of sexuality perfectly clear. Take for example the bedroom of the wife in the Villa Khuner, built in Kreuzberg, Austria, in 1930, and now a guesthouse. The niche in which the bed is set is painted dark brown and varnished (unlike the other bedrooms which were either papered or wood panelled). Lit by the reading light, one's reflection is reduced to an approximation, but is nevertheless perfectly visible reflected in the glossy surface. Whoever Mrs Khuner was sleeping with in her austere bedroom, they would be able to watch themselves. The Knieschwimmer, originally designed for the salon of the Villa Müller, Prague, in 1930, is good for nothing except discarded clothes. And, it turns out, vigorous sex; bottom

heavy with well upholstered bolsters in all the right spots, this use seems to have been knowingly built into the design.

The same preoccupation with status and multiplicity of purpose can be found in MCC's *Dual* (2006 – 2007), only in a more literal form. His chair is a reversible sculpture: upright, it is at home in a smart public space such as a café; in its reclining position it is a chaise longue. The domestic interiors of Mackintosh and Loos, while being decoratively modern, still gratified ingrained nineteenth-century notions of family structure. They both assigned gender to the typical areas, the men's being the more unrestricted rooms and the women's protected and private (in Mackintosh's case, they were even colour-coded black and white). MCC's work recognises the classical division of public and domestic, while simultaneously embodying the destruction of the hierarchies on which they were based. The fact that his gender, sexual orientation and age are frequently mistaken comes as no great surprise.

3

In 2003, in the middle of a re-staging of *Partial Eclipse* in Flourish Studios, Glasgow, Robert, at that time yet unreformed and still behaving much like Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*, casually set fire to the newspaper he was pretending to read. The studio was warm and dark, the soundtrack was produced by two vinyl records simultaneously playing Eno's *Discreet Music* and a recording of a text being read quietly and dispassionately (both from the original performance of the work in 1980). The slides faded in and out, while a figure (a local pop star) paced back and forth as

if in deep thought in the beam of the projector. The audience was completely focused on the performance, which was what might have enraged Robert. But it might also have been the sensuality of the work, read as a kind of conceptual come-on for participation. Robert might have felt that because the setting was a shared studio he had, as a musician, a right to join in, only to be rebuffed by the work's high orchestration. Like having a wolf-whistle ignored, Robert's response was to demand vengeance. In my memory, everyone turned and gazed passively as a corner of the studio that was known to be soaked with turps and oil caught fire. I also remember how well it went with the performance, and how typical it seemed that MCC might use a natural material like a small glowing fire to complement the artificial elements of the total work. Luckily someone had the presence of mind put it out, and the performance continued to the end. The chance intervention by a trouble-maker who would have been greatly admired by Genet had they been incarcerated together, brings to mind the powerful natural materials that get instrumentalised in MCC's work: marble and fine cabinetmakers' wood, as well as their metaphorical counterparts in figures such as Cocteau, Genet and Flaubert. The natural materials get paint-rollered on to them and stacked, their inherent quality harnessed for a particular purpose, the figures too, their failures and successes as part of their qualities as fissures are in marble and bullets in forest rosewood.