



Forsaken Decoration

When the final bell rang within Spode on a cold November<sup>1</sup> day, work stopped at the Spode Factory and the work force were marched off site one by one. With the workers gone, everything has been left for scavengers both human and animal to peck through. Abandoned decorative transfers left piled in boxes: waiting to be placed on plates<sup>2</sup>, platters, side dishes, fish platters, biscuit tins, tureens, dog bowls, teacups, tea saucers, teapots, coffee cups, coffee saucers, coffee mugs, lids, bread boxes, jam pots, lamps, thimbles, ornaments. Objects<sup>3</sup> that will never be produced have no need of their ornamentation. So the transfers wait, packaged and stacked, for a new purpose and home. Now stranded from their original destination, the transfers become objects in their own right.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In 2006 Spode merged with Royal Worcester; unfortunately the newly formed merged company failed and entered administration on 6 November 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Bear Pit* (2013), pictured above, is constructed of 100's of stacked plate decals found on site. Peeking out from inside is an original Spode figurine of a polar bear. Hunted for and recovered from Ebay, he has finally been brought home and now sits hopefully waiting inside his 'plate pit'.

<sup>3</sup> Contextual referencing: Helen Frik as "both artist and director of the Frik Collection Ceramic Museum (FCCM). This museum collection consists of nearly two hundred pieces: strange vases, remarkable objects, weird utensils. The works are in all respects hybrid and contain remnants from other worlds and earlier times. Each object ensures that the overwhelming reality is tempered in the proportions of everyday life." (Frik) "She has a splendid disregard for the preconceptions, orthodoxies and history of the medium. It is, for her, another outlet for the things in her head and her hands. The results are joyous: useful, useless." (Risley)

<sup>4</sup> "Every object has two functions - to be put to use and to be possessed. [...] These two functions stand in inverse ratio to each other. At one extreme, the strictly practical object acquires a social status: this is the case with the machine. At the opposite extreme, the pure object, devoid of any function or completely abstracted from its use, takes on a strictly subjective status: it becomes part of a collection. It ceases to be a carpet, a table, a compass or a knick-knack and becomes an object in the sense in which a collector will say 'a beautiful object' rather than specifying it, for example, as 'a beautiful statuette'." (Baudrillard).



Interest is found foremost in the transfer's decorative and domestic reference; each detail a fragment of pattern. To fit a coffee cup: rim { ( ) }, handle { i }, base { [ ] }. These found fragments<sup>5</sup> of adornment add up to a whole, but not the whole that was intended. They will never be brought together on the intended ceramic structure again; that time and those days are lost. Yet these fragments of the decoration<sup>6</sup> continue to offer up notions of home and domestic space; gatherings focused on friends and family coming together through sharing of food {tea and biscuits} {coffee<sup>7</sup> and cake} {dinner party celebrations} {Christmas dinner<sup>8</sup>} times when 'best' is brought out and used. They create nostalgia for a time and place that never was: dinner sets used for the perfect Thanksgiving or Christmas<sup>9</sup> meal; plates filled with rural hunting scenes; Spode's Blue Italian set owned by past generations. An American's ancestral Euro-centric nostalgia for ones past that never was, as they were not part of it and can never be.<sup>10</sup>



Left now for years in cardboard boxes: rats, both human and rodent, have already started to work their way through the transfers. The neat and orderly, expected in a working factory, becomes disused chaos in the left wasteland. The contradiction of the cosy home, as indicated through these domestic decorations, versus the derelictions of the Spode

<sup>5</sup> Image seen above is a fragment of the decorative detail to be used around the pouring spout of a cream jug from the Woodland pattern. The yellowing, not part of the original design, has occurred over time with age.

<sup>6</sup> Contextual referencing: David Mabb's paintings found over top of William Morris patterned prints. Mabb's work leaves fragments of the pattern to come through and disrupt his own work, creating a slippage between the two. "Mabb never simply paints or covers over the Morris pattern with another image, elements of the Morris pattern always poke or burst through. This combination produces an unstable picture space that is never fixed, where a Morris pattern and the other image are never able to fully merge or separate. On the one hand, *Two Squares* reminds us of a nostalgia for a future that never transpired; Mabb's other work shows us the collapse of a utopian project in the face of capitalist mass consumption." (Fleming)

<sup>7</sup> *Painter Encased by Coffee Saucer* (2012), pictured above, was made using the coffee saucers decorative edged transfers piled high on top each other, creating an open encasement for dogs found as part of a still popular Spode ware from the Woodland pattern. This was an early piece produced during the initial Topographies of the Obsolete workshop.

<sup>8</sup> Originally created in the 1930's, the Christmas Tree pattern is still a popular dishware set continuing to be produced by Portmeirion under the Spode label.

<sup>9</sup> When the Spode factory closed down in November 2008, Christmas lights had already been put up around the site for the upcoming holiday season. Still found on site today, artist Andrew Brown's simple use of fixing the Christmas lights created the piece *5/11/2008*. It is a suiting memorial to the human factor of the loss at Spode; as there is almost no worse time to lose your livelihood than right before Christmas. The remaining forsaken Christmas decorations are an ironic reminder that one of the few Spode designs that carries on being produced, by another company,<sup>13</sup> is the still popular Christmas Tree pattern.

<sup>10</sup> "Americans are people of conviction, convinced of everything and seeking to convince. One of the aspects of their good faith is this stubborn determination to reconstitute everything of a past and a history which were not their own and which they have largely destroyed or spirited away." (Baudrillard)



site offer up a jarring moment found in the slippage between the two. Speaking of the domestic location that the objects produced in Spode were destined; these aspirational patterns<sup>11</sup> now found in the empty site remind us of the double edge of value they hold.

#### **Between valuable and worthless**

Unable to be used for their original purpose, the transfers still hold significant value, while simultaneously being worthless. Human scavengers are drawn to them like magpies. Finding interest in nostalgic patterns they know well, seen in different form; objects or material to manipulate and use for new purposes; or fascination in the uniqueness found within the mass-multiple object.

#### *Historical value*

These modern transfers are the last tangible link of an important lineage of transfer ware<sup>12</sup> belonging to the Spode factory. Original designs find their last home in rotting cardboard boxes rather than everlasting protection on ceramic ware. While these current paper backed machine printed transfers may seem less important than the original hand engraved transfers, they directly link back to this heritage. One can look at the original copper engraving plates with a reverence that is lost on a modern production method, but we should not forget that the engraving plates were once the height of progression. These current sheets, flimsy and easily water damaged, may not yet be seen in such reverence, but once gone they will be lost forever.

#### *Monetary value*

Gold found on rims of your coffee cups come from these printed transfers. Found as sleek black lines on the transfers that only glisten once fired; the gold is unassuming yet there. Once, unused and damaged transfers with gold were melted down to reuse, so hesitation is found over the worth of these transfers. Usage for artwork is held back while the gold value and reclaiming mechanism is sought out. But only momentarily until it is discovered the smelting process is not worth the gold reclaimed: a potential value is lost again.

Selected lines of the leftover transfers are now owned and produced by the Portmeirion Group<sup>13</sup>. While these left over transfer sheets were offered to Portmeirion, the company was uninterested because they used different techniques to Spode. Tight rein is kept on these particular transfers, so a counterfeit ring of dishes does not find its way to the open market<sup>14</sup>. This tantalizing vibration of potential worth held within each transfer clashes with the snowdrifts of wet and muddy ones found kicking about the Meadows<sup>14</sup> floors. Yet it is through this value clash of a sole transfer that the wider economic issues of Spode are implicitly spoken.

#### *Material value:*

Even these wet and muddy transfers become important nest building blocks for the mice, rats and pigeons that are slowly taking over. Artists have also become key scavengers of these important relics from Spode. A unique material found nowhere else; the Spode transfers are a hidden gem with a limited supply and restricted access. Artists find value in the lost and overlooked, the transfers have now worked their way into performance pieces, films, photography, re-creations of ceramics, sculpture and installation.

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<sup>11</sup> Numerous blogs based in the USA, speak almost in panic of the impending closure at Spode, such as *A Thanksgiving Table Setting with Spode Woodland*, 25 November 2008. The blog's author, simply known as Susan, states 'I suddenly had visions of [Woodland] becoming unavailable. Now I've never done anything illegal, well at least knowingly...but if there's a black market for china, I might just cross that line!' (Susan) Woodland is used on her site as her Thanksgiving 'tablescape' for 2008.

<sup>12</sup> "Transfer printing is a particularly English form of ceramic decoration. Although printing on paper existed for centuries, it was the enterprising English engraver and printer who saw its potential as a means of decorating the hard, shiny surface of pots. It is not possible to credit one individual with the sudden flash of inspiration that led to transfer printing on pottery. [However] by 1785 Josiah Spode I had developed the first commercially viable blue printed earthenware. The factory continued in production for over two hundred years, and "Staffordshire blue & white" was shipped worldwide." This then 'modern' form of transfer printing onto ceramics created a drastic change in the ceramic market at the time. (Whiter)

<sup>13</sup> Six months after Spode went into administration Portmeirion Potteries purchased the Spode Brand. This did not include its facilities but the copyright to the Spode designs. Portmeirion brought the production of Spode ware ceramics back to Stoke-on-Trent from the Far East, and continue to produce and sell its most popular patterns: Blue Italian, Christmas Tree, Delamere and Woodland.

<sup>14</sup> The Meadows is the name used for the designers block building found on the Spode site. Once the home to Spode designers, artisans and manufacturers, is it now no longer safely accessible. Home to the room of transfer boxes, and before deemed unsafe, it was studio space for a variety of artists during the Topographies of the Obsolete workshops. Finally becoming an exhibition venue to the outcomes of the playful experiments produced within its walls.







### Made to measure

A ceramic object such as a bowl or teacup offers a three-dimensional structure for the decorative transfer to be placed. The transfer image is printed onto paper and produced as a flat two-dimensional plane that is then slipped off by hand and, now flexible, placed on its volumetric ceramic home. Similar to pattern cutting for fabric,<sup>15</sup> the flat transfer needs to fit onto a three-dimensional object. Multiple transfers are produced together flat onto large paper sheeting and then each is cut out. Produced in bulk, the transfers are found in large stacks of 50, 100, and 200, all cut in pragmatic yet curious shapes.

Two-dimensional and three-dimensional identities are combined together: a whole series of flat planes together unite into three-dimensional forms. The 'flat' transfer when stacked in multiples creates a new three dimensional form in space. These solid and wonderfully odd shaped structures are building blocks<sup>16</sup> that can be used in the creation of towering plinths, canyons for hidden moments, and frames for other transfer images.

<sup>15</sup> Contextual referencing: Polly Apfelbaum's work *Anything Can Happen in a Horse Race* shown at Milton Keynes Gallery her "new works used what appeared at first glance to be simple off-cuts [from garments made] of highly reflective, sequined fabric. These hard-edged, spidery forms contrasted with her previous work which involved the aggregation of similar shapes and sizes." Working similarity to Apfelbaum I relate to her discussion of "working on-site...over the course of five days. For the artist, it is important for the work to be 'situational' and to involve an element of performance, in direct response to the [exhibition] space." (Batchelor)

<sup>16</sup> *Cream Spray Duck* (2013) seen above, is made from 100's of transfers from three different components and a single image detail of a duck. This work was developed and shown in the British Ceramics Biennale: Topographies of the Obsolete: Vociferous Void as part of *Plinths and Frames*.

<sup>17</sup> A plinth being a base structure for a three-dimensional sculptural object. Similarly a frame is a supporting structure for two-dimensional work, commonly drawing or painting. Both are key standard support structure for the display of artwork usually found within the establishment of museums and galleries.

<sup>18</sup> *Looking the Wrong Way* (2013) as seen to the right, is created from 1000's of side plate transfers laid out creating a large swath of colour. On first experiencing the work, the viewer is overwhelmed by the abstracted form of yellow billowing off in the distance. Yet as eyes 'adjust' small moments of detail begin to appear: small stacks of transfers with images of dogs and an original 19th century Spode dog figurine are all lounging while looking toward the viewer. As the viewer moves within the space a 'hedge' is revealed in which small birds and rabbits are hiding away from the danger found in front.

*Plinths and Frames* was developed as an over arching premise for the conception of a series of individual works: components that work together as a whole but can also be seen as individual. The transfers function as plinths and frames<sup>17</sup> for themselves and other transfers, blending the boundary between what is the 'support' and what is the 'focal point'. Confronted at first glance with a variety of colour and shape, as the viewer moves through the space moments of hidden detail begin to be revealed.<sup>18</sup> Idyllic 'nature/natural' scenes are found hidden in deep holes created by the stacks of transfer; tiny stacks of honey bees are hidden in plan site by their contrasting small scale; suggestive ceramic wares are used to prop and lift but also to reveal; antique/vintage Spode ceramics are placed within, on top and amid stacks of transfers; a greyhound figurine is found relaxing on top of a 'plinth' of transfers.

Similar to a fractal process or perspective of zooming in and out of the work: the viewer steps back for the long overview, moving closer for the individual view, further in for a detailed view and so on. This is comparable to the experience of the Spode site itself; like the fractal zooming in and zooming out of each layer {whether it be the site, a building, room, personnel, equipment, mould(s), computer, paperwork, transfer, mildew, rain water, dust} is new and unique yet all telling a similar story.



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