

## Commissaires Gallery Boutique, where form meets function

BY EVA FRIEDE, GAZETTE FASHION EDITOR    OCTOBER 26, 2009    BE THE FIRST TO POST A COMMENT

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Yedda Morison with her Kyoto Protocol wallpaper and framed fragments of text from Conrad's Heart of Darkness, in which words unrelated to nature have been removed.

Yedda Morison with her Kyoto Protocol wallpaper and framed fragments of text from Conrad's Heart of Darkness, in which words unrelated to nature have been removed.  
Photograph by: John Kenney, The Gazette

MONTREAL - Wallpaper: it's decorative material to cover a wall, the name of a trendy magazine dedicated to design and the pretty patterns on your computer screen.

Yedda Morison's Kyoto Protocol wallpaper is also decorative, but here form, function and a pointed message intersect. The Montreal-based artist has printed out the words of the international climate-change agreement in Bodoni Ornament, a typeface that transforms letters into graphic florals. End result: reams of paper with a decorative black and white pattern, and a clear statement.

"Efforts to save the environment or to try to lessen the human impact often have been decorative or ornamental," said Morison, who came here four years ago from San Francisco but plans to return to California this winter.

The work hangs at Commissaires, a unique, cutting-edge gallery-shop devoted to forward-looking design. It is part of an exhibition titled Nature and Other Anomalies, certainly a timely statement on the environment and what happens when nature goes awry. Other works on show – and sale – include exquisite stuffed bluebirds, freshwater pearls spilling out to represent organs or maggots, as well as apothecary jars based on drawings of human diseases.

The idea was to sell design in another context – a store that acts as a gallery, said owner-curator Pierre Laramée, who opened on St. Laurent Blvd. near Fairmount St. four years ago as a rush of designers was putting Mile End on the style map.

Works are typically shown for about three months, and are augmented by more accessible, permanent items like furniture, jewellery and scent. There are occasional photography exhibits, as well.

The Nature show, Laramée said, walks the line between art and design, if you consider design as something functional.

Philippe Malouin, a native Montrealer and rising design star working in London, was clear on the difference between art and design.

"When something is made to look like a chair, but it's made with fishing wire and you can't sit on it, it's not a chair. Therefore it's not design art – it's just art," said Malouin, who co-curated the previous show at Commissaires, called It Actually Has a Use.

"It was called that because there's been a lot of ridiculous design masturbation," he said from London. Among his works in that show were the Hanger Chair, which folds and hangs in your closet, and the Grace Table, an inflatable table that is rigid and expands to seat 10.

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For Nature and Other Anomalies, Laramée said his starting point was artists who take their cues from the darker side of nature or who use design to express ideas and concerns about nature.

One artist is Kelly McCallum, a Toronto native based in London whose stuffed fox with golden ear maggots was featured on a poster for London's Victoria & Albert Museum's Telling Tales exhibition, which ended this month.

McCallum is fascinated with vintage taxidermy, Laramée said, and manipulates creatures to reveal the process by which we're all going to die. Her bluebirds are beautiful: gold and pearls represent all sorts of decay. Another bird has a ticking pocket-watch mechanism embedded in its body.

British ceramist Tamsin van Essen's apothecary jars, titled Medical Heirlooms, can be beautiful to behold – until you know what they're about. Jars representing cancer are plump and pink as a cartoon pig; vases representing psoriasis are covered in peeling white matter, and are really rather creepy. Other jugs depict syphilis, scars, sutures and acne, dotted or pocked.

Morrison's Specimen Drape hangs in the window dominating the gallery – it's a 17-foot installation in silk and plastic of thousands of plant and flower specimens.

"It insinuates itself into the design world," Morrison said. The work was first created in collaboration with a San Francisco interior designer to hang on a chandelier, then adapted for Commissaires. It used the chandelier as host, like a parasite, Morrison said.

"It's so lush, you're tricked into thinking it might be real," Laramée said. That's also the case with Morrison's Bioposy, a series of beautiful prints of artificial flowers scanned and reconfigured.

To Morrison, talking about the environment in terms of design and visual arts is becoming a part of the public discourse. She said it will be interesting to see whether we become numb to the issue.

"I'm interested in the move toward all things green in the domestic sphere, which ultimately, I think is a positive thing," she said.

"It's an interesting phenomenon. A lot of energy gets channelled into that and there's a whole market behind it – not necessarily a bad thing, but worth looking at."

Asked to define the difference between art and design, and perhaps classify her work, Morrison said she is interested in both fine art – art for art's sake – and design.

"I'm not interested in why one isn't the other," she said. "There's a dichotomy set up that isn't particularly useful." Morrison added she is interested in what happens at the intersection of art and design, and in her case, her writing.

Framed poem-like fragments, in which sections of Conrad's Heart of Darkness have had all the words not relating to nature removed, are hung atop the Kyoto wallpaper at the gallery.

Morrison said Commissaires is unique to Montreal. She said there is interest in its shows, but there is a limited clientele, partly because it is difficult to classify what Commissaires does.

"He is walking the line (by) including what one would term fine art and also design," she said.

Malouin compared Commissaires to Milan's Rossana Orlandi, a gallery-shop that presents new and original design and fashion. It also represents his work.



Malouin, who studied at the renowned Eindhoven University of Technology, called Laramée a groundbreaker, especially in Canada. "He has a world-class gallery and shop as selective as any in New York, Paris, or London."

Among the permanent items for sale at Commissaires are Mr. Jones watches, contemporary furniture by Danish firm Hay, and scent from I Hate Perfume by Christopher Brosius.

The watches, \$145 to \$190, are big, stylish and clever. The Decider, for instance, helps you make decisions – the seconds ticker points to the words yes or no as it rotates; the Mantra alternates a positive statement with a negative – "You are amazing," or "Nobody likes you."

Brosius's perfumes, starting at \$69, are subtle: a delightfully light Tea Rose, the evocative At the Beach 1966 and Just Breathe are a few of the scents.

From Hay, there is a mix of pared-down classical Scandinavian pieces and innovative items: a recycled plastic chair, \$570, that looks as if it's covered in grey flannel and blown-metal stools, \$560 to \$780.

Nature and Other Anomalies remains on display until the end of November. Morrison's Specimen Drape is \$16,800, the Biopsy print is \$3,300 and the wallpaper can be ordered to measure. Contact the gallery. McCallum's bluebirds are \$3,600 for the pair on a silver tray. The apothecary jars are \$870 to \$2,000.

**Commissaires is located at 5226 St. Laurent Blvd.**

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