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### David Mabb

**Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful**

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BY DAVID BALZER March 11, 2009 21:03

#### EDITORIAL RATING:

To Mar 21, Tue-Sat 11am-5pm.  
Leo Kamen Gallery, 80 Spadina  
Av. 416-904-9515.  
[www.leokamengallery.com](http://www.leokamengallery.com).

El Lissitzky was a famous Russian suprematist/constructivist, an engineer manqué whose geometric paintings and architectural sketches had a profound influence on the Bauhaus school and on the development of non-representational modernism during the last century. William Morris was one of the pre-eminent pioneers of the British Arts & Crafts movement, which preceded Lissitzky's experiments but in a sense presaged them with its emphasis on semi-abstract design motifs, and on a radical reimagining of how industry must handle them and society must consume them.

In a patently postmodern move, artist David Mabb has mashed the two figures together in his "Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful," now on view at Leo Kamen Gallery. Mabb takes real, gorgeous squares of William Morris wallpaper – Morrisites, prepare for shock – and paints onto them all 12 pages of El Lissitzky's 1920 children's book, Of Two Squares, including front and back covers, and an endpaper. This is a very brainy, conceptual gesture that can't be outlined in full here; in short, Mabb matches Lissitzky's book's simple call for a design revolution with Morris' own, showing how they intersect on a purely formal basis, and how this intersection has social implications. The show is most interesting for how Mabb deals with the intersection as an artist. Quite often he succeeds in very surprising and pleasing visual juxtapositions of the two men's philosophies.

The second part of the show, "Morris Kitsch Archive," is less resonant. It is a funny library, taking up two walls, of images of mass-produced Morrisiana, from quilts to G-strings to "William Morris is my homeboy" t-shirts, all of which give ironic proof of how far we've fallen from Morris' dream of a design industry that supports creative handiwork. In light of this archive, the paintings seem like further statements of failure – even like acts of vandalism, with the bravado of Lissitzky's industrial revolution at times choking the optimism of Morris'. One might, accordingly, wish Mabb had painted that wallpaper himself: then he would have shown that Morris and Lissitzky's ideas, however quaintly utopian, were still practicable in the face of their prolific perversion.

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