



Old Village Hall

Rustic Formalism on the Lower East Side, NYC

Interview with Fabric Designer, Scott Hill

by Amy Mintonye

"I like to create a tactile story and texture story. The story is best when there are not too many colors and not too many textures. In texture, generally there should be something rough and earthen, something smooth, cool and atmospheric, and something frivolous, for starters."



Photo credit: Margee Challa

Old Village Hall Fabric Designer, Scott Hill

Fabric designer Scott Hill's Lower East Side shop, Old Village Hall, feels more like a reading room than a retail boutique. Dimly lit and filled with both Hill's original designs and his curated collection of antique store treasures, one would feel right at home lounging in one of the custom-fabric armchairs, basking in the light from a roaring fire.

Hill uses his hand-printed, silkscreened fabrics to create pillows, bags, apparel and reupholstered antique furniture. Hill scours Hudson Valley and New England thrift stores, estate sales and auctions for his inspiration. His imagery includes the portraits and text of great writers like Poe and Whitman and appropriated found imagery culled from his scavenging efforts, all layered atop one another with vision. Hill's embrace of loose, gestural printing resulting in unique prints that retain individuality.

I met Scott at the Gowanus Print Lab in New York City, while he was printing his "Schoolboys" design. He was kind enough to answer our questions and give us a glimpse into his artistic processes and inner world.

How would you describe your style in a few words? Wabi sabi. Imperfect. Rustic Formalism.

You've printed balsam pillows. Other than the lovely pine smell, why did you choose them over regular pillows? I began making balsam pillows with the waste cuttings from the furniture I was refurbishing. I have always been a huge fan of roadside travel souvenirs and was inspired on a trip to Maine to see my family.

When Erica and I first opened our store in upstate New York, balsam pillows with the name of the town (Andes) was the first thing we made and offered for sale. Subsequently, I contacted a manufacturer in Maine who specializes in balsam products and asked if they could stuff and sew pillows with my fabric and they said yes.

I discovered that linen is the best vehicle to transmit fragrance. I find balsam fragrance very calming and transporting, and I'm inspired by its ancient uses. Balsam fragrance creates very strong, long lasting memories of fun, innocence, beauty and the natural world...the good things in life.

The use of found imagery is a staple in your work. What makes certain ephemera scream "use me!"? I use bits of things that I feel have energy that radiates meaning bigger than the thing itself. I like portraits of people that appear just a bit troubled. I like handwriting that emanates feeling, not perfect penmanship, but a moment that portrays sadness or peace or hostility. I like interior photos of old homes that appear haunted. When I say "haunted" I don't necessarily mean ghosts and goblins. -I mean energy in the atmosphere.

A reoccurring theme in your work is the American identity. What is your definition of the American identity?

Outsider. The survivor trying to become civilized. The artist. The wild west physician. The American moves forward. There is a momentum at work in the life and psyche of the American. In essence (Western). It is a life of present into future without much concern for the past. It is a momentum of construction and development, creation, hope...simply that tomorrow will be better than today.



Old Village Hall Fabric Designer, Scott

I grew up in California...my family are many generations in California...Our ancient relatives (like everyone else's) were all about finding the double rainbow -by getting out of England or Germany or Denmark or Spain or wherever, getting out of the East and moving to un-mowed fields of green and building a little place to call one's own away from trouble, a safe place to raise children, full of promise and potential. Entrepreneurial.

When I came to New York I quickly saw that in the East, the philosophy that drives the Future is that the past is better than the present (Think: conservation versus preservation). I have to admit, and will not front, that this philosophy is growing on me and I feel comfortable with two views. I have a soft spot for Emerson.

My cynical side says that our days of discovery and achievement are on the wane and that our identity is backsliding into a more animal (plush animal) existence.

In "Schoolboys on Black/White Toile," you printed a 1950's photograph of schoolboys on top of a toile pattern. What does the sum of these two parts mean to you?

French toile typically depicts inert country life: young lovers at the well, young boy fishing, dancing or playing music near an overgrown, ancient ruin. Basically the rustic "good life." To me it symbolizes gentle natural life, simple, easy, unpretentious, honest folk playing and discovering beauty.

The schoolboys look as if they come from a different tax bracket as the toile people, but I imagine that the reality of their existence involves some of the same things, nature, sport, dance, music, love... the aristocratic Schoolboys are a natural extension of the laid back and natural energy depicted in the drawings of idealized country folk of the toile.

When I put them together, the toile is the swirling smoky hazy understory, the ancient relative, the forest floor from which springs new growth, green shoots of energy, fiddlehead ferns and mushrooms, the patrician schoolboys ready to inherit the future.

What is more important to you, a perfect print or a print with personality?

A print with personality. "Perfection" is a liquid concept to me, moving and hard to pin down...and stressful! Perfection is unreal... a false standard that is impossible to live up to in the usual way we conceptualize perfection. One should not strive for perfection. It's better to share imperfect things with your friends and family.

I have a lot of happy accidents when I print because its a lot of freestyle, unregistered, jungle printing. I get what I get...and the "accidents" become part of the work...wrinkles, strings, shadow images...all unplanned random results.

What's next for your work?

More explorations of tactile and textural stories on fabric. We're also developing accessories and a clothesline.

~For more information on the work of Scott Hill visit www.theoldvillagehall.com. Amy Mintonye works for Gowanus Print Lab, a community printing workspace, exhibition space and educational center (www.gowanusprintlab.com); she also is an artist and writer for her contemporary art blog, Machismo Cherry (mimimintonye.tumblr.com).

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