

# Simon Ogden

b.1956

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Master of Arts: Royal College of Art, London

The Romans and Byzantines made beautiful and complex mosaics from glass and marble. From the Renaissance until the early 20th century, furniture makers excelled in the art of *Intarsia*: the construction of intricate pictures and patterns through marquetry – the decorative inlaying of thin veneers of different kinds of wood. This work by Simon Ogden makes use of linoleum flooring in a way that pays tribute to those historical arts, but with a deliberate anti-preciousness in the technique and use of humble recycled materials, that mark the work as contemporary.

Next time you see a lino floor, take a good look at the patterns. You might spot an abstract 'smear' motif, like a fragment of a Jackson Pollock painting; or a pattern of abstract shapes like those found in the paintings of Joan Miró, Jean Arp and Paul Klee; or Modernist grids like those of Piet Mondrian; or ancient Greek 'key' motifs; or Art Nouveau plant forms like those of the architect and designer, Charles Rennie Mackintosh. These correspondences can also be found in fabric design and product design of the period. The tendency for designers to draw on art for inspiration continues today, but in Ogden's lino works the traffic is reversed and these designers' patterns function as art historical references.

Ogden is widely interested in 20th century Modernist Abstraction, particularly Biomorphic Abstraction. Biomorphic refers to irregular or organic abstract form based loosely on shapes found in nature. Biomorphic form is found throughout Modernist Abstraction, but notably in the work of Miró, Arp, Tanguy, Gorky and (late) Matisse. Its origins are found in the Surrealist movement.

Ogden's work fuses Modernist-derived formal references to the landscape and the body with more personal memories of landscape and experience. His work has figurative elements, often including recognisable forms. In *Lowe Street Series 3* there are plant forms and what appear to be planets. The title suggests a specific place is being evoked, but could just as easily refer to a specific experience or, indeed, to the address from which the lino was lifted!

Ogden's formal 'language' as a painter was acquired when he was a student in England. It was at a period when the concept of the Avant-garde still had some currency and when abstraction was still considered to be Avant-garde. There is a kind of nostalgia in his work for the 20th century Avant-garde, but rather than simply imitate the look of once Avant-garde art,

he reprises it while using various Post-modernist distancing devices (like using inlaid lino instead of oil paint) that make his nostalgia seem ambiguous and interesting.

It is worth noting that the Modernist concept of the Avant-garde experimentally pushing the boundaries of accepted norms in art has largely been abandoned. The reasons for this are complex but, interestingly, since the 1960s the mass-culture industry has misappropriated the vocabulary of the Avant-garde as a marketing tool for popular music and commercial cinema. The language explaining the concept has become corrupted or devalued. Some cultural theorists have asserted that this 'stripping of meaning' is another sign of Post-modernism's deconstruction of Modernism's ideas. It would be more true to say, as Ogden's art seems to suggest, that Modernism and Post-modernism coexist and often draw on each other in ambiguous ways.

## Andrew Paul Wood

### Galleries and museums:

[www.bowengalleries.co.nz](http://www.bowengalleries.co.nz)  
[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)  
[www.fina.canterbury.ac.nz](http://www.fina.canterbury.ac.nz)  
[www.milfordgalleries.co.nz](http://www.milfordgalleries.co.nz)

### Articles:

Mane-Wheoki, J. (1991–1992). 'Simon Ogden: The Choreography Of Abstraction'. *Art New Zealand*, Summer, Number 61.

### Web search:

Jean Arp  
 Arshile Gorky  
 Intrasia  
 Henri Matisse  
 Joan Miró

