

On Simon Ogden, Linoleum and Proust

I SUPPOSE IT 'all came back to me' when I took the train to Greymouth in the summer of 2005. It was a rare moment of what some call involuntary memory. Almost half a century earlier and a world away I'd grown up in post-war Britain, in London's east end. Britain was then a place of hardship and austerity; almost monochromatic. It was a country covered in linoleum. Lino was everywhere. Carpets were faded, threadbare rectangular islands in indistinct semi-geometric patterns, that always occupied the centre of what was then referred to as a reception room. In those days, carpets were simply carpets; they were never 'fitted'. It's a curious testimony to the power of the aspirational, that an adjective like 'fitted' should take on such significance. In the late 1960's domestic heating would also become prefaced, but this time with the word 'central'. The world was changing. It was becoming a place where linoleum was fast becoming plain old lino. A world that wanted to 'distance' itself from austerity, poverty and all things 'pre-war' – and that meant lino.

It wasn't until I saw some abandoned bungalows near Arthur's Pass and later the baches on Rangitoto that I started to fully appreciate the linoleum marquetry of Simon Ogden. I suppose what I'm describing is some kind of Proustian epiphany. For him it was a madeleine cake dunked in tea; but for me, there and then, it was Simon Ogden's linoleum marquetry. His mixture of lino from the early 20th century through to the 1960's, released a wave of distant, half-memories; memories of my childhood. A childhood spent playing with my Dinky Toys on the linoleum. I remember that the older, predominantly brown, lino had a semi-geometric pattern which would become roads and 'the town'. The floral patterns presented a problem; there were no roads. I eventually decide (unsurprisingly) that they would represent 'the woods'. Later, during my visit to New Zealand in 2005, I visited Rangitoto. When I saw the baches, the method of their construction and the materials from which they were made, I immediately experienced the power and resonance of Simon's work.

I'd been familiar with Simon's work since he was a student at the Royal College of Art when I was a visiting lecturer back in 1980. I'd always admired the manner in which Simon would appropriate the formal 'poetry' of Matisse, Arp or Miro and apply it to a history, a memory or some event that was very much his own. Yet, here on the other side of the world is a tangible sense of what I've come to regard as 'my' past. Presented in what seems for a split second – a reverie. The kind of reflection that directs us to that is both past and present. A world that is both primordial and constant; a world of natural elements. Elements which employ a poetic and pictorial economy. The mix of economy and informality that makes Matisse's Jazz such an iconic work. The kind of imagery that encourages us to daydream. Simon's work has the power to transform loose associations into an experience that only something as ubiquitous as a humble floor covering could render. An exquisite example of art's transformative power. The fusing of memory and material. Simon's work provides us with clues; clues to our relationship with the past, our culture and our identity.

It's a testimony to the creative force of Simon Ogden's work that something as familiar, something as modest as lino should have the potential to liberate involuntary memory is nothing short of wonderful. Literally.

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