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Question 3: 'The Materiality of Surface'

Examine by drawing upon current and historical context, how [pattern, texture, form, ...] functions as a medium for communicating identity, place, storytelling and cultural symbolism. Discuss in the context of your own practice and with reference to two/three illustrated case studies.

Narrative is important to communicate within art and design, allowing spectators to creatively interpret and 'read' works in a personal way (Dillon P & Howe T, 2003, p.289). Enabling involvement from audience members helps to attract people to art, providing a holistic interpretation to the design that welcomes people to spectate work (p.290). Materiality of a surface can effectively demonstrate this storytelling, this term being about the qualities and impact being recognised in the materials used (Sustainability Directory, 2025). This is what I will explore further in this essay, answering the question of how the materials of a surface can tell this narrative. An example of a brand that cleverly makes this happen is Laura Ashley. Creating an extensive range of interior and fashion collections full of "quintessential sophistication" (Ashley L, 2025), all the florals and various other types of patterns make up the narrative behind their collections, expressing the beauty behind the British countryside and displaying Laura Ashley's Welsh heritage using the brand's icons and motifs (Next Retail Ltd, 2025). In my opinion, I really like the brand's unique way of storytelling, and I will delve deeper into this personal view in this piece of writing. Alongside other theories, I will be describing my positive perspective with what the company show throughout.

Storytelling with artworks is first shown from the surface itself, using "Materiality." In art theory, this definition refers to the physicality of the art object and medias used to produce artwork (Nelson Mandela University, 2020). As well as this, "Materiality" is the "aesthetic experience" and concept gained from the surface of an artwork, engaging the senses of the viewer through the artwork's physical components (Mills C.M, 2009). Surfaces, according to theorists studying "Materiality" contain many layers, through the visuals produced and the condition and textural manifestation of the surface (Bruno G, 2014, p.3). Expanding on from this point, in Chapter 4 "*The Surface Tension of Media*" of the same book, Guiliana Bruno uses the work of Robert Rauschenberg, set in a former New York City warehouse (p.73). "*Excursus: Homage to the Square*" (1998) (Figs 1 &2) is a minimalist installation, set in an open space which "exposes the potential of a square" by creating eighteen similarly constructed rooms out of light and transparent scrims (p.73). Bringing attention to spatial relations and perceptions (Dia Beacon, 2018), this brings the materiality theory into textile design, as well as interior and gallery spaces, "expanding into an ever-broadening realm" (Igoe E, 2020) with the material and the relationship between the artist and the artwork created. This chemistry then turns into an embodied experience between spectators and the outcome, simplifying the "Materiality" theory. From the moment that the artist is influenced by a subject, their tacit knowledge starts to develop, constructing a basic idea of composition, and the mediums used to create pieces (Kiwi Loose in Museums, 2017). An example of a theorist who studies this concept of materialism is Giles Deleuze, expressing his theory in "*Difference and Repetition*" (1994), and later on in "*Desert Islands and Other Texts*" (2004),

redefining the term by grounding reality as a process-lead thing, rather than this being static, known as his “new materialism” or “full materialism” (Deleuze G, 2004, p.174; quoted in Cole D.R, 2012, p.1). Just the beginning statement of “*Difference and Repetition*” reinforces his recreation of the definition, stating that “repetition is not generality” and that they “must be distinguished in several ways” (p.1). From reading this, I can reflect that repetition, in this case, is a creative process, not only considering the main features of a thing (Oxford Languages, 2025) but incorporating many elements into a “materialistic” way of thinking or doing something. Later in this novel, he continues to communicate his views on repetition, leading on to his synthesis of “virtual objects” (p.70).



Figs 1 and 2- Robert Irwine “Excursus: Homage to the Square” at different times of the day.

Contrasted with explicit or propositional knowledge (The London School of Economics and Political Science, n.d, p.1), tacit knowledge is hard to communicate, and cannot be “captured,” only visualised and “manifested” in what artists create (Tsoukas H, 2002). Because of this meaning, this is more difficult to express and articulate due to it coming from the more personal experience creators have, learning through the exact feeling of a certain material or process in an artistic context (Anderson B, 2025). This term originated from physician Micheal Polyani, developing his “post-philosophical” ideas in many articles and books: “*Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*” (1958), and “*Tacit Dimension* (1966)” (The Polyani Society, 2023). In both books, Polyani explains knowledge through separate systems and theories, firstly through the objectivity of theoretical knowledge rather than immediate experience (Polyani, 1955,1962, p.3), which he then leads on to “The Tacit Component”, the name of Part Two of “*Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*.” (p.69-260). Challenging the objectivity in science previously mentioned, he then begins to explain the “inarticulate intelligence” and manifestations required (p.72-79). This relates to the concept of “tacit knowing”: contributions made by our sense perceptions and experiences rather than traditional academic intellect is just as valuable (p.103). The concept of these experiences is also highlighted in Polyani’s second book that I mentioned: “*Tacit Dimensions*” (1966). Expanding on from “*Personal Knowledge*”, this states that tacit knowledge is a vital part of this scientific knowledge he referred to, working out the structure of tacit knowing (p.xviii). One of the beginning statements Polyani writes claims that “we know more than we can tell” (p.4), introducing the points and thesis that he is making about this theory. Compared to implicit knowledge, a more tacit way of knowing is a power that all types of knowledge are discovered by (p.6) and is the “universal principle of knowing (p.44), reinforcing this principle of the “personal participation” earlier said when evidencing Polyani’s first book, and nature of this power.

Dating back to 1953, Laura and Bernard Ashley founded the iconic brand “Laura Ashley” which started off on the kitchen table of their Pimlico flat, influenced from a Women’s Institute exhibition at the V&A museum (Next Retail Ltd, 2025), and other influential women like Audrey Hepburn (Collins, 2023). From investing £10 on printing materials like wood for a screen, fabric and dyes, this is where the world-loved brand began, printing their first design called the “Pelham print” (Fig 3) and various other patchwork designs on scarves, tea towels (Warnaby G, 1994) and other small everyday household objects (Wood, 2009, p.23). Being taught to do patchwork, quilting, and various other types of needlework from her grandmother, Laura was determined to have a go herself at this, after seeing her families’ talents, as well as the inspiring exhibitions of handicrafts mentioned earlier in this paragraph (p.19). From this point, this is when the name of the well-known “Laura Ashley” brand developed, as Laura and Bernard Ashley opened more high street stores in this extraordinary partnership they have together (p.7). On the strength of this business’ success, this is when Bernard decided to leave his job and devote time into this “embryonic business,” as “Ashley” products were booming and being purchased in high street stores, firstly being John Lewis (p.26). The high street store of theirs which they opened first was when they, and the Ashely family, move to their home country of Wales and bought the building on Machynlleth at 35 Maengwyn Street (Roberts, 2022). As a Surface Pattern and Textile Design cohort, all our class visited the Laura Ashley archive, located in London. Having this amazing opportunity to explore through the wealth of the artwork produced by the brand, plus other collaborators and family members made me realise how easily this theory of materiality is visualised, and a narrative is communicated, through elements like pattern and texture that are applied to a surface. Key aspects and keywords from the archive are going to be expressed in this essay from this point, taking many notes and photographs of the inside and throughout the initial talks the company gave us about the backstory and design process behind each project and design brief of theirs.



Fig 3- Laura Ashley “Pelham print” from my Laura Ashley archive trip

Narrative in art and design enriches the design process of a piece of artwork, another way of engaging spectator experience and creating a more personal meaningful response from the audience (Grimaldi *et al.*, 2013, p.210). As aforesaid, these narratives and connections tell these stories through the visual elements such as the imagery on display and compositions, going beyond just the patterns and aesthetics. The ubiquitous terminology can be applied to

my practise, sharing my narrative through the project I'm currently completing with Laura Ashley, and through the work of the brand itself. Through the wallpaper and textile designs that Laura Ashley mainly focusses their practise on, their heritage is displayed mostly through the physical qualities of the material used. All these characteristics, such as texture, weight, surface and tactility, can represent the "symbiosis of [the] "look and feel" of the papers and fabrics, conveying "high quality and sophistication" (Wallpaper from the 70s, n.d). Like this source from "*Wallpaper from the 70s*" states, Laura Ashley shows her timeless aesthetic (Ashley, 2025) and elegant style through her use of materials, as well as the plethora of motifs shown. Similar "glamour of naturalness" to this source is demonstrated in her pieces, throughout the decades they have been running for. Starting in 1953, as previously mentioned, the heritage of the quintessential English countryside is reflected, drawing nostalgia to their classic styles and motifs in current artworks, as well as some older wallpapers, textiles and developing artworks seen at the archive visit. Being born and raised in South Wales with a tight knit family (Wood, 2009, p.7), her aim is to reflect her upbringing and the beauty of the countryside, with its "deep valleys and soaring mountains." In terms of the motifs and hero prints created, the company began with geometric patterns in abstract colourways, despite Laura being initially drawn to the small stripes and floral patterns she had seen in previous exhibitions (Wood, 2009, p.23). The reason why she could not pursue with this inspiration point was due to the limited room they had on the kitchen table and the fact that these were "far too intricate" for the silk screens that they purchased. The story of how the company developed into the renowned company seen today is the main narrative of Laura Ashley, explained previously.

Despite the company having to branch out and become more commercial and digitised over time, their enduring aesthetic has still been bought into designs made nowadays, further reinforcing the narrative of the Welsh and English heritage they've worked with since the beginning stages of the business. They continue to materialise and work with similar motifs, patterning a multitude of surfaces with an abundance of florals, spots and stripes featured within current collections. Although the material itself does not carry a significant amount of meaning when discussing Laura Ashley's wallpaper collections, the paper material itself often presents a natural and warm aesthetic and is suitable for various home styles and buildings with the paper's typically matte appearance (Cher Décor, 2025). With this finish to the wall covering's surface, Laura Ashley have accompanied this with a muted colour palette in the background and the foreground of many of their designs. Generally, this colour scheme evokes feelings of calmness and creates more harmony within an art collection, if placed next or near to brighter colours (Chatt, 2023). In the work of Laura Ashley, I believe that this is the case, as the colours help to give that serene and sophisticated feel, also evoking a sense of nostalgia from the Ashley's upbringing with their biophilic connection to their natural surroundings in South Wales. Muted colours are also present on the textiles that the company create, sharing the same colours and meanings as the papers. Emphasising from this, the motifs create a further sense of connection and calm surroundings as a variety of prints represent this storyline of the company. In addition, I personally believe that the patterns could also shine a light onto the resurgence of handcrafted pattern, displaying this through Laura Ashley's tacit knowledge of the technique of printing. Seeing a visual improvement as she learns with the print materials, a range of ditsy, spot repeat and other varieties of repeat patterns and standalone motifs are created, investigating the technique using the materials with her hands and more tacitly since being taught by family, rather than using more academic sources. Recognising the intrinsic value of traditional textiles (Singh, 2024), the older styles of print and patternmaking are featured in a plethora of their current designs, augmenting the timeless and classic aesthetic the company visualise within their works. I saw this when in the Laura Ashley archive, viewing both older and more recent outcomes which shared similar qualities with use of pattern and colour (Figs 4-8). Patterns like ones previously mentioned, and continuing floral icon and hero motifs, were a common feature within the archive collection, and within the old "*Home Furnishings*" catalogues from the company. In developing drawings, samples and final outcomes, these were developed

with geometric shapes and florals. These are still prominent features today, despite using more updated processes, within wallpaper designs and textiles from the brand.



Figs 4,5,6,7 & 8- Photographs of various drawings and fabrics from my Laura Ashley archive visit

In conclusion, the company Laura Ashley visualises the theory of Materiality within the plethora of designs on display for consumers to buy and within the immense archive that our Surface Pattern and Textile Design class had the incredible opportunity to visit. Through visual symbols and shapes, in addition to the physicality of the surfaces and medias used to create artworks, the story of the company is displayed. These effectively visually showcase the love of nature predominantly within Laura Ashley, and the other contributors in the past

and currently in the company. As Laura Ashley was tacitly gaining knowledge about the process, the progression of the company grew, gaining status and growing larger as the “Ashley” female fashion and home decorations and fabrics became well-known and recognised. Using Laura Ashley’s “Welshness” to tell the story and to market the brand (Collins, 2023), this started off in London and then became Welsh, as she returned to her home country and opened their first shop in South Wales in the 1960s. Storytelling and narrative is an important thing to demonstrate within art practise, using this as a mode of narrative inquiry and encouraging spectators to participate in the activity by making up their own conclusions and reasonings behind the artist’s work (Bochner & Ellis, 2003). Having the information provided to them visually, spectators can gain this individual experience from Laura Ashley’s prints, displaying a multitude of different responses to her countryside heritage and living. By considering their choice of muted colours and motifs, the company have a distinctive style which is instantly recognisable and displays the identity of Laura Ashley herself.

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Figure 2: Dia Beacon (2018). *Robert Irwin: Excursus: Homage to the Square*. Dia Art Foundation. Available at <https://www.diaart.org/exhibition/exhibitions-projects/robert-irwin-excursus-homage-to-the-square-exhibition> [Accessed 13th November 2025].

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