



## THE PHOTOSHOP POINTILLIST

With a successful career as a fashion photographer under his belt, Martyn Thompson has been using his shooting and digital-retouching skills for a different purpose: wallpaper and fabric design. Whether Pollock-style splashes of paint or rippling water, his collections make use of both camera and computer to capture every rich nuance. Elfreda Pownall zooms in to his live/work New York loft. Photography: Martyn Thompson

Opposite: racks that once held rolls of background paper for photo shoots now display Thompson's jacquard fabrics with (from top): 'Blotch', green 'Radiant', sea blue 'Melting', 'Drippy', blue 'Drop Cloth' and 'Dapple' – a photographic lamp stands by. This page: the living area of the loft has been transformed into a showroom for mid-century furniture that Thompson has re-covered in his fabrics, including Richard McCarthy's chair for Selrite in red 'Splat' (far left) and Gio Ponti's lounge chair for the Parco dei Principi hotel with 'Drop Cloth' cushion (next left). They are gathered round a 1980s Japanese lacquered table. All the ceramics, including the lamp bases, are by Dove Drury Hornbuckle, who also made the swirling copper wall sculpture

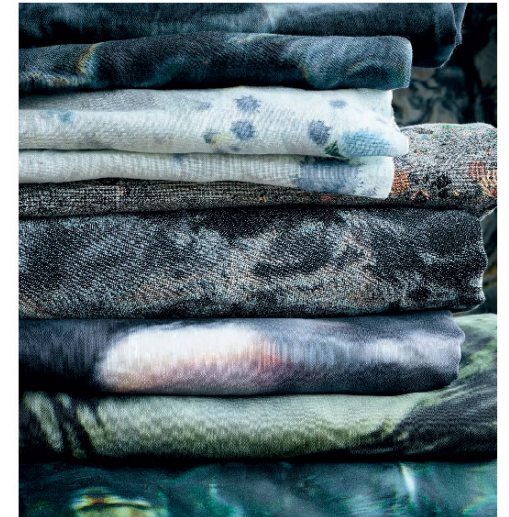
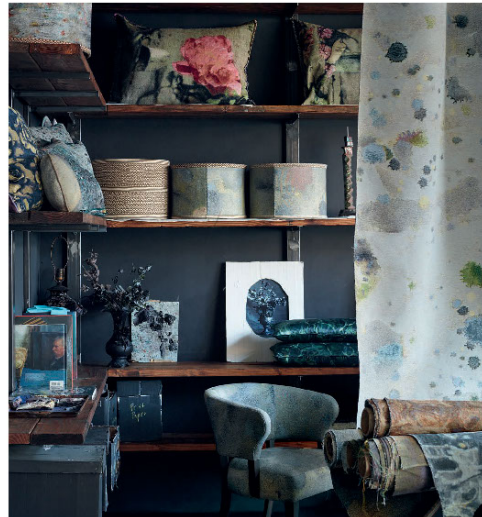




Above: the view from the kitchen towards Prince Street. Thompson, seated in an Ilmari Tapiovaara chair, works at a pair of industrial tables that recall the loft's original use as the Little Singer building. Below left: a sample of 'Splat' wallpaper, with test prints of Thompson's original inspiration – blown-up images of splashes of paint on paper. Below right: this corner, the workstation of Conor Burke, brand manager for MTS, is also used to display stock



Above: in Thompson's bedroom, his sage 'Ripple' jacquard fabric serves as a wall panel. The bed linen is by Society. A painting by the Australian artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye stands on the wardrobe, with a black Capodimonte vase. Below left: the colour palette is confined, so that fabrics from each of the three collections work together. Below right: there is a mix of blues and weights of fabric in this pile, sandwiched by natural and glazed versions of green 'Radiant'





'JUST DO IT,' says the photographer turned fabric designer Martyn Thompson, 'that's my motto', a personal philosophy he attributes to the influence of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren rather than a self-help book – or a Nike ad. He was born in London, but his parents soon emigrated to Australia, so it was in Sydney that the 20-year-old Thompson first connected with the spirit of punk, which he interprets as: 'Be fearless, you don't need to be educated in something – just go ahead and do it. It was the era of the New Romantics – we were all dressed in knickers and ruffles. In a way I've never lost the taste for that.' Standing in his immense New York loft, on Prince Street in SoHo, he is dressed in tapestry shorts and a grey linen shirt that he made himself, with several necklaces and bracelets. On a colder day, he would also be wearing hand-knitted over-the-knee socks, with stubby round-toed shoes, made from various coloured leathers. Now 55 and whipper-slim, his silver hair, cut short at the back and sides, with an immense towering tsunami of a quiff, is complemented by a neat goatee beard. The whole get-up brings to mind an intriguing creative elf from Middle-earth.

For he is nothing if not creative. After 30 years of photography for the grandest magazines and such luxury brands as Hermès and Tiffany, Thompson has turned to making fabrics, and in so doing, his artistic wheel has swung full circle back to his early days. While studying for his degree in English literature at Sydney University, Thompson was painting fabrics and using them to make his own clothes, when he wasn't singing in a band.

This return to his first love was partly a pragmatic reaction to the changes in the photographic world since the crash of 2008 ('Everyone's a photographer now,' he says), and partly a need to return to being a producer, a craftsman and not an interpreter. His fabric and wallpaper designs are based on details from his photographs, which he then blows up and converts into repeat patterns in Photoshop. The digital files are then used to weave a heavy cotton jacquard in the USA, while lighter fabrics are printed in Italy. The definition of the digital printing is superb; every infinitesimal nuance is captured with pointillist exactitude; but step back and the images resolve themselves – the effect is beautiful.

'I want to bring nature at its most abstract into the house,' he says. In May this year, he launched a collection entitled 'The Accidental Expressionist', which was based on splatters and flicks and spots of paint. His latest collection, 'Rock Pool', will be launched during London Design Festival, at Brompton Design District (this year celebrating its tenth anniversary). It is inspired by photographs he took beside the Ionian Sea, recalling the flicker of sunshine on water, or pebbles underneath, seen slightly distorted by a slight breeze on the surface. 'I like being part of the world of people who make things, they are often very open, not closeted and afraid about their work.'

When the young Thompson first came to New York for a month-long post-graduation trip, he had very little idea of work at all. 'I spent most of my time in clubs – no surprise! I practically lived at Danceteria, and it was there, on the qui-

eter floors where you could just hang out and talk, that I met people who were planning to be actors or furniture designers, very ambitious people. Sydney was not like that. New York lit the flame. Back in Sydney, I bought my paints, bought my fabrics, showed my clothes to people, opened a shop, called Ox, on Taylor Square with some friends.' He also started photographing the clothes he had made, which were sold to other shops, and over the next couple of years he was commissioned to take fashion photographs for local magazines *Follow Me* and *Stiletto* and eventually for *Vogue Australia*. By 1986, he had put down his scissors, and taken up his camera in earnest – and in 1988 he left for Paris, the capital of fashion, where he knew nobody.

'It was lonely at first in Paris,' he recalls, but thanks to his one friend, the Australian fashion stylist Brana Wolf, Thompson was soon very busy. 'I've never, ever had any problem getting work,' he says. He began to worry that he needed to move beyond his one 'signature look' – dark and moody, using available light and grainy film – to learn the technicalities of photography. 'But when you focus too much on the technical, your pictures don't work so well; when you just let it all happen, they work beautifully.' He was still resolving the tension between instinct and technique when he fell in love with an Englishman and, in 1991, followed him to London.

Here, another Australian friend, the stylist Jane Roarty, convinced him to work outside fashion, to photograph food and interiors. 'She pushed me, and I have to say I was pretty reluctant. It was the beginning of that whole "lifestyle" (I hate that word) movement, but, once I engaged a broader spectrum, that's when photography started working for me.' His speech is an amalgam of these formal, articulate pronouncements undercut by hoots of laughter, which, with his original eye, worked its magic on journalists. Ilse Crawford, the founding editor of British *Elle Decoration*, used his images often and became a lifelong friend. Sue Skeen, the then deputy editor, recalls: 'The quality of his work was lean and brooding, intense somehow. He built his images with architecture, texture and darkness, while everyone else was going light.'

His New York loft attests to that. Many lofts in this area have been spruced up to bland anonymity by bankers or supermodels, but Thompson's retains the visible pipes and rough brickwork of its first incarnation as the Little Singer building from 1904. The place serves partly as a showroom, so there are rolls of fabric and wallpaper, cushions and mid-century Italian furniture upholstered in his designs, as well as ceramic lamps made by his former partner, Dove Drury Hornbuckle. 'A decade ago I felt there was something missing, and I think it was that spirit from my early twenties of just doing what you want to do. Making fabrics is a learning curve, but I feel very passionate about it – and when you have a passion the rest will follow' ■

To contact Martyn Thompson, ring 001 917 374 1764, or visit [martynthompsonstudio.com](http://martynthompsonstudio.com). 'Rock Pool' will be launched during London Design Festival (Brompton Design District), at 3 Cromwell Place, London SW7, 17-25 Sept. Mon-Sun 10-6. For details, visit [londondesignfestival.com](http://londondesignfestival.com)



Opposite: ceiling pipes, a legacy of the building's industrial origins, make it easy to hang tall lengths of fabric – and that practice shows the beauty of lilac 'Splat' and blue 'Drop Cloth' to good advantage. Pieces of 'Dappled Butterfly' and 'The Painted Galaxy' are draped beside a box overflowing with swatches