

opposite, from left
 Soldier, Symmetry #10" by Elissa
 for "Skeleton wallpaper" by
 Showroom Dummies; "McGeean Rose"
 Timorous Beasties

Are wall coverings becoming the new soapbox?

BY EVE M. KAHN

I CAN ALREADY SEE IT. Some day a crew of urban archaeologists will be scraping at plasterwork in a Manhattan townhouse, trying to determine how past inhabitants lived and decorated. At the circa-2005 layer, the team members will uncover fragments of a wallcovering that doesn't jibe with their preconceptions of 21st-century mainstream tastes. They'll see, amid the paper's treillage of trees and vines, shoeless black kids frolicking around toilets and flies.

If future scholarship goes well, historians will eventually figure out that one generation of rowhouse tenants wanted to mock traditional pastoral scenes while somewhat humorously protesting stereotypes and bigotry. In other words, these walls will be able to talk.

"The pattern seems very pretty and benign, but as you look at it, you realize something political is going on, something

with so much weight and so many implications," says production designer/artist Ron Norsworthy, who's just prototyped the wallpaper "Toile des Enfants du Ghetto." Some well-known African-American filmmakers are considering the product for their children's bedrooms. If excavators do find it in a century or so, Norsworthy explains, they'll understand the current appetite for subversive surface treatments: "The trend is toward over-the-top self-expression, and wallpaper is a way of expressing ourselves large-scale. We're done with the Martha Stewart-era cerulean-blue painted walls."

Ghetto toile is by no means the most opinionated of wallpapers now reaching the market. Forget your grandfather's jokey bar wallcovering with rummies leaning against lampposts, or your mom's hippie-wannabe sine curves in the powder room. Papered walls are now conveying belief systems, protesting war or overdevelopment, and titillating or grossing out people.

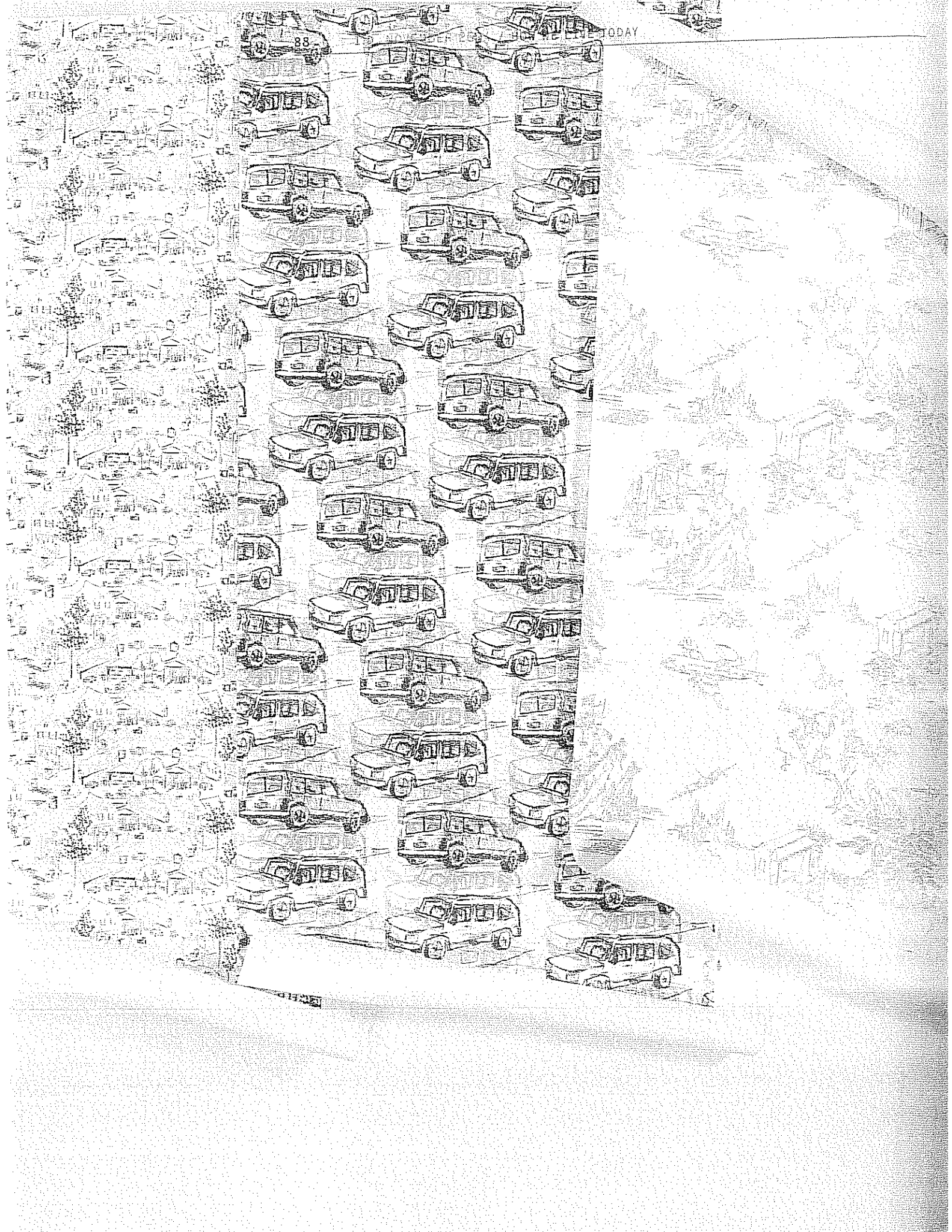
"Wallpaper clings enigmatically to the conceptual and material margins of architecture, art, and decor," wrote Marion Boulton Stroud, founder of the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, in the catalog for a 2003 exhibit "On the Wall: Contemporary Wallpaper" (organized with the Rhode Island School of Design). "What goes up (on the wall), of course, must come down," Stroud added. "Wallpaper, by its very nature, is an ephemeral art object destined for dereliction."

Despite the short lifespan, a handful of artists and entrepreneurial print shops, mostly in the U.S. and U.K., have launched lines of strong-willed or discomfiting wallpaper. David Schefer Design has bought some 600 rolls of a pattern featuring swarms of foot-wide moths from Glasgow manufacturer Timorous Beasties for 63 Wall Street, a recent residential conversion of an

Art Deco office tower in Lower Manhattan. The BBC in London is looking at lining a conference room with skeleton motifs on a creepy paper designed by the artists' collective Showroom Dummies. Brooklyn furnishings store The Future Perfect has been busily sending out samples of artist Elissa Levy's flocked gun-toting soldiers, and reports interest stirring among restaurateurs, homeowners, and designers. Staffers with big-shot designers Peter Marino and Pierce Allen, meanwhile, have been fingering Studio Printworks' swatches by artist Jessica Smith, who slips trash cans, traffic jams, and spy planes into her toile-inspired papers.

"As an artist, I wanted my work to be more accessible, to transcend the walls of the gallery," Smith says. "I toned down the politics a little to make it open to a wider public."

Wallpapers, she adds, have long revealed their owners' innermost thoughts. "French peasants in the 14th century would cover cracks in their walls with rough block-printed religious icons, which gives you a sense of how much power the church had then." Playfully disturbing imagery—gored stags, fanged dragons, leering monkeys—has found favor for centuries and still appears in popular reproductions by the likes of Brunschwig & Fils. Blunt political statements are yet another venerable wallpaper tradition. In the 18th century



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alone, design historian Catherine Lynn points out, rolls were printed with French Revolutionaries razing the Bastille and American patriots causing Britannia to weep. Nineteenth-century scenics glorified heroes of Napoleon's campaigns or the Greeks' battles against the Ottomans.

Taste for such literalism has understandably waxed and waned. Jackie Kennedy hung Revolution scenes at the White House; "the Clintons covered them over, and now the Bushes have uncovered them," says Gregory Herringshaw, curator of "Artists' Designed Wallpapers" at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, through November 14. His 12-object overview includes Andy Warhol's 1960s cows and Allen Jones's 1970s portrait of a bikini-clad sadist called "Right Hand Lady." The RISD/Fabric Workshop's 100 samples were rich in more recent extremes, such as Robert Gober's 1989 genitalia screenprints and

Nicole Eisenman's 2003 sateen scenes of prison abuse.

Most of these fine artworks were produced as one-offs for gallery installations, or come in pricey limited editions. For \$30,000, the Marianne Boesky Gallery will ship you a small roomful of Takashi Murakami's "Jellyfish Eyes" (with a certificate promising a new set, at cost, if you move—provided the gallery is still in business). The late lamented *Nest* magazine, by contrast, was charging just \$72.50 for a small roomful of Paul Noble's "nobnest zed," with Bosch-like cartoons of spider webs and penile snakes.

"Nobnest zed" clearly didn't prove much of a moneymaker, nor have any of the other provocative recent designs become best-sellers. The industry's heavyweights, like Brewster and MDC, are not showing much interest in edgy patterning: "It's definitely not mass market, no way, no way," says Ron Pietrzak, executive director of the Wallcoverings Association.

New technology, though, could help the avant-garde gain some ground soon. Digital printers are expanding in size while prices drop; Norsworthy was able to inkjet-

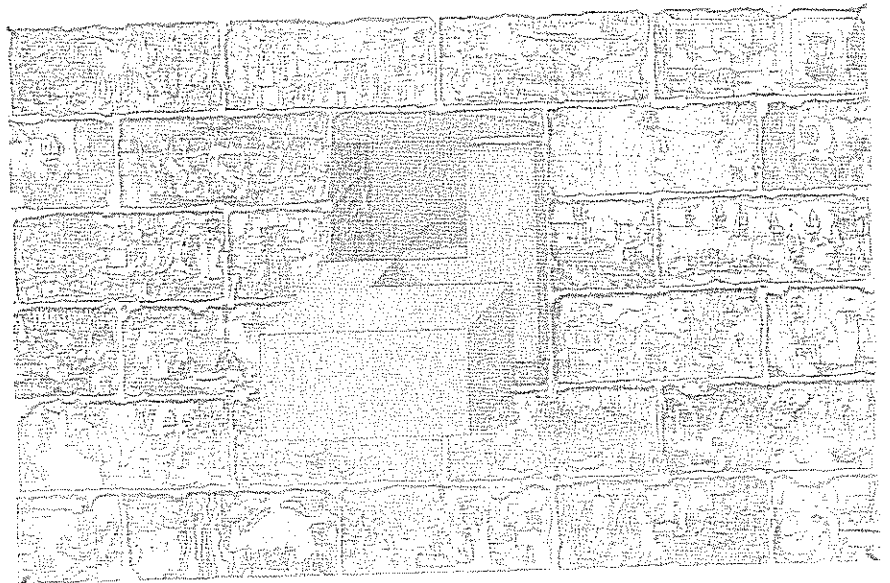
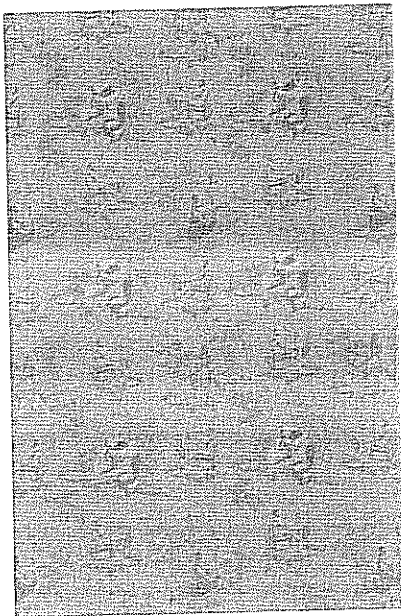
print his samples on linen-textured paper. And designers are learning to pack their walloping messages ever more sneakily, to catch conservative observers unawares.

Elissa Levy intentionally printed her fuzzy soldiers in quiet cream-on-cream: "The subtlety makes it more subversive. I imagine people don't always get it at first maybe it affects them more subconscious." Eve-Lynn Schoenstein of David Schefer Design says that she expected Timorous Beasties' Wall Street moths "would get more of a rise out of people. But no one's really rattled by it. Everyone loves it, it's a very friendly paper." Just in case, whenever anyone's unsure what kind of bugs are afloat overhead, "We tell people those are butterflies."

Eve M. Kahn is a contributing editor at I.D.

opposite, from left
"Trash Day," "Cars Go Beep,"
and "Soying on China"
by Jessica Smith

"Toile des Enfants du Ghetto"
by Ron Norsworthy



"nobnest zed" by Paul Noble