

**Weird and Wonderful, or the Victorians Я Us:
Review of *Victoriana: The Art of Revival***

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Victoriana: The Art of Revival
Guildhall Art Gallery, London, UK
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The Victorians are still very much with us, persistently refusing to fade away quietly to make way for the postmodern present. Instead they rumble about like restless, sometimes vengeful ghosts in the lumber-room of postmodernity's cultural unconscious – and apparently in artists' creative consciousnesses also. As the recent bicentenary celebrations for Darwin and Dickens remind us, or the monies spent on re-modelling museums dedicated to prominent Victorians, such as the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, north-east London (awarded the Art Fund Prize for Museum of the Year 2013), or the lengthy queues at exhibitions, such as *The Cult of Beauty – The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900* at the V&A in 2011 or the 2012-13 *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* at the Tate Britain, the Victorians' aesthetic and creative legacies continue to fascinate and intrigue. The Guildhall Art Gallery, London, self-confessedly capitalised on this perennial appeal with *Victoriana: The Art of Revival*, which ran from 7 September to 8 December 2013, but it did so by adopting a distinctly contemporary neo-Victorian angle. Rather than celebrating Victorian personalities and artworks, this exhibition displayed the works of present-day artists engaging with the nineteenth century via varied modes of inspiration, adaptation, homage, re-visioning, re-inscription and transformation.

From static to moving, from playful to perverse, from humorous to disconcerting, from subtly restrained to confrontationally excessive, the exhibits resorted to a range of mediums and techniques, drawing equally on 'High' Victorian art and the period's popular culture and crafts to give

Victoriana a flavour of something in-between an exotic Cabinet of Curiosities and an excursion into Wonderland. Stephen Kenny's work, for instance, takes the form of hand-bill fly posters or advertisements that revive Victorian letterpress or relief printing laboriously undertaken by hand, inviting the reader to *Drink More Gin* (2009) or – my personal favourite – *Disappear Here* (2011), as though signposting our own Alice-like encounter with a latter-day Cheshire Cat.



Figure 1: Stephen Kenny, *Disappear Here* (2011). Letterpress print.
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Fittingly, placed in a corridor at the ‘tail-end’ of the exhibition, *Disappear Here* provided a suitable open-ended but self-reflexive questioning note to the exhibition. To what extent do our neo-Victorian overlays of ‘the Victorian’ with our own projections and desires ‘disappear’ the real nineteenth century? Does the neo-Victorian project rely on the attractions of escapism from a somehow less aesthetically appealing, less sensuous, less vibrant, less curiosity-exciting present-day, making us want to immerse ourselves and vicariously ‘disappear’ into the past? Or does it re-engage us with our own time via a self-estranging encounter with ourselves as would-be Victorians and the Victorians as futuristic versions of ourselves?

Coming downstairs into the subterranean exhibition space as though literally descending into the Victorian wing of our cultural unconscious, the visitor was first met with Yinka Shonibare's well-known photographic suite *Dorian Gray* (2001), which recreates Oscar Wilde's protagonist via eleven, near life-sized, black-and-white images and one chromogenic photograph of

a black dandy.¹ As stressed on the artist's website, Shonibare's work equally references Albert Lewin's 1945 black-and-white film adaptation of Wilde's novel (Shonibare 2010), making the work a resonant exemplar of neo-Victorianism's palimpsestuous practice, whereby the adaptation process increasingly incorporates not only the source text but also prior adaptations (see Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 212), even to the point of being unable to distinguish between them. Shonibare's play with Dorian Gray's ethnicity, underlined by the images' lack of colour, disconcerts our expectations of what 'the Victorian' and 'the Victorians' really looked like or, more to the point, makes us self-conscious about what, like race, is often marginalised or left out altogether in recreations of the period.²

Many of the *Victoriana* displays, such as Shonibare's, have a distinctly Gothic flavour, often employing deliberate estrangement techniques to render the Victorian in a different and disconcerting light. Set within a recreated cluttered mini-parlour in the exhibition, the *Trophy Chair* (2008) by Miss Pokeno [aka Alannah Currie], undermines notions of Victorian domesticity and deadening 'stuffiness' by turning the easy chair, an emblem of comfort, into a taxidermist's case study. The two dead foxes twisted tightly together and incorporated into the back of the chair evoke violence and despoliation for sport, as underlined by the choice of crimson velvet.



Figure 2; Miss Pokeno, *Trophy Chair* (2008).
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As the accompanying text on the artist's website makes clear, the artist intends her "destructivist" work as a feminist statement. Implicitly, the chair aligns femininity with prey by comparing domesticity for many women, then and now, to "illfitting [sic] dresses – too tight for comfort and bursting at the seams" (Miss Pokeno n.d.), much as the foxes seem to strain against their confined place in the mash-up of beast and furniture. Yet the viewer may also draw more general conclusions from the chair regarding the way the nineteenth century has become stereotypically reified in the popular imagination as an age of acute repression and exploitation, evoking environmental as well as gender issues.

Gothicised gender themes of imperilled femininity, combined with other prominent neo-Victorian tropes, such as spectrality, also featured in other exhibits. Tess Farmer's *Mignon Ambushed by a Mob of Fairies* (2013), a site-specific installation, surrounds the titular Victorian marble statue by E. Roscoe Mullins with hovering swarms of insects and miniature fairy-sculptures constructed from amalgams of organic materials and naturalist fragments, which are Farmer's trademark.



Figures 3 & 4: Tess Farmer, *Mignon Ambushed by a Mob of Fairies* (2013) and detail.

Bone, worm shells, insects, arachnids, plant roots, crabs, snakeskin, hedgehog spine.

Site-specific installation, using E. Roscoe Mullins' marble (1881-83).

Reproduced with kind permission of the artist and Guildhall Art Gallery, London.

Rather than carefully ordered and classified specimens neatly arranged in a Victorian naturalist's collections, defamiliarised 'nature' runs riot, refusing containment by science or rationality. The vaguely sinister and macabre madcap swirl (and 'litter' at the statue's base) of dead bone, insect wings, bits of spiders, snakes, crustaceans, and skeletal figures seems to deliberately deface the female purity of the white marble figure. Farmer plays with the typical neo-Victorian tendency to pathologise the Victorian by concentrating on the period's seamy underbelly, irrational obsessions, and taboos in implicit contrast to our would-be more enlightened postmodernity. As noted on the artist's website and in the exhibition description respectively, Farmer's 'fairies' "borrow from Victorian occultism" (Ellis 2007) as much as from the work of the Victorian artist Richard Dadd, who produced some of his most famous paintings of fairies and other supernatural subjects while imprisoned for patricide, initially in the psychiatric hospital Bethlem (or Bedlam), London, and later in the newly opened Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum (now Broadmoor Hospital), Berkshire.³ Comparable to Dadd's work, Farmer's installation conveys a sense of a dark (neo-)Victorian imagination 'out of control', insidiously infiltrating, subverting, and queering the real. In a sense, the Victorians have been internalised as the new Id of the postmodern psychic apparatus.

Sue Blackwell's *While You Were Sleeping* (2004) reprises similar themes, though – at first glance – in a less overtly threatening manner. An actual dress suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition hall is half-enveloped in swirls of butterflies, consisting of cut-out fragments of the dress itself. As per the exhibition description, the dress is "a found piece, a twentieth-century reworking of a Victorian/Edwardian gown", though the installation's concept is based on "a Burmese legend", whereby a person's soul assumes the shape of a butterfly for the duration of their sleep. In one sense, a reverse colonisation of memories of British spiritualism by the Asian cultural imaginary, Blackwell's work highlights how closely intertwined the neo-Victorian remains with memories of empire. Yet it also emphasises the inevitably multi-cultural and multi-temporal hybridity of 'dreaming' the long nineteenth century back into presence via its material traces.



Figure 5: Sue Blackwell, *While You Were Sleeping* (2004).
Installation using an altered ‘found’ Victorian/Edwardian dress.
Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Yet arguably, for all its ephemeral floating beauty and other-worldly effect, the installation also has less uplifting connotations of vulnerability, trauma, and loss: the deliberate ‘shredding’ of the dress and its resulting tattered lacey fragility produce a sense of desecration analogous to Farmer’s work. Somehow the dress struck me as that of a child rather than an adult and, perhaps not coincidentally, the exhibition description refers to J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1902), seemingly alluding to Wendy’s flight. For me, Blackwell’s work implicitly evokes the missing female body that would be exposed by the ‘violated’ fabric, as well as recalling the allure of ragged ‘lost’ children and nubile fairies. The latter, of course, were often both feminised and sexualised in Victorian representations, depicted, like the somewhat later Tinkerbell, as both (illicitly) desiring and desired/desirable objects.

As such, Blackwell's work also appears to allude to the irresolvable paradox of Victorian conceptions of childhood, which we have problematically inherited: both as an age of innocence deserving protection and of that innocence's monstrous abuse, what the cultural critic James R. Kincaid has resonantly termed "Child-Loving", as per the title of his controversial 1992 study *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, and its 1998 follow-up *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. Whether premeditatedly or inadvertently, even the title of Blackwell's artwork, *While You Were Sleeping*, plays on the threat of prevalent 'unseen' or willfully disregarded paedophilia enacted on hapless child victims in both the nineteenth century and our own time. Hence I found Chantal Powell's *Nightingale's Nest* (2013) rather less successful (see <http://www.chantalpowell.com/nightingales-nest.html>). Consisting of a jasmine-scented grotto-like alcove filled with innumerable, sleeping, white plaster cherubs, some of them resting on downy pillows, Powell's exhibit succeeds in playfully parodying the Victorian cult of death, summoning to mind both funereal statuary and postmortem photographic portraiture of infants celebrated as 'little angels'. Yet for me the simultaneously clinical and cloying purity of *Nightingale's Nest* wholly elides the Victorian eroticisation of the child linked with representations of fairies and cherubs that ghosts both Blackwell's and, to a lesser extent, Farmer's works, which thereby produce a much more disconcerting haunting effect.

For an ironic treatment of the Victorian passion for (not to say fetishisation of) ritualistic mourning, an artwork such as Jane Hoodless' *Shorn Out of Wedlock* (2011) has significantly more impact and resonance (see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/louisehagger/10294941744/>, or the artist's website: <http://www.janehoodless.com/#/exhibitions/4569312633>). From a post-feminist perspective, the macabre triple-tiered wedding cake, fabricated from human hair, implicitly conflates marriage with metaphoric Rapunzel-like (self-)mutilation, even death, recalling as it does Victorian mourning jewellery, which so often preserved or incorporated woven hair of the lost beloved. The dark interior revealed by the missing slice, marked by 'crumbs' of curls, proves something rather different from tantalising '*Chocolat*' (à la Joanne Harris' 1999 novel). Evoking Miss Havisham's wedding cake, Hoodless' Gothic sculpture interrogates women's continued addictive investment in the romance narrative, not to say the wedding industry and the often extortionate costs of even an 'average' ceremony and

accompanying celebrations these days.⁴ Like many of *Victoriana*'s exhibits, *Shorn Out of Wedlock* makes us ask what we choose to 'preserve' from the past's gender ideals and ritual performances (and why) for both the present and the future. The female hair, here repurposed as an object of symbolic consumption (i.e. cake), seems to mock women's continued self-commodification and enslavement to traditional beauty ideals – not least the flowing Pre-Raphaelite locks currently back in fashion – justified as part of the commercialised attractiveness of 'girl power', preferably with accompanying sexy curves 'good enough to eat'. Back in Wonderland once more, we find – like Alice – that perhaps even would-be post-feminists cannot, after all, always have their cake and eat it too.

The Victorian action-hero mode seemed preserved for male figures in the *Victoriana* exhibition, as in case of Ligia Bouton's *The Adventures of William Morris Man: William Morris vs. Owen Jones 1 & 2* (2011). It pits the medieval-inspired Morris against Jones, the establishment design theorist who promoted a 'modern' commercial style of ornament and was responsible for the interior design of the Crystal Palace of the 1851 Great Exhibition, as well as instrumental in the foundation of the V&A.⁵

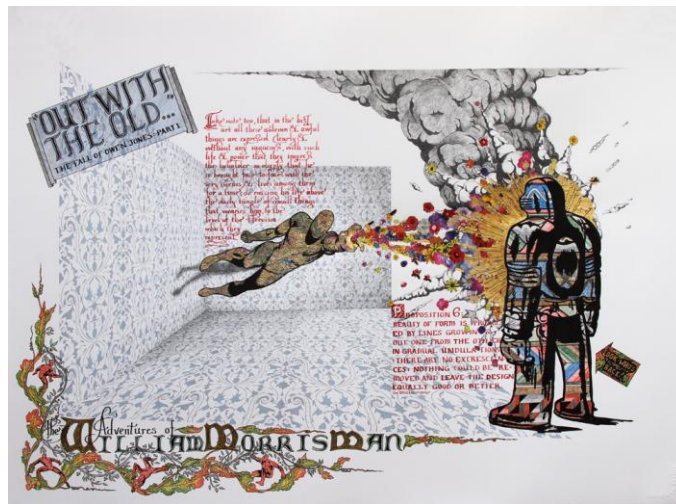


Figure 6: Ligia Bouton, *The Adventures of William Morris Man: William Morris vs. Owen Jones 1* (2011).

Coloured pencil, ink, graphite, gold leaf, collage on digital print.
Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Ironically, of course, Morris's own work could be seen as drawing on Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), which covered various historic styles of ornamentation from around the world, much of them from medieval sources, in media ranging "from architecture, textiles, tiles, rare books, metalwork, stained glass and many other decorative arts" (Melhuish 2009: 5) – of all of which Morris & Co. would become prolific commercial producers. Yet especially the Arts and Crafts Movement's love for naturalistic detail, in part taken over from the Pre-Raphaelites with whom Morris was so closely associated personally, artistically, and professionally, was at odds with Jones' principles, which tended towards abstracting nature.⁶ Morris' own ornamental patterns, of course, have now themselves become the epitome of 'traditional' and establishment Victorian British design, perversely associated with 'old-fashioned' quaintness, with William Morris wallpapers often sold alongside designs by Jones. Bouton's transformation of Morris and Jones into quasi comic book figures plays on these perverse shifts and reversals in taste and iconicity, deliberately bastardising 'High' and 'low' culture in ways that resonate with current debates about the mass market commercialisation of 'standardised' neo-Victorianism and/or Victoriana via bestseller fiction, blockbuster films, fashion and life-style (for instance, in steampunk subculture), and even theme parks.

The Arts and Crafts history of hands-on design and ingenious self-making was also evoked by a range of Steampunk *Victoriana* exhibits, foremost among them Ian Crichton's *Herr Doktor's Space Helmet* (2008). Crichton's work transposes the emblematic pith helmet of Empire into outer space by means of a contraption with almost Daleksean overtones from *Dr Who* – a series which, of course, has repeatedly revisited the Victorian period, if sometimes transposed to alternative universes. The Steampunk goggles imbue the enclosed headspace with a sinister, almost skeletal appeal beneath the white headgear. Described in the exhibition as "stylish, comfortable, and fully adapted to hostile environments", the helmet evokes the spectre of head-hunting 'savages', with the lower part of the contraption disconcertingly resembling a technologically savvy cannibal's cooking-pot.



Figure 7: Ian Crichton aka Herr Doktor, *Herr Doktor's Space Helmet* (2008).
Acrylic, styrene, brass, wood, leather, mixed media.
Reproduced with kind permission of the artist and Guildhall Art Gallery, London.

In the marvellous *Victoriana: A Miscellany* (2013),⁷ which accompanies the exhibition, replacing an actual catalogue, Otto von Beach's illustrated "Neo-Victorian Alphabet" twice employs this cooking-pot scenario: for both the letters 'D' ("–IS FOR–DR LIVINGSTONE, I PRESUME") and 'N' ("–IS FOR–NATIVES RESTLESS"), although in the latter case tartaned Scotsmen substitute for dark-skinned indigenes (von Beach 2013: 70, 71, and 139). Crichton's helmet likewise lampoons would-be neo-imperialist and, indirectly, nationalist and/or racial supremacist ambitions in the space age. Not least, for me, the spectral medical man turned exhibited specimen calls to mind the fate of the racist megalomaniac Dr Potter in Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000), while the red valve and temperature gage on the contraption seem to invite us to 'turn up the heat' on the comically odious Victorians.

Humour vied with unease in *Victoriana*. But besides postmodernist deconstruction and cynicism, the exhibition also revived a genuine capacity for wonder, as if to contest postmodernity's rationalist and disenchanting secularism. Perhaps most obviously, wonder ruled in the darkened room,

entered like a circus via a heavy portiere, where Mat Collishaw's *Magic Lantern* (2010) or three-dimensional stroboscopic zoetrope, flickered entrancingly.⁸

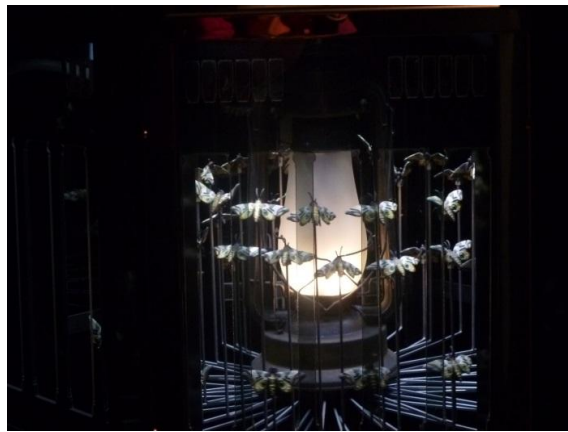


Figure 8: Mat Collishaw, *Magic Lantern (small)* (2010).

Steel frame, glass, two-way mirror, aluminium, LED lights and motor.
(Image author's own.) Reproduced with kind permission of the artist
and Blain Southern Limited, London.

The metallic naturalistic moths, rapidly fluttering up and down on vertical moving spars, produce a mesmerising, near-vertiginous effect, as if one was literally being catapulted down the rabbit hole, spinning wildly in a dream state. The artwork materialises the inherent binary contradictions of the period and its still ongoing metamorphoses, simultaneously celebrating nature and mechanisation; vision and illusion; science and fantasy; technology and 'magic'; ingenious invention and repetitive reproduction. This was neo-Victorian spectacle at its best, affording a sensuous immersive 'real' encounter with the re-imagined past, satisfying what the writer Sarah Waters calls "want[ing] to get close to the Victorians themselves" (Waters 2013: 34). Collishaw's lantern plays like music on the nerves, resonating with recurrent themes of naturalism, occultism, artificial (after-)life, and dream states that suffuse so many of the *Victoriana* displays.

Indeed, any reviewer of the exhibition's rich diversity and themes – which also included anthropomorphism, hybridity, disability and politics, among many others – must, of necessity, imitate a moth, briefly alighting on this or that exhibit without being able to do justice to them all. However for me, *Victoriana: The Art of Revival* was epitomised by Phil Sayers' re-

imagining of John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott* (ca. 1894, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/the-lady-of-shalott-38481>).⁹ Waterhouse's Pre-Raphaelite painting depicts Tennyson's eponymous tragic heroine turning away from the magic mirror entangled in her threads, bent forward to gaze directly at the viewer, with the image's frame substituting for the forbidden window onto the real world. Apart from the mirror with its bright and colourful reflections and the Lady's light dress, Waterhouse leaves most of the background deliberately in shadow, contributing to the sense of her Gothic imprisonment. Sayers queers Waterhouse's image in gender-bending fashion – with a nod to the Victorians' fascination with technology that also inflects other *Victoriana* exhibits.



Figure 9: Phil Sayers, *Shalott* (after J. W. Waterhouse), 2008.
Combination of 5x4 transparency and digital photographs. (Image author's own.)
Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Part-digitised photography replaces the painterly medium, and three old-fashioned computer screens, a keyboard, and a dangling mouse take the place of the Lady's loom and half-completed tapestry, while the cross-dressing artist assumes the Lady's position, only here entangled in electrical leads.

Unlike some of the smaller or more restrained exhibits, Sayers' image assaults its viewers. The Lady's gaze, however, is not straightforward but slightly askance, much as the artist seems to intend us to contemplate what exactly we 'treasure' about the Victorians – pre-Raphaelite representations of Tennyson's poem, of course, consistently ranking among the UK's best-loved and most reproduced paintings. The round mirror in *Shalott's* background gives an impression of a diving bell or astronaut's helmet, with the re-animated 'Victorian' figure artificially suspended in a glass dome or a nineteenth-century Wardian case. Significantly, the mirror functions as a skewed halo, parodying the religious iconography on the armoire and tapestry in Waterhouse's painting, replacing it with a nude female sculpture behind Sayers' Lady and what appear to be indistinct images of women on the computer screens. Meanwhile the spindle grasped by Waterhouse's Lady is replaced by an oversized pair of scissors, held at the ready to brutally cut through the constraining leads – here playfully evoking anxieties of castration and emasculation as a counterpart to the de-sexing of the Lady of Shalott through Tennyson's implicit conflation of female desire and sexuality with original sin, inexorably punished by death.

Like Collishaw's magic lantern, Sayers' image produces a vertiginous effect, in this case forcing us to question persistent gender stereotypes and our continuing own investment – or entanglement – therein, even "in a post-feminist world" as per the exhibition's accompanying description. The virtual 'web' alluded to by way of the computer screens at once references the omnipresent internet (and via the juxtaposed nude sculpture, implicitly its potential for the dissemination of exploitative pornography), the insidious constrictive cultural 'web' of gender performativity, and the way that the Victorians have been 'virtualised', transformed into always half-created fantasies of what we want them to have been (or not). Not least, we have continuously reconstructed them in our postmodern sex-obsessed image and/or as its repressed double. Put differently, the Victorians today and their aesthetic and cultural legacies are always as much shadows and reflections of ourselves as themselves.

Yet even Sayers' self-conscious playfulness does not wholly escape the snares it highlights: the edgy masculine form of the desk, the substitution and implicit privileging of (still predominantly) 'male' gendered technology for and over the Lady's female domestic and decorative arts simultaneously – perhaps deliberately – undermines some of the work's post-feminist challenges. We are not, finally, given a re-imagined *male* prisoner of Shalott, but rather a drag act or pantomime of Waterhouse's Lady, though this does not diminish the image's impact. *Victoriana: The Art of Revival* thus foregrounded not only the undiminished fecundity of the nineteenth century as the present's aesthetic and ideological rag-bag for inspiration, but also the work still left to do in unpicking and remaking the period anew. One can only hope that a decade from now the Guildhall will see fit to stage *Victoriana: The Art of Revival II*, enabling us to witness the next stage of the Victorian's protean transformations in art and in our cultural imaginary.

Notes

1. For the full series, see Shonibare's website, <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/shonibare/dorian.html>. They are also reproduced in Solicari 2013: 20-21.
2. The first series of BBC's *Ripper Street* (2012-13) provides a striking contrast to Shonibare's work in this respect. The series' re-imagined nineteenth-century Whitechapel is curiously devoid of people of Indian, Asian, African and Caribbean origin, including prostitutes, though these would likely have formed part of the local population, since the East End attracted large numbers of immigrants and brothels would often seek to offer 'exotic wares' to their customer.
3. Farmer's choice of Mullins' statue is curiously fitting in the light of the plot of Ambrose Thomas' comic opera *Mignon* (1866), based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-96), wherein one of the characters portrays Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The novel and opera also employ the trope of female peril, as it transpires that the titular heroine was stolen by gypsies while still a child.
4. One might think of the popularity of reality TV series like *Four Weddings* (with multiple country-specific versions), *Bridezillas*, or *Don't Tell the Bride*.
5. One wonders incidentally what Morris, the advocate of people living surrounded by at once beautiful and functional objects, would have made of

the museumisation of his one-time family home and of the Red House, Bexleyheath, and of much of his work having been reduced to untouched displays only to be looked at.

6. See, for instance, Jones' "Proposition 13", which reads: "Flowers or other natural objects should not be used as ornaments, but conventional representations [should be] founded upon them sufficiently suggestive to convey the intended image to the mind" (Jones, qtd. in Melhuish 2009: 5). Indeed, "Proposition 13", transposed to re-imaginings of 'the Victorian' provides a curiously apt description of neo-Victorian practice, which more often than not draws on "conventional representations", predictable expectations, and skewed stereotypes of the nineteenth-century to "convey the [artist's or writer's] intended image to the mind" of viewer/reader, rather than aiming to realistically recreate the period in its own image.
7. *Victoriana: A Miscellany* is a rich and rewarding companion to the event and a treat for all die-hard neo-Victorianists, expertly edited by the curator Sonia Solicari. (The previous issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, of course, included a contribution by Solicari on the planning and curation of *Victoriana*; see Solicari 2013: 180-188.) The volume incorporates a wealth of colour illustrations and contributions including critical, theoretical, and personal responses (for example, by Cora Kaplan and Matthew Sweet), writer interviews and creative fiction (by Sarah Waters and Lee Jackson), and reflective pieces on artistic practice, several of which discuss artists featured in the exhibition. Nonetheless, some visitors like myself may have wished that a 'traditional' exhibition catalogue had also been made available.
8. Also in 2010, the V&A commissioned a much larger, temporary lantern work by Collishaw, exhibited in the museum's Cupola, which likewise involved the "animating [of] large moths that flutter around the glowing interior" but also incorporated video projectors (Collishaw n.d., see <http://www.matcollishaw.com/art/archive/magic-lantern/>).
9. *Shalott* is one of a series of Waterhouse images reinterpreted by Sayers; see the artist's website: <http://www.philsayers.co.uk/waterhouse.html>.

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