Ideal Home is a show with three artists. Carol McNicoll and Jacqueline Poncelet have collaborated closely on several occasions. They share an interest in pattern and the logic of decoration while the furniture maker Sam Scott rationalises waste, making it both pattern and functional form. Seeing their work together is both an unsettling surprise and a pleasure.

On the walls are paintings by Jacqueline Poncelet. Each is painted in gouache during a single lengthy sitting. They are works of meditation, informed, like the work of Brice Marden, by the discipline of calligraphic brushwork. They take the grid as a starting point, a structure that, as Rosalind Krauss has observed, stands for the modern in fine art and which permits an artist to work both logically and intuitively. For Krauss, behind every modernist grid lurks historicisms that have been repressed, from the framing grid of a literal window (explored by artists as different as Caspar David Friedrich and Matisse) to nineteenth century treatises on optics.

Poncelet’s grid paintings bear out Krauss’s theory. They are in part inspired by a real home, Bryn Ogwyr, sequestered in the Welsh Valleys, with ‘its simplicity, its Welsh blankets, photographs and views’. Welsh blankets, a vernacular of complex pattern, have always been admired as examples of homespun abstraction, a collision of folk art and accidental modernism. Of course Poncelet’s paintings have their own optical logic. Colours recede and advance. The picture plane resonates and shimmers. But, as Anton Ehrensweig pointed out in his 1967 primer The Hidden Order of Art, optical painting has something in common with the all-over effects of printed or woven cloth. Thus it is apt that Poncelet’s paintings in part celebrate the tight construction and eccentric colourways of an almost forgotten Welsh industry. But her paintings are also examples of tender mark making that serve to reemphasize the paradox of the grid and its braiding of logic and intuition.

The second exhibitor is the furniture maker Sam Scott. His clarity of approach, a decorative modernism, owes something to the bright optimism of Festival of Britain design. For someone born in 1968, the Festival and the South Bank Exhibition resonates as an event from his parents’ past. But Scott, unlike the designers of the 1950s, is also a recycler. Here he takes inspiration from the massive tables, simple chairs and benches made out of multicoloured scrap wood by the Einhoven designer Piet Hein Eek. Like Hein Eek, Scott is a fine woodworker with a cabinetmaker’s skills who nonetheless works with solid wood scraps, bits of laminate and MDF and waste rubber off-cuts. No waste is wasted. He creates generic chests of drawers, sideboards and tables. But within each class of object the poetic melding of disparate materials creates difference, unique to each piece. Some of his furniture provides plinths for Ideal Home’s third exhibitor, Carol McNicoll.

A group of soldiers with heavy backpacks are sitting on the ground waiting. We know that is what soldiers often do. But although we have grown used to the idea of a permanent war involving British troops we rarely think about their suffering and their impossible role. Aside from what we read in the newspapers, we mostly understand ‘the war’ anecdotally. For instance, we might know that the British troops have second-rate equipment or that some of the American officers like to wear spurs and Stetsons like mad Colonel Kilgore in Apocalypse Now. In Expediency Coffee Set McNicoll’s hapless ceramic soldiers are screwed down to a brass tray, a linked brass chain fencing them in, a jubilee clip between each man, a found coffee cup hanging from each clip. They look stuck, condemned to gaze forever at a found coffee pot that has been re-glazed with transfers of more soldiers, branches and leaves. In Freedom and Democracy soldiers sit on an aluminum plate shouldering Coca Cola bottles wired together to form a basket. In Fruit Kettle five standing soldiers form a circle. They are bolted together with metal strips and carry a fuzz of wire netting that, unexpectedly, does the job of a bowl.
Poncelet, Scott and MacNicoll all, in different ways, interrogate pattern, found material and memory. A whole history of grid painting and colour science combined with a sense of place and landscape inform Poncelet’s work. A marriage of recycling and optimistic 1950s colour values characterize Scott’s furniture. McNicoll’s contribution is both the most waywardly ornamental and the most melancholy. These are bowls, jugs and table centre-pieces whose supplementary military figures are frozen about their tasks – ‘Cold Pastoral! / When old age shall this generation waste,/Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe/Than ours’. Soldiers, branches and leaves, bucolic scenes printed on commercially made plates, flying ducks, Wedgwood reliefs, oil rigs and sleek bombers present an invented pastoral Britain of ideal homes walking blindfold in step with an arms industry and an ongoing series of wars.

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