



A cure for the magnolia wall syndrome

New-build houses and apartments tend to come with vast expanses of magnolia wall. It's very soothing in the beginning but then the 'naked wall' syndrome can take you unawares when you least expect it. Suddenly the urge to break up that endless blank space with something, - anything - can become an obsession. Some people can live with cool, clean nothingness quite happily, but many of us do ultimately want to create an environment and a home. A place is not really yours until you have added your own personality to the space and created your own private bolthole. Art can be a part of that transformation.

An architect or interior designer will tell you that a pictures can define spaces. Truth is, they can. Art can dominate a room and make it exciting. It can emphasise proportion in a very subtle way by adding a gleam of colour to a corner. It can transform an entire wall, or provide the inspiration for a whole colour scheme. Art can make a whole room come alive.

If you're renting your place out you can easily grab a tasteful collection of framed prints from Habitat or Ikea and whack them on the wall. This type of safe wall dressing fills the space, does the job and won't offend anyone. But, to be honest, it's a bit like lift muzak – sort of vaguely there but you can't quite make out the tune. If you're going to live in your new home for a while it's worth trying a little harder. You could start collecting the real thing and discover a heady new addiction.

Whether you are new to buying art - or already hooked - there is a wonderfully laid back gallery deep in the heart of Greenwich market that could be the answer to your magnolia expanses problem. Forget the kind of gallery where the owner's beady eye watches your every move and sighs at your lamentable lack of taste. Here you can amble in and rummage to your heart's content. If you want to talk about any of the work you'll find the staff are artists themselves and their attitude is one of genuine pleasure and willingness to talk to you as much or as little as you like, or simply leave you to your own devices.

The Greenwich Printmakers Association began in 1979 when a group of artists decided to open a gallery in which they could exhibit and sell their work, and which would be run as a co-operative. 23 years later it is run on the same principles and is still staffed and managed by the artists. The gallery is situated in the old, covered fruit market at Greenwich and is a wonderful place to track down an original piece of work. All the works on show are limited edition artist's etchings, lithographs, relief and silkscreen prints. The gallery carries the work of up to 45 artists at any one time, runs new exhibitions every two months and gives buyers the chance not only to buy original work at reasonable prices, but also to meet the artists, commission special pieces and attend local "open studios".

Buying direct from the artist means prices are very reasonable, anything from £25 to £500. The choice is vast but a few stand out. Trevor Price produces clever, witty figurative etchings in hot tropical colours; Deanne Coleborn's work echoes that of Chagall and her aquatint etchings are often based on the themes of theatre, circus and music mythology and allegory. Michael Barratt's work is full of humour and observation of people at play (see Life Imitating Art). Also worth seeking out are the strong, colourful abstract prints by Sue Rowling, Jane Lydbury's exquisite etchings and Anita Klein's beautiful black and white drypoints.

The standard is high. The competition to exhibit and sell work at the gallery is tough. New artists write in to the Association every two years for the coveted three to four places available and then have to go before a selection committee to show their work and be interviewed at length. The result of this tough process is that the quality of the work exhibited is far better than most print shops, and mixes quite traditional work with very strong contemporary pieces.

Art is a subjective subject and a very personal thing and an awful lot of rubbish is talked about it and too many people think you have to know a lot about it before you buy. I have had people tell me that they don't feel comfortable in galleries. Nobody can tell you what you should buy and the best way is to trust your own instinct. The only real rule about buying any kind of art is simply to buy what you fall in love with.

Buying real art is an addiction, and I speak from experience. But the great thing about this particular addiction is that the end result hangs on your wall, provides endless pleasure and lasts a very long time, with very few side effects. And of course, it is the perfect antidote to the bland magnolia wall syndrome.

Greenwich Print Gallery, 1a Greenwich Market, London SE10 9HZ. Tel: 020 8858 1569 Open every day from 10.30am – 5.30pm. www.longitude0.co.uk/printmakers/

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