

MAY 2022 £4.99

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





A TROPICAL EYE

Amateur painter Althea McNish migrated from Trinidad to London in the early 1950s. After becoming a virtuosic screen-printer with a wonderfully lush sense of colour, she would soon be courted by the likes of Liberty and Dior for her exotic floral prints. But, neglected by design historians, she is only now receiving her due, as Ellen Mara de Wachter reports

IN THE mid-1960s, Althea McNish's textiles could be found in the most prestigious places: at Liberty and Christian Dior, on the *ss Oriana* luxury liner, at the Ideal Home Show – and in the Queen's wardrobe for her 1966 royal tour of the Caribbean. And yet by the beginning of this century, the name and oeuvre of this innovative and prolific textile artist were unfamiliar even to design academic Rose Sinclair, who has curated a major exhibition of McNish's work at William Morris Gallery and who first came across her name in an article in 2005. Intrigued to know more, Sinclair looked into her life, only to realise she had been written out of the history of mid-century British design.

Born in 1924 in Port of Spain, McNish, whose creativity blossomed early, first exhibited her paintings at the Trinidad Art Society aged just 16. In the early 1950s, she and her mother joined her father in London, where she had intended to build on her

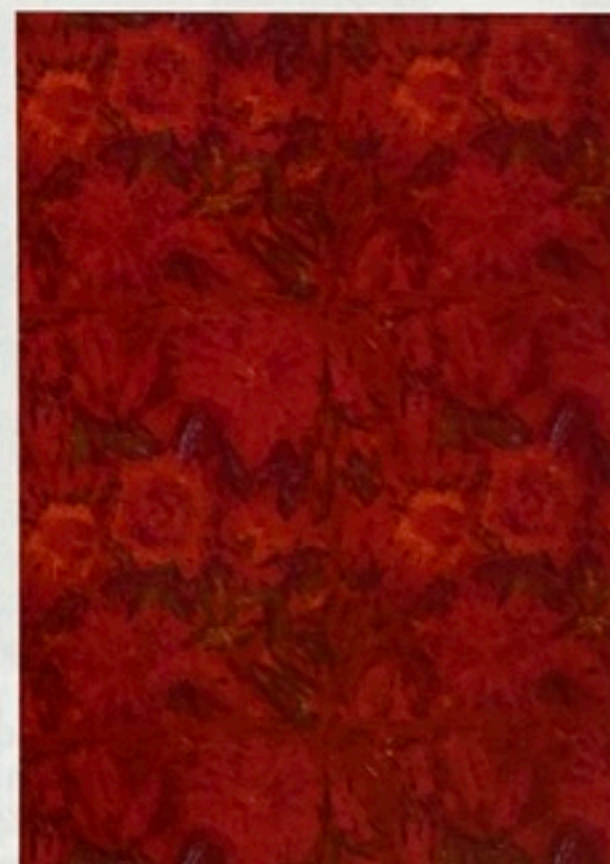
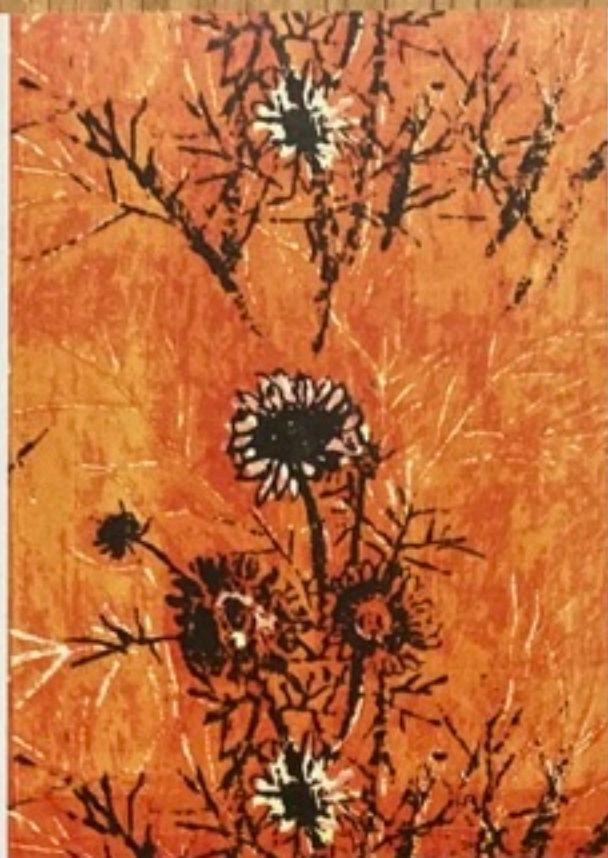


experience as an illustrator and cartographer for the British government on her native island by studying at the Architectural Association. It was not to be: put off by the seven-year-long course, she decided instead to study screen-printing, the skill that would serve her fertile imagination throughout her career. The ambitious McNish also took evening classes at the Central School of Art and Design, where her teacher, the artist Eduardo Paolozzi, encouraged her to take printed textiles seriously and to pursue a master's at the Royal College of Art.

A few years later, the chairman of Liberty was so impressed with McNish's graduation show that he invited her to a meeting the next day, commissioning her on the spot to create exclusive designs for its furnishing and fashion fabrics. He also introduced McNish to Zika Ascher, a textile manufacturer who supplied Parisian couturiers including Christian Dior, one of

Top: McNish's 1954 degree portfolio for examination at London College of Printing and Graphic Arts includes a full London Zoo campaign and a leaflet on Peruvian pottery, a subject that would be the focus of her master's thesis at the Royal College of Art. Above: McNish in her studio, c1970, wearing a shirt made from 'Bézique', one of her Liberty fabrics (1958). Opposite: 'Hula-Hula' was made for the same brand in 1963





TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM RIGHT: © THE WHITWORTH, THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER. TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM CENTRE: NICOLA TREE, COURTESY NIS ARCHIVE. THE ALTHEA MONISH COLLECTION. MIDDLE LEFT: NICOLA TREE. WILLIAM MORRIS GALLERY (THE DESIGN'S ORIENTATION IS IN FACT VERTICAL). MIDDLE CENTRE, MIDDLE RIGHT AND BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY NIS ARCHIVE. THE ALTHEA MONISH COLLECTION

Top row, from left: the horizontal lines of 'Painted Desert', a 1960s screen-printed cotton for Hull Traders, emphasise the design's musical feel; 'Rubra' has the scratchy look typical of 1960s graphics; 'Lumiere' has a repeat that's so subtle the fabric has the feel of a one-off work of art. Middle row, from left: the 1960 'Orina' was designed for Danasco Fabrics; the undated 'Vanessa' consists of swaying tulips; a cellular motif, vibrating with hot hues. Bottom row, from left: a sizzling design, undated, reminiscent of a Vasarely abstract; expressive freedom and painterly skill in Design A758, a 'Terylene Toile' for Hollins Thomson, c1963; designed for Heal's in 1960, 'Tobago' nods explicitly to McNish's homeland



many designers who would use the Trinidadian's fabrics. With the cultural liberation of the 1960s on the horizon, McNish's energised designs found a receptive audience. In what we might today interpret as a rewilding of dress patterns, McNish said she wanted to 'release women from the flowerpots' they were wearing, according to Sinclair. A case in point is the 1959 printed-silk 'Tropic' for Ascher, its painterly verve thrilling the eye with colourful flowers and foliage scattered across a rich background. McNish's virtuosity as a screen printer afforded her great artistic freedom. In her artist's statement, she proudly claimed that 'whatever I can design, I can print', even when she was put off by sceptical manufacturers. She told Sinclair she always carried an Allen key to tweak screens behind the printers' backs.

McNish loved the natural world and was a frequent visitor to Kew Gardens. She packed all manner of plants into designs that thrum with life. In 1957, she visited the Essex home of her tutor Edward Bawden and for the first time was faced with the splendour of a wheat field. She associated this vision with the sugarcane plantations of Trinidad and translated it into 'Golden Harvest', her best-known design, produced in 1959 by Hull Traders. Printed on cotton satin for upholstery in four colourways, ranging from juicy pink and yellow to a contemplative twilight blue-green, it was the firm's best-selling print on its release and remained in production until the 1970s. McNish's genius is in layering her sensory impression of an English field with Caribbean

plantations, those potent symbols of slavery and colonialism, in a design that melds aesthetics, history and politics.

An artist above all else, McNish was a founding member of the Caribbean Artists Movement, a group active between 1966 and 1972 that included the writers CLR James and Stuart Hall and artist Aubrey Williams. She was optimistic that she could use her success to help redress racial injustice by opening doors for others to follow – and she was also realistic. 'I'm not saying racism didn't occur,' she told Sinclair, 'but I ignored it.'

Her feminism is evident in the 'Bachelor Girl's Room' for the 1966 Ideal Home Show. Intended as a creative haven for a free-spirited woman, it was furnished with mood boards, swatches and a panoply of art-making materials, reflecting McNish's playful confidence and social consciousness. Rediscovering it today, you can see that McNish's work is a modern synthesis of Caribbean and English nature rendered with great technical ability. Sinclair points out that 'you don't see copies of her work, because of its complexity. Some of the prints have up to 17 colours.' McNish was in thrall to colour, in her work as in life right up to her death in 2020. She and Sinclair 'always met at the café at Ikea because Althea loved the colours. Her eyes would sparkle, she would eat lemon cake and we would talk for hours' ■

'Althea McNish: Colour Is Mine' runs at William Morris Gallery, Lloyd Park, Forest Rd, London E17, 2 April-26 June. For opening times, ring 020 8496 4390, or visit wmgallery.org.uk

The 'Tropic' design, dated 1958, was printed by Ascher in five colourways on silk and used by several fashion houses including Christian Dior, Biba, Pierre Cardin and Mary Quant. In 2015, looking back at her career, McNish stated: 'Everything I did, I saw it through a tropical eye'