

UNDERFOOT presents a major new body of work by the artist Elizabeth Price. The exhibition originates in a proposal made by curatorial practice Panel with artist / writer Fiona Jardine (The Glasgow School of Art). Together they approached The Hunterian with the suggestion of developing a textile commission and related exhibition that would invite Price to respond to the design and corporate archives of James Templeton and Company Ltd and Stoddard International plc, now held in the Archives and Special Collections of the University of Glasgow. These archives consist of documents, photographic records and working materials used by these important companies in the industrial manufacture of carpets in the 19th and 20th centuries. They are a point of entry into an industrial and social history that is both specific to Glasgow and exemplary of wider transformations in work and culture. The artist's initial engagement with this archival material was supported by a Research Fellowship, awarded by the University of Glasgow Library, and drew on the expertise of historian and weaver Dr Jonathan Cleaver. From that kernel, Price developed not only a textile piece, *SAD CARREL*, but also a new two-screen video work, *UNDERFOOT*, both of which have been commissioned for The Hunterian's permanent collection and are shown for the first time here.

UNDERFOOT continues Price's practice of using digital technology as an artistic medium which can give voice and form to overlooked perspectives on social experience. Within her existing oeuvre, in works such as *At the House of Mr X* (2007), *User Group Disco* (2009), *The Woolworths Choir of 1979* (2012, for which she won the Turner Prize), *K* (2015) and the recent trilogy *SLOW DANS* (2019), Price has often created narrative works that feature historic artefacts and documents, often of marginal significance or derogated value. Her selection and treatment of them is shaped by a politics of gender and social class. She uses historical material to consider and give expression to the adjacent blind-spots, oversights and erasures of particular archives and museum collections. To address these omissions, Price often uses strategies she terms 'critical fabulation': creating ghost stories or science fictions to narrate and expand upon the artefacts she features. Both language and sound play a crucial role in these works, as in *UNDERFOOT*: through painstaking editing, Price both ventriloquizes the didactic language of authority and gives voice, often choral voice, to countervailing points of view that are muted or unexpressed in culture.

In *UNDERFOOT* Price uses the archival traces deposited in the Stoddard-Templeton Collection to explore connections between industrial textile production and the development of data storage and computer programming. These connections open on to questions about work, the public realm, cultural authority and value. The film *UNDERFOOT* uses archival imagery and digital animation to express the power dynamics at work within the organisation of knowledge in a library building. Here patterned carpets designed to imitate natural forms are transformed into almost psychedelic animations to suggest the potential crafting of a less hierarchical public space. *SAD CARREL*, a hand-tufted



From a series of photographs documenting carpet making processes at a James Templeton & Co Ltd factory in the 1960s.

DOUBLE VISIONS: UNDERFOOT AND OVERHEAD
Dominic Paterson



textile work designed by the artist and made in close collaboration with Edinburgh's Dovecot Studios, elaborates a vinyl record motif, found in the music room of Glasgow's Mitchell Library, into a new composition. It alludes to the emergence of independent cultural forms in the urban spaces both abandoned and made available by de-industrialisation. Price's own recollections of Glasgow from her formative experience as a touring musician in the band Talulah Gosh inform the work.

In the film *UNDERFOOT*, the two-screen structure accommodates two intertwined voices. As they parse the institutional space of a library building, and the structures of its floral carpets, these voices evoke two contrasting cultural realms, that of the 'overhead' and the 'underfoot'. We pass from a cultural order, official and rigid in its categories, to one subversive, sensory and ludic, or latently so. The exhibition too consists of a contrasting pair: a film that is ostensibly about textile production, and a textile work that points us to the world of music. Underpinning all these doublings is another:

that of the Hunterian Art Gallery with the Mitchell Library extension. Both these buildings were constructed in the 1970s, in an architectural vocabulary redolent of an earlier decade, and opened to the public in 1981. For Price, these two spaces both carry the vestiges of an optimism about a public realm in which culture and knowledge might be shared openly and creatively. That the technological and political histories which are woven through her work have generally worked against such a public space is key to Price's practice and to its use of digital means. But hers is a double vision, holding both institutional power and resistance to that power in its gaze. Of the Mitchell's Library's richly patterned foliate floors she has suggested that 'maybe the carpet that furnishes the lateral space of a floor, is also possibly always the image of another space: an idealised garden or imagined realm'. That imagined space is one we are invited to inhabit together in *UNDERFOOT*, even as we see how it has been threaded through the apparatuses of industry and of digital technology.



From a series of photographs documenting manufacturing processes at a Blackwood, Morton & Sons Ltd (BMK) factory in the 1950s.

The first work I saw of Elizabeth's was *THE TENT* (2010), a single book – a manual – animated and explored as a steep pitched roof, itself a building. I remember watching self-destructing scripts attempt rapid advancements across smoothly circling imagery. A commentary derived from the book's interior played out against stifling audio-induced hypnosis. A close experience. The video brought to mind an idea of the 'typing ghost' that features in Muriel Spark's novel, *The Comforters*:

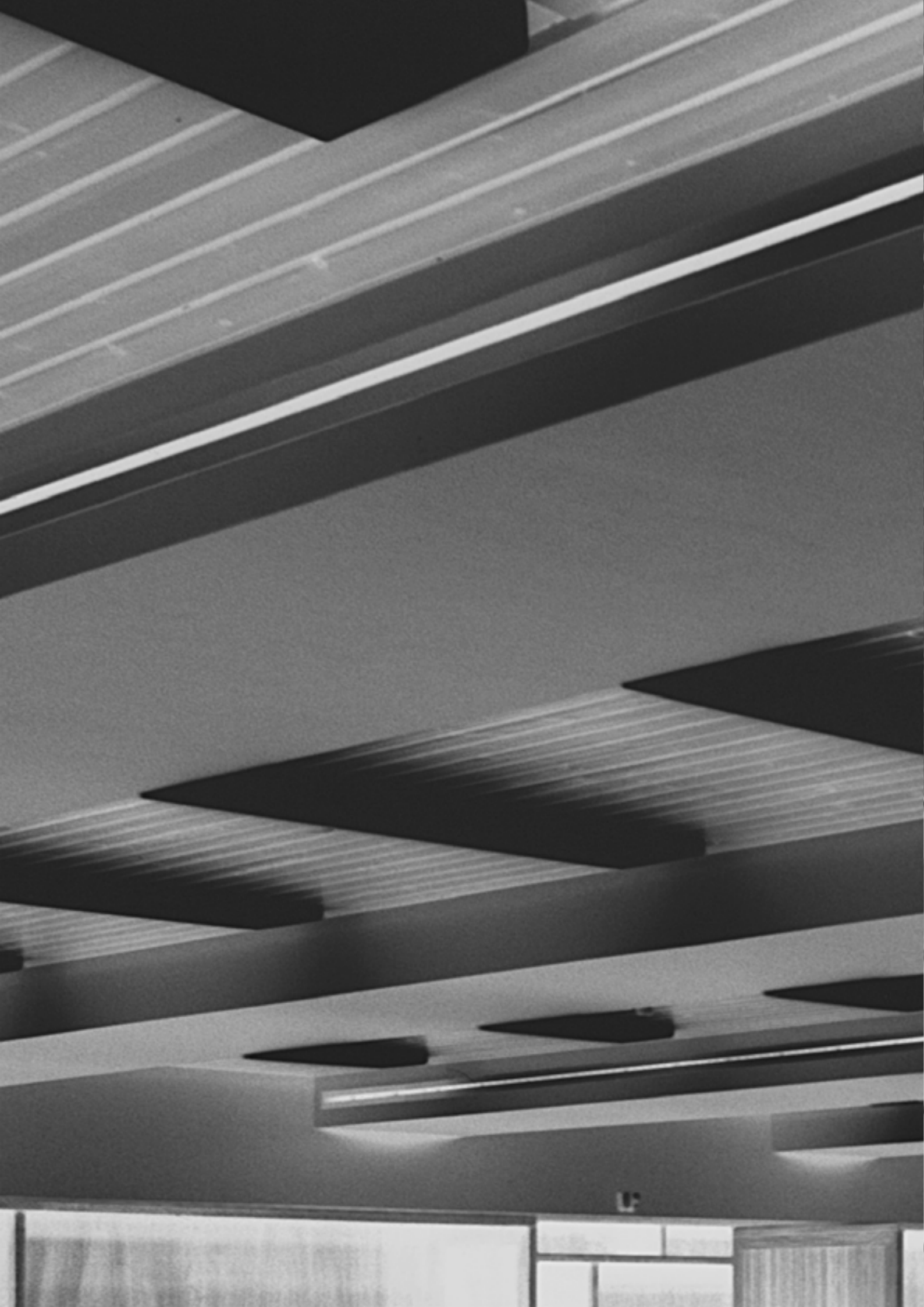
Just then she heard the sound of a typewriter. It seemed to come through the wall on her left. It stopped, and was immediately followed by a voice remarking her own thoughts...There seemed, then, to have been more than one voice: it was a recitative, a chanting in unison. It was something like a concurrent series of echoes...A typewriter and a chorus of voices: What on earth are they up to at this time of night?¹

I saw *THE TENT* over a decade ago when it was made and, as yet, I am primed to recognise some of Spark's plot devices in Elizabeth's work.

Actually, I had already seen a video by Elizabeth, but I hadn't attached her name to what I'd seen. *At the House of Mr X* (2007) is a circumvention and subversion of a beautifully preserved, enviably understated paean to mid-century modernism, The Picker House. Low lit and arboreal, the interior is a terrain of careful veneers, plate glass and lucent coloured muslins in kelp green and chrysanthemum. It is an environment designed for Stanley Picker's collection – art, books, records, objects. And there they sit, carefully poised, as if for a drama.

Behind a collection like Picker's – the things aired for display and the things left on the shelf – extends a density of information, assuring and testifying; handwritten, xeroxed and typed. Bits of paper, bills, correspondence...research. Archives exist as unseen ballast, a static hum, the tinnitus that pervades a silence, measured in linear metres and terabytes. Archives are there to be mined, excavated, checked, or spun into something Spark might call 'patterns of facts' – stories rewriting themselves as they embroider the truth, stepping back by way of a date, a brand name, an adage, a redundant rhetorical form. Stories that seem familiar.

With *UNDERFOOT*, research took a conversational turn through gaps and adjacencies in holdings relating to the defunct business of the Glasgow carpet manufacturers, James Templeton and Company Ltd., leading ultimately to the Mitchell Library and its notorious carpets. As fields unfolded, these carpets stretch wide across open rooms, emitting warm, acid bright frequencies, carefully positioning people on seats – elbows on table – as they incline over notebooks and newspapers, all brought together in this plush and leisurely place. Dense, velvety patterns habituate the library, dress it boldly, lending it an energy that calls to mind the tail end of an era that specified the use of materials in civic spaces generously. In Galashiels, where I grew up, the vaulted ceiling of the local library, built through public subscription in the 19th century, had – in the 1960s – been hung with an excessive number of giant paper lanterns, casting soft light in the steely



dark days of winter (they are still there). Such paper lanterns became an everyday desire, as did the glamour of the assistants who issued books. Surely they were twinning tank tops with pussy bows?

The floors in the Mitchell are famous floors. Today, their striking presence gestures to a time when carpets were rolling off Templeton's looms at an exponential rate of knots in marvellous, hitherto hand-wrought figurations: 'On the carpet vegetables are driven into a frenzy with their desire to be ornamental'.² Charles Dickens nods to the popularity of carpet critique in *Hard Times*: Sissy ('Girl number twenty' at Mr Gradgrind's school) is questioned by an Inspector:

...[would you] carpet your room – or your husband's room, if you were a grown woman and had a husband – with representations of flowers, would you?'...

'If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers,' replies Sissy.

'And is that why you would put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots?'

'It wouldn't hurt them, sir. They wouldn't crush and wither, if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy –'

'Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn't fancy,' cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. 'That's it! You are never to fancy.'

... 'Fact, fact, fact!' said the gentleman. And 'Fact, fact, fact!' repeated Thomas Gradgrind.

*'You are to be in all things regulated and governed,' said the gentleman, 'by fact... 'You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets... You must use,' said the gentleman, 'for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste.'*³

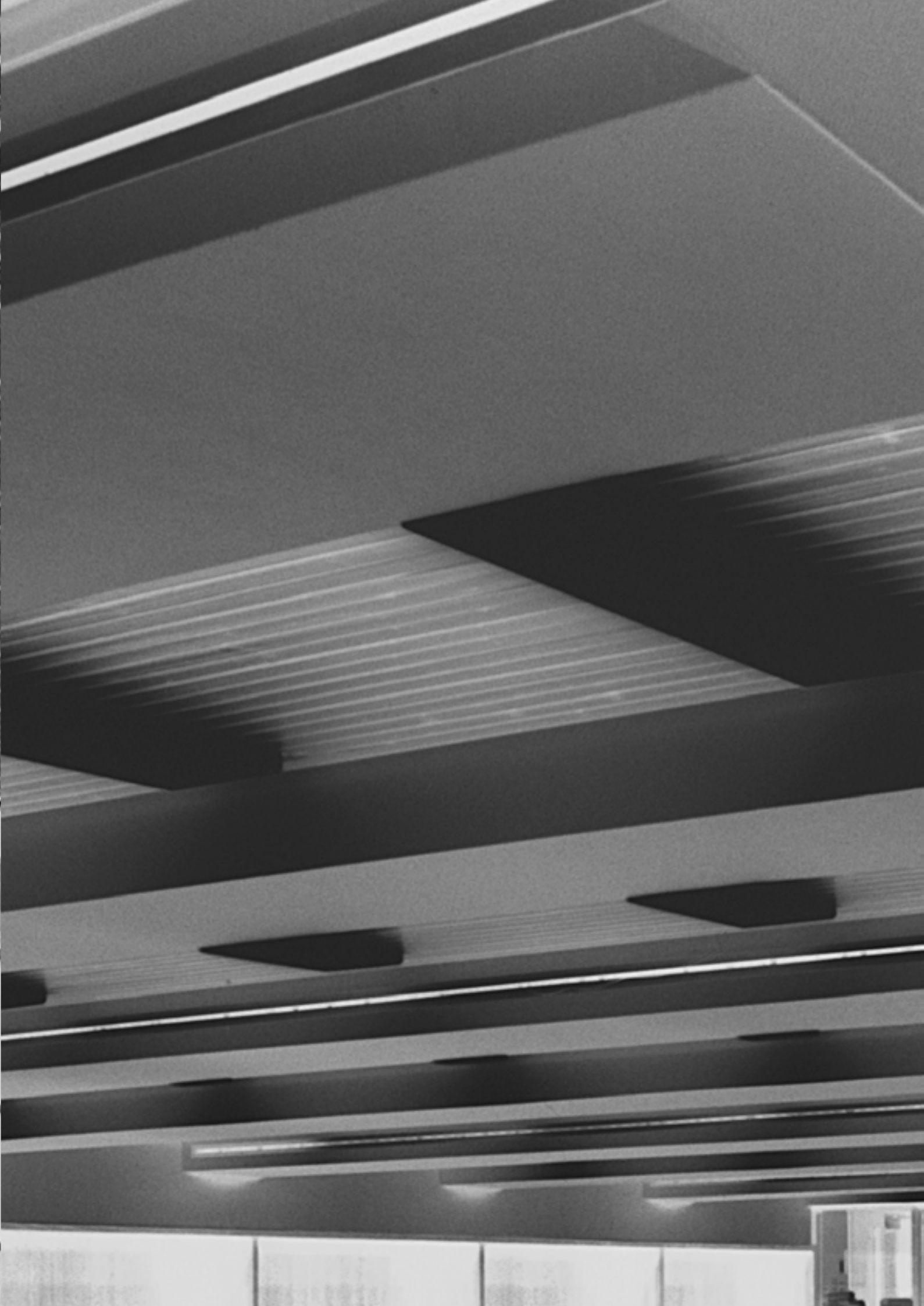


III From a series of photographs of the 'Wilton Gripper' weaving process at a Blackwood, Morton & Sons Ltd (BMK) factory in 1969.

1 Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (Virago, London, 2009), p35

2 Lucy Orrinsmith quoted in Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society, 1750–1980* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1995), p110

3 Charles Dickens, Chapter III 'Murdering the Innocents', in *Hard Times* (1854)





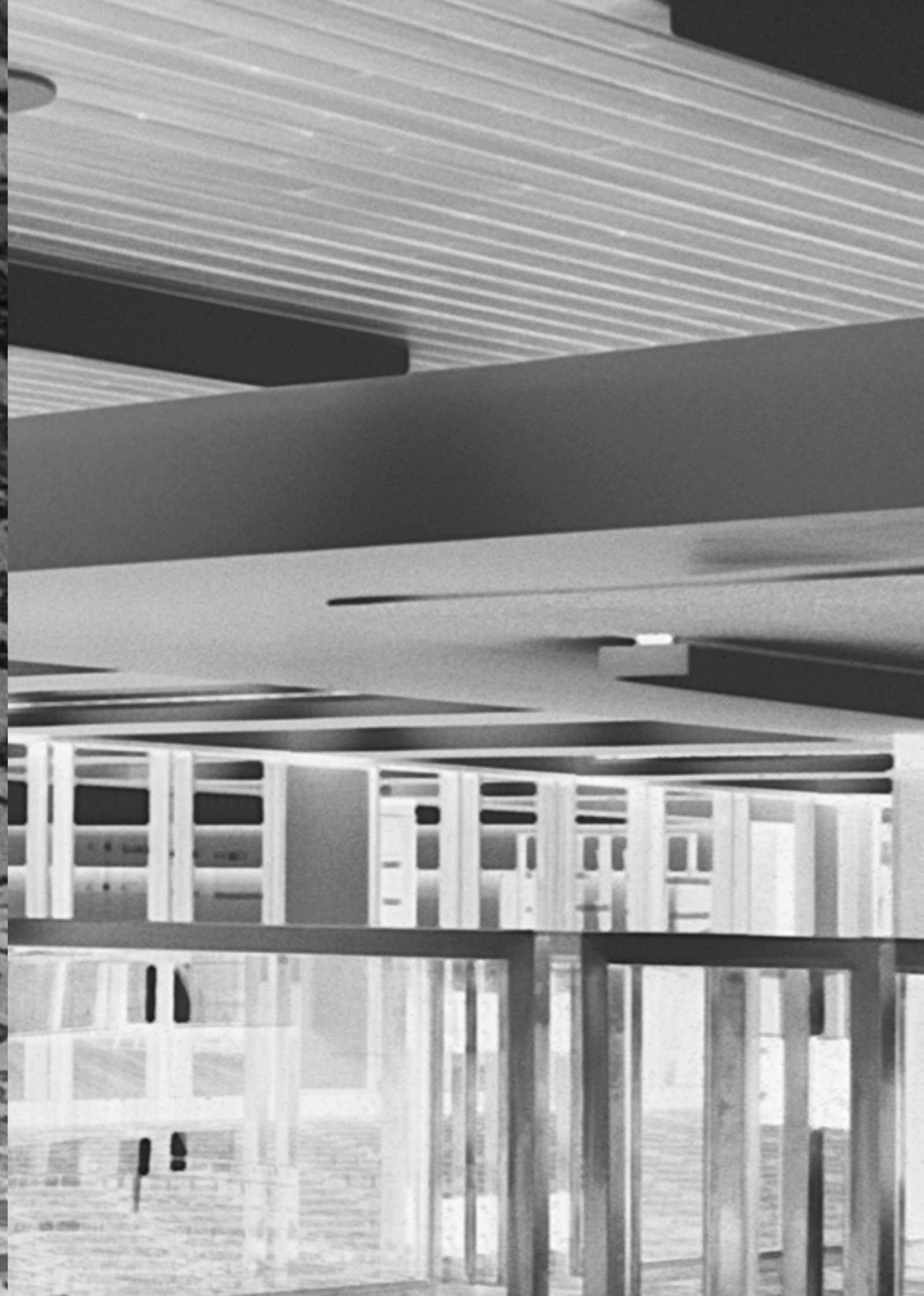
IV From a series of photographs of finishing processes at a Blackwood, Morton & Sons Ltd (BMK) factory in the 1950s.

UNDERFOOT draws on the company archives of 15 carpet manufacturers that operated in Scotland between the 1830s and the 2000s. The largest of these firms were James Templeton and Company Ltd, Glasgow, and A F Stoddard and Company Ltd, Elderslie, each of which employed several thousand workers. By engaging with their archives, we can comprehend the vast assemblage of human, material and technical resources that were concentrated in Scottish factories and sent back out around the world as patterned floors.

I have been fortunate to accompany Elizabeth Price on her exploration of the archives – starting with photographs of factory workers and moving on to consider pattern designs, loom specifications, instructional texts and business records. Price’s questions about technologies of visual information, the provision of public services, and the histories and sensations embodied in abundant patterning extended out of the archives into locations including Glasgow’s Mitchell Library. Although the photographs of workers in action are the most direct records of labour, Price’s research process reminded me that every item in the company archives is also a trace of work. Each of the many thousand drawings, ledgers and reports holds information in case of future need.

Seeing the design archives as a visual record of work stresses how the technologies used for making carpets amplified and multiplied the actions of individual workers. Sometimes at a vertiginous scale. The Spool Axminster carpet loom that is shown in *UNDERFOOT* epitomises this integration of mechanical technique and human skill. Spool Axminster weaving was a dominant carpet weaving technology in Britain from the 1880s to the 1980s. The loom’s mechanisms created a unique method of converting pattern information into woven cloth. It enabled carpet manufacturers like Stoddard and Templeton to make complexly patterned carpets more efficiently and in larger volumes than ever before. However, there is a tension between imagining a loom as autonomous technology and recognising the people’s work that gives it motion. One writer in the 1920s described a loom similar to the one featured in *UNDERFOOT* as ‘the machine with a thousand fingers.’¹ On the one hand, this is an image of monstrous mechanical overabundance. But on the other, it underlines the loom’s ability to intensify and reproduce the actions of women who operated the looms and wound the spools of coloured yarns for each carpet design.

When investigating the collection of carpet designs, Price chose to examine hundreds of gridded ‘point paper’ drawings rather than the designers’ freehand preparatory sketches. Point papers are fully realised patterns hand-painted onto a printed grid. The dimensions of the grid correspond directly with the tufts in the finished carpet. Although point papers are aesthetically rich, they are also precise technical documents. They encode all the necessary information about a pattern, store the data securely, and enable it to be communicated between design staff, production staff and loom mechanisms. When viewing the eclectic profusion of patterns stored in the archive, we can trace



complex adaptations of motifs between cultures and geographies. But the point papers' capacity to store that information and make it retrievable gives them resonance with the Mitchell Library's role as a shared store of knowledge.

It is becoming rarer to find large expanses of patterned carpets of the sort that Spool Axminster weaving made abundant in Britain. In Glasgow, the survival of the carpets in the Mitchell Library allows an increasingly uncommon experience of patterns proliferating underfoot. The modern extension to the Edwardian Mitchell Library building was proposed in 1967 during a nationwide surge in public library construction. The architects, Sir Frank Mears and Partners, dramatically increased the building's storage capacity, aiming to accommodate around 20,000 new volumes yearly for at least 100 years. Simultaneously, the city council extended the library's role as a leisure facility by specifying a space for theatrical and musical performances and a bar. In this way, the new building absorbed an echo of the concert venue that had previously occupied the site until 1962, the

St Andrew's Halls. Music also spread through the building's new practice rooms and audio listening posts.

The architects and the Chief Librarian chose to carpet these amalgamated social and scholarly spaces to reduce maintenance and manage acoustics, but this does not account for their distinctive patterning. Commissioned in 1978 from the firm Hugh Mackay and Company Ltd, Durham, the vibrant carpets were more like those made for entertainment venues than the austere carpet tiles used in other modernist libraries.² Richly patterned floors are still valued in their traditional homelands of hotels, casinos, theatres and pubs, where they suggest leisure, luxury, comfort and heritage. In the library, my experience of the carpets is intensified by the shared concentration or quiet distraction of other library users. I cannot unpick the threatening aspects of mechanised overproduction and visual overstimulation from the pleasures of the patterning under my feet. When seen from the perspective of the carpet, these histories of work and leisure, technology and information, texture and sound, are integrated and abundant.

- 1 William Laurel Harris, 'The Machine with a Thousand Fingers', *Good Furniture Magazine*, (September 1922): 138–43
- 2 Strathclyde Regional Archives, GDC 1/2, Glasgow District Council Minutes, Issue 13, 1977–8, Meeting of the Civic Amenities Committee, 10th April 1978, 1195



V The final stage of carpet production; checking finished product for flaws at A F Stoddard & Co Ltd, c.1950s

UNDERFOOT
Elizabeth Price

Hunterian Art Gallery
11 November 2022 – 16 April 2023

Co-editors
The Hunterian and Panel

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Print Production
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Archival image catalogue reference

- I GLA ASC STOD 201/2/16/2/4/19
- II GLA ASC STOD 201/2/3/4/1/(V)
- III GLA ASC STOD 202/2/3/4/5
- IV GLA ASC STOD 202/2/3/4/2/(IV)
- V GLA ASC STOD/200/2/16/2/2/(II)

List of works exhibited

UNDERFOOT, Elizabeth Price, 2-Channel Video, 13 minutes, 2022
SAD CARREL, Elizabeth Price, Textile (wool on canvas), Tufted by Ben Hymers, Dovecot Studios, 99 x 423cm, 2022
 Photograph showing manufacturing at A F Stoddard & Co Ltd, Elderslie, GLA ASC STOD 200_2_16_2_2 (ii)
 Photograph showing Carpet manufacturing at James Templeton & Co Ltd, Glasgow, STOD 201_2_3_4_1 (v)

UNDERFOOT is a new commission and exhibition by Elizabeth Price for The Hunterian.

UNDERFOOT has been realised through a partnership between The Hunterian, Panel, The Glasgow School of Art, and Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh. It is generously funded by the National Lottery through Creative Scotland, with additional support from Kingston School of Art, London and a University of Glasgow Library Research Fellowship.

Elizabeth Price was born in Bradford in 1966 and lives and works in London. Often beginning with research into archives and museum collections, Price creates short videos that explore the social and political histories of artefacts, architectures, and documents.

In 2012, she was awarded the Turner Prize for her video installation *THE WOOLWORTHS CHOIR OF 1979*. In 2013, she won the Contemporary Art Society Annual Award with the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology. She has exhibited in group exhibitions internationally, and has had solo exhibitions at Tate Britain, UK; Chicago Institute of Art, USA; Julia Stoschek Foundation, Düsseldorf, Germany; The Baltic, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA and The Whitworth, Manchester, UK.

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Kevin Pollock

The artist and The Hunterian would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for their assistance in the preparation of the exhibition:

Dovecot Studios
Celia Joicey, Director
Naomi Robertson, Studio
Manager & Master Weaver

The Mitchell Library
Dawn Vallance,
Principal Librarian

Martin Clark

University of Glasgow Library
Siobhán Convery, Assistant
Director, Collections Strategy
Clare Paterson, Senior Archivist

The artist would like to extend special thanks to Jonathan Cleaver, Fiona Jardine & Simon Bedwell

Dedicated to Albert Price:
1936–2021



