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Calico's immersive, mural-style wallcoverings are the Savile Row suits of surface decoration. Until now they've been a trade secret, but collaborations with acclaimed creatives are set to propel the Brooklyn brand into the spotlight. **Katrina Burroughs** reports. Portrait by **Nicholas Calcott**

Rachel and Nick Cope, founders of Calico Wallpaper, are mildly horrified when asked to pick a favourite project. Every one of the couple's luxury wallcoverings is a unique installation, based on original artwork, tailored and tinted to fit an individual interior. How can they choose?

Badgered, they settle on the penthouse apartment in 432 Park Avenue, New York, by architect Rafael Viñoly. The block is the tallest residential tower in the western hemisphere and the \$40m 92nd-floor flat, unveiled in March this year, looks down on the Chrysler Building. Kelly Behun – the designer behind the interior, renowned for her eye for design-art furniture and quirky taste in highly crafted objects – commissioned Calico to create a wallcovering for the bedroom. “They are best in class,” she says of the couple (pictured right). The result of the collaboration (pictured overleaf) is a paper-backed linen mural with handpainted metallic drips and streaks. The inky-blue colour of the wallcovering was developed to mimic the Manhattan night sky, so that after dark the bedroom walls appear to recede and the entire interior seems suspended above the cityscape. “I can tell you that the room at night, with this paper, is pure magic,” says Behun.

The magic began, Nick says, in 2008, when he saw Rachel unceremoniously chucking her artwork away. “When we started dating, I remember seeing Rachel in Union Square literally hurling her work into the street. I said, ‘You can’t throw this out!’” He rescued paintings, drawings and sculptures from the kerb and subsequently photographed and made a website of her art. Four years later, in October 2012, the couple were living in a loft in Red Hook, Brooklyn, when Hurricane Sandy blew into town. He remembers: “It was fun and exciting and then suddenly it became frightening. During the day we had our Hunter boots on, walking around, snapping photos with the tourists. We went back home and two hours later it was impossible to leave. We live above a supermarket and you could see the lobsters from the lobster tank floating into the river.”

At that point, Rachel was an art therapist in the psychiatric unit at Metropolitan Hospital and Nick had a design and building firm. When the hurricane hit, Rachel's unit closed for six months, and Nick's Manhattan contracting jobs went on hold. During their enforced sabbatical, Rachel began experimenting with marbling techniques, creating hundreds of samples.

Right: Calico Wallpaper founders Rachel and Nick Cope at their Brooklyn apartment, where most of the brand's early artworks were created

murally



exclusive



Calico's success is down to the Copes' blend of art and technical wizardry. "What they try to do is so ambitious, and they achieve something I've never seen anyone do as wallcovering before"

Nick observed that the pattern would make a sublime wallcovering. Shazam! They had conjured up the concept for their brand.

And so, in 2013, they launched Calico Wallpaper – named in honour of their cat – from their Brooklyn kitchen table. Acclaim quickly followed. The Copes were a hit at the international design fairs, from Design Miami to ICFF New York. During this year's Milan Design Week, their murals were displayed at three venues, including the shrine to cool design: Spazio Rossana Orlandi. Their work has been used in projects by architects and interior designers, including Rafael de Cárdenas, Amy Lau and Celerie Kemble, and they have a roster of high-profile clients. The accolade that delights them most, though, came when Calico's Aurora Ray, a grey-to-orange ombré composition that mimics a sunrise, was acquired by the Cooper Hewitt in 2015. "That was a great honour. It's part of the Smithsonian, the national museum!" Nick says. "They have the Hope Diamond!"

Surprisingly for such successful folk, the Copes inspire affection rather than competition among their peers. They count as friends noted artists and designers such as sculptor Huy Bui, their first paying client, and Lindsey Adelman, creator of a spectacular sculptural contemporary lighting collection. Adelman, like Rachel, graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design (Rachel studied sculpture; Adelman industrial design). She says Calico's success is down to the Copes' distinctive blend of art and technical wizardry. "What they try to do is so technically ambitious, and they really achieve something I've never seen anyone do as wallcovering before." Adelman commissioned a Calico mural for a conference room at her studio, based on Rachel's Aurora artwork (\$344 per sq m). "It's a sunrise, and the reason I wanted that in this room is it's really tiny and I was interested in creating an expansive feeling. I wanted something that was inspiring and timeless."

Expansive and immersive are two words frequently applied to Calico's work. The wallcovering at 432 Park Avenue imitates the immensity of the night sky; the mural in Adelman's office creates a constant rosy dawn. This spacious sensation is purposeful and partly achieved by the Copes' passion for non-repeat decoration. "We always intended to do non-repeat. For us there was never any other option," says Rachel. "We really wanted to do something entirely new and different and to create an



From left: Rachel Cope with Calico's handpainted-linen Fragments wallpaper, price on request. The inky-blue colour of the Manhattan mural, in the bedroom of the penthouse at New York's 432 Park Avenue, was developed to mimic the night sky. Aurora Ray fabric, one of the six textile designs that Calico's sister brand Cope has launched with

immersive environment." This approach has persuaded professionals who are customarily pattern-shy to commission Calico. Architect and designer Rafael de Cárdenas says: "I rarely use wallpapers, largely because I favour the 'fields' possible with decorative finishes. However, I have specified Calico often for both residential and commercial projects. The designs have a more radiant sublimity with their giant scale – they are ultimately fields more than patterns."

Calico's early collections were based on Rachel's paintings and her experiments in craft techniques, including *ebru* (the Turkish method of paper marbling), *shibori* (Japanese resist dyeing, which creates a contrasting pattern by preventing the dye from reaching some parts) and *kintsugi* (the repair of pottery using precious metals). Much of Calico's archive of original artwork was created in the front room of the Red Hook flat. Last year, the Copes expanded their operation into a

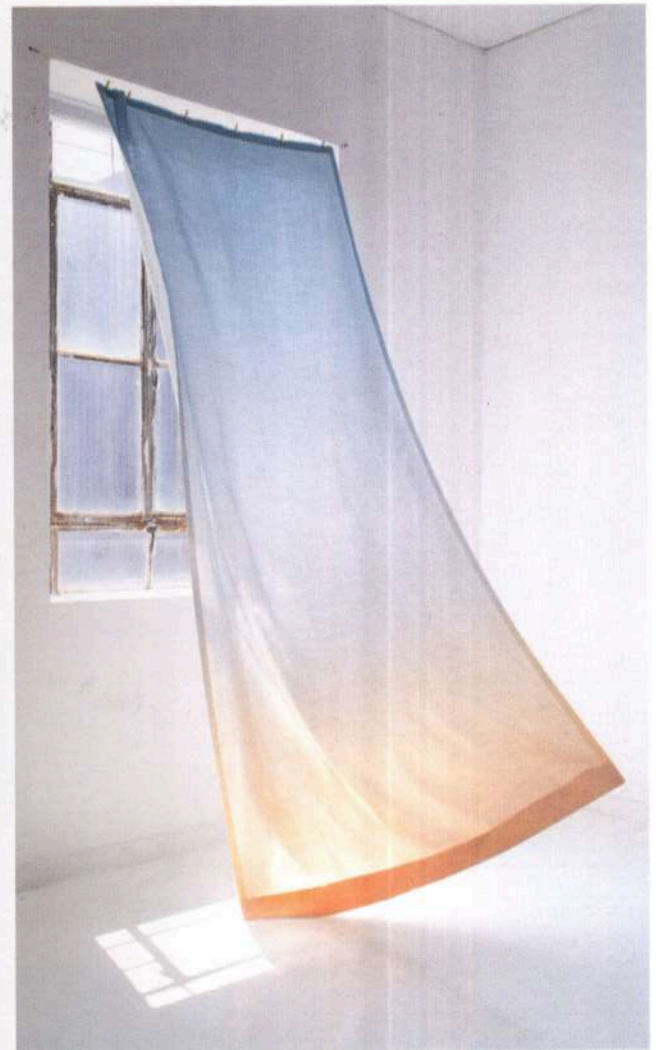




separate studio, 10 minutes' walk away, where they now employ nine staff. Having taken pleasure in handmaking since earliest childhood, Rachel is nowhere happier than in this new workspace. "My mother was a fibre [textiles] artist, and when I was a little kid growing up in Martha's Vineyard, she taught me how to marblise paper, how to do batik, how to dip-dye, how to quilt. I was raised learning all these techniques and processes and it's really exciting now to be able to use them for Calico," she says. The mucky technique of marbling, used to create her first collection, is her particular pleasure: "We make a very large gelatinous bath using a natural plant-based fibre that thickens when mixed with water. Then we fill a tray that is 60in x 80in with this viscous liquid. I float fine mineral pigment on top to create a pattern and then put a piece of paper on top of that, making a perfect imprint of the surface. It is a bit of a messy process, I have to admit. When we were

working out of our loft, we spilled paint on the lovely hardwood floors... I'm not sure if we'll be getting our security deposit back from our landlord when we move."

The genius of Calico has been to take the fruits of these traditional skills and reinvent, rescale and recolour them to make murals that perfectly suit contemporary taste. While some of the brand's wallcoverings, such as Fragments (price on request, pictured left), are handpainted on linen, and others, for instance Satori (\$581 per sq m, pictured overleaf), include hand-applied motifs, most are digitally printed on paper-backed linen, Mylar or vinyl (\$341-\$581 per sq m). "The finished product takes both of our backgrounds," says Nick, who studied digital design and photography at NYU. He is well aware that the phrases "digital print" and "luxury wallcovering" make an unlikely pairing. Surely digital signifies inexpensive mass production, not high-quality artwork, in many a



design buyer's eyes? "If we were talking 10 years ago, it would be a lot harder to answer this question," he says. "We often mix handmade with digital, and we are really trying to push the boundaries of the technology and be at the forefront of this kind of hybrid design work. Among the collections that are exclusively digitally printed, the quality is now staggering. Resolution has improved, and the variety of materials you can use as a substrate is becoming more and more diverse. At 432 Park Avenue, we digitally printed over hand-applied metal leaf, which was unthinkable a decade ago. It's amazing that you can get something to bond perfectly to a material [silver] that is so resistant to pigment."

Small wonder the Brooklyn startup has flourished: Calico's revenue has grown 320 per cent in the past three years, and now it ships to 21 countries; it's completed 235 commissions in the past year. And yet the Copes exist below the radar of all but interiors professionals and the most dedicated design fans.

There are a couple of good reasons for their current obscurity. Number one: Calico's wallpaper is not easy to buy. Though it's sold at the Sé showroom in London and The Future Perfect galleries in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, it is not as straightforward a purchase as "off-the-peg" rolls. Ordering a Calico mural is akin to commissioning a bespoke suit. "It's more of a dialogue," says Rachel. Nick adds: "We take elevations, typically a floorplan and dimensions of the walls, complete with cutouts for windows and doors, then we print in panels to fit the space." Secondly, the Copes are not tremendous self-promoters. The question, "What are you most proud of about Calico?", is met with a short silence. They have just launched a sister line called Cope, which will include printed fabrics, pillows and curtains. When we met in August, they were unclear how many products or what patterns the range would include; they were just allowing designs to develop organically rather than to a marketing schedule. Publicity hungry they are not.

What may drag Rachel and Nick into the limelight is their collaboration with internationally acclaimed creatives. The new work that debuted in Milan this spring marked the first time Calico Wallpaper sought



Faye Toogood's paintings of drizzly-looking English landscapes have been translated into panoramic murals, printed onto hessian at such high resolution that every brushmark is visible



Clockwise from above: **Fields from Woodlands, Fields, Moors** - Faye Toogood's collaboration with Calico - \$409 per sq m. Hand-applied motifs feature in **Satori**, \$581 per sq m. **BCXSY** for Calico **Microcosmos**, \$344 per sq m. **Snarkitecture** for Calico **Topographies**, \$344 per sq m

out a group of outside designers to build a collection. Rachel and Nick worked with **BCXSY** (**Microcosmos**, \$344 per sq m, pictured top right), **Snarkitecture** (**Topographies**, \$344 per sq m, pictured above right), Ana Kraš and Faye Toogood to create the series called **Imagined Landscape**. Patterns are based on peeling paper, woven textiles and soap bubbles, scaled up almost beyond recognition, to look like lunar landscapes, blurred horizons and microscopic universes. Each is quite different, but all share Calico's trademark immersive effect. Star of the set is a trio of designs by British artist-designer Toogood called **Woodlands, Fields, Moors** (\$409 per sq m, **Fields** pictured left). Toogood's original gouache and watercolour paintings of drizzly-looking English landscapes have been translated into panoramic murals, printed onto hessian at such high resolution that every brushmark is visible. The inspiration for the compositions was her childhood in Rutland, and anyone who grew up in Britain will find the work witty and evocative. The damp and chilly scenes are an authentic antidote to the endless holiday-brochure sunshine and bikinis on Instagram. It's arguably Calico's strongest work to date.

Woodlands, Fields and Moors almost didn't happen. Known for her art installations featuring modest materials and craft techniques, shown at venues such as the V&A, Toogood was in two minds about the

invitation to collaborate. She hadn't worked in 2D for a decade. "But then, the more I considered it and the more I looked at what they were doing, the more I started to think, 'I can approach this in a different way to how I would with any other wallpaper company.' Wallpaper is one of those amazing things that once you put it up in the room, you become completely embraced and I thought, 'Wouldn't it be fantastic if you could create a landscape and felt like you were in that landscape.' It's not a new concept. I went to look at some 18th-century French panoramic wallpapers that featured landscapes. Then I started to paint."

Toogood's conversion illustrates how far and how fast Calico has come. People looking for something rich and innovative to make their homes unique should be flocking to buy Calico's wallpaper. Toogood sums up why it's the antithesis of old-fashioned printed papers: "Wallpaper is a very traditional decoration, but Rachel and Nick have moved it into the world of design." ♦

PAPER TRAILBLAZERS

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