

Decorative Contemporary

by Emily Warner

Pattern and Decoration has been called the last modernist movement and the first postmodern, a final hurrah in the chapters of avant-garde rebellion and a new front in the pluralist free-for-all of the 1970s. Certainly the movement was multiple, divergent, even contradictory in its manifestations: under its umbrella it gathered abstraction, figurative flourishes, gridded designs, riotous arabesques. Anything and everything outside the borders of the austere status quo—outside of that formal and expansive “Athene” that Clement Greenberg sought in his vision of high modernism: it’s not folk art, he famously asserted, not mass production, but “Athene whom we want: formal culture with its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehension.”¹

The Athena quote appears as one of many collaged together in Joyce Kozloff and Valerie Jaudon’s 1978 “Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture,” a manifesto-like essay for feminist art and its craft-based movements.² The essay’s contention, that the biases of gender and race deeply inflect the dominant narratives written about culture, is well captured in Greenberg’s vision of Athena. For it is this Athena, understood in her various guises—Eurocentric culture, high art, the negative purity of abstraction—that so much of Pattern and Decoration has aimed at undoing. What might the marginal and the decorative, P&D asks, the frippery sheared from Athena’s edges, offer by way of alternative? How might the surfeit of extras repeatedly refused by fine art capture a richer and more varied meaning—both in P&D’s initial instances, and today, in present practice?

Since the 70s, of course, Athena’s hegemony has been repeatedly contested. This has made P&D’s own grumble with modernist orthodoxy somewhat more elusive. If Pattern and Decoration was a breath of fresh air in the stale space of an over-serious art world, as its early supporters maintained, what do we make of it today, when color, freshness, and insouciant critique are the norm? Some have deemed P&D an essential

¹ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” [1939] reprinted in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Francina (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 21-34; 32 n5.

² Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff, “Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture,” *Heresies* 1:4 (Winter 1977-8), 38-42. Reprinted in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, ed., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 154-64.

break—a decisively important “first”—in the opening of the floodgates.³ I am more interested here, however, in the particular strategies that P&D employed in its assault. What of its various manners and impulses—the proliferating scrawl of the decorative, the tacky glee of visual excess, the psychological or political freight vested in materials? Where, on the contemporary scene, do such concerns with interface and surface, with the thingness of objects and the heightened spaces between them, crop up in newly generative ways? In dwelling on a few of P&D’s salient impulses, and noting their permutations in present practice, I offer neither a full summary of the movement, nor a cast of contemporary heirs. (Indeed, the artists and works discussed vary greatly in style and ideological commitment.) Rather, I hope to elucidate a few specific themes that informed P&D, and that continue, with or without the specter of Athena as counter weight, to be fruitful modes of artistic investigation.

Proliferation

More than the grid per se, it is proliferation, the sprawling continuation of motif, that underlies the P&D decorative. Equally apparent in the tightly patterned knots of Valerie Jaudon’s canvases and the messier, looping strokes of Robert Zakanitch’s paintings, such spreading motifs take over surfaces and objects with a cheerful disregard for variations in medium or function. In Kim MacConnel’s fabric works, like the 1978 *Red Corner*, strokes of paint wiggle themselves across underlying patterns, so that a blue flower print is limned with gestural curlicues and the outlines of jaunty, cartoonish peonies.

In the wallpapers of contemporary artist Virgil Marti, patterned images extend their reach across entire room interiors. As in Cynthia Carlson’s rooms of the 1980s, patterning erupts everywhere: on the walls, along decorative objects, on hung pictures. In Marti’s *VIP Room* (2010), a slowly turning disco ball sends a pale, light-refracted wobble

³ Artist Robert Zakanitch, for example, has noted, “without P&D, there would be no postmodern.” Quoted in Anne Swartz, “Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art” in Swartz, ed., *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975-1985*, 12-42 (Yonkers, NY: Hudson River Museum, 2007), 23.

Somewhat more measuredly, Holland Cotter noted P&D’s importance in “bring[ing] down the great Western Minimalist wall for a while and bring[ing] the rest of the world in. Let the art historical record show, in the postmovement future, the continuing debt we owe it for that.” See Holland Cotter, “Scaling a Minimalist Wall with Bright, Shiny Colors,” *New York Times* (January 15, 2008), E1.

across the patterned silver wallpaper, while at night blacklights illuminate a neon-colored landscape lurking in the paper's printed fluorescent ink.

This propensity for multiplication—for a spreading-beyond-the-borders—goes a long way to distinguishing the decorative from its more staid and serious counterparts in abstraction. Artist Polly Apfelbaum's floor pieces, flat fabric swatches clustering in corners or spilling out from wall bases, speak to the same kind of proliferating drive, overtaking even the floor we walk on.

Excess

Proliferation shades easily into abundance and profusion: the decorative likes to revel in its gaudiness, its over-the-top-ness. If Apfelbaum's floor pieces hint at such a direction, her more recent monoprints, neon flowers and dots closely printed on giant sheets of paper, celebrate it. You can lose yourself in the deeply saturated colors of her monochrome flowers, each perfect and pokey as a Volkswagen decal. The excessiveness has both a high and low register: the impressions cut deeply, seductively, into the weave of the handmade paper, even as they evoke the tacky sheen of vinyl shower curtains.

Excess is something the original P&D artists excelled at. Miriam Schapiro's mixed-media works, with their dazzling pile-up of endless flower motifs, cubes, and fabric shreds, stun the eye in their profusion of detail. Robert Zakanitch's large paintings, like his famous wall-size *Bungalow Suite* series (1990-94), envelop the viewer in feet upon feet of swooping paint strokes.

Contemporary artist Catherine Lan's mixed-media canvases, trussed up in fuzz and puckered silk, put a subtly unnerving spin on the tacky glee of Zakanitch and Apfelbaum. The glut of textural materials in her works (lace, fabric, glitter, spray paint) suggests layers of female masquerade and fantasy. Art historian Norma Broude, in an essay on Pattern and Decoration, deemed the decorative "abstraction's 'other,'" and there is something convincing about this when looking at Lan's works: the patterns are formally beautiful, but constituted from such pop debris as twinkling rhinestones and

pasted fur balls.⁴ Everything that abstraction might aim for, but in a lovingly vulgar vocabulary.

Interface

Brimmed in faux fur and felt, Lan's canvases can feel like living personas. P&D teems with such quasi-animate entities. In Cynthia Carlson's 1975 *Triple Buldges*, bulbs of canvas, hardened into place with coats of paint, suggest rows of peering eyeballs. A Jane Kaufman work from 1984, *4-Panel Screen*, stands six and a half feet tall, its black, feather-coated panels intimating the curved back of a giant insect. Like the hanging fabrics of other P&D artists, Kaufman's standing screen acts as a marker between spaces: with its slight concave bulge, it almost seems to breathe, separating outside from inside, surface from interior.

This play between thing and interface, between sculpted object and an object that sculpts its environment, continues in a variety of contemporary works that sit, like Carlson's *Buldges*, somewhere between painting and sculpture. The shaped canvases and constructions of such artists as Jim Lee, Ian Pedigo, and Justin Adian burble personality traits (feisty, loveable, uncanny, weird), at the same time they tinker with the space around them: misshapen ovals with crackled surfaces suggest mirrors or voids, leaning stretcher bars and puffed-up limbs carve frames and portals against the gallery wall.

This interest in the mediating potential of objects informs many of P&D's "usable" and architectural works. The wearable fabrics of Robert Kushner's *Chador* series, or the edible clothing from his 1972 performances, impart new skins to their wearers, or, when hung on the wall, hint at the enlivening power of costume. Donna Dennis's mini hotel fronts and subway entrances from the 1970s engage similar themes of threshold and façade. Perkily arranged (in some 1970s exhibitions with fake palm trees), the shacks and house fronts offer shallow porches and entrances that lead to nowhere.

⁴ See Norma Broude, "The Pattern and Decoration Movement" in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Broude and Mary D. Garrard, 208-225 (New York: Abrams, 1996), 208.

Material

Perhaps the most characteristic impulse of Pattern and Decoration is its attitude toward material. Robert Zakanitch, for one, rooted his decorative practice in childhood memories of material ornamentation, noting, “In my grandparents’ house, ornamentation was everywhere. They had embroidered tablecloths and armrests. They used stencils to paint flower patterns on their walls...[they] decorated everything.”⁵ In addition to being liberal, even decadent, in the diversity of its materials, P&D was deeply invested in their metaphorical layers, in the cultural and political nuances that specific media might encode. Miriam Shapiro’s quilts and pasted fabrics originated as an attempt to incorporate the anonymous craftwork of women, to recover and engage with a female history of “sewing, piecing, hooking, cutting, appliquéing, cooking, and the like.”⁶

Like Shapiro, contemporary artist Jessica Jackson Hutchins utilizes materials with distinct evocations of the domestic. Her constructions, with clay figures on faded sofas, or plaster-caked rocking horses, focus less on the repetitive gestures of traditional “women’s work” than on the detritus of home- and art-making. The assemblage *Convivium*, from 2008, covers a table with a network of papier-mache tubes, sprouting like growths from the table edges and offering small platforms for bumpy clay vessels. In his *Plate Convergence* projects, contemporary artist Theaster Gates uses ceramic plate ware as material conveyors for Black and Japanese cultural traditions. Making and using the vessels, in dinner gatherings and performances, becomes a way not only to recover lost handiwork and ritual but to craft eclectic contemporary mixtures. In both Hutchins and Gates, material intersects potently with the relational, with the ephemeral webs of eating, gathering, crafting, history-telling. Material as metaphor—with its textural grain and its infinite capacity for difference—is one of P&D’s most potent legacies.

In many ways, the most significant lessons of P&D involve strategies for making things messy—for roughing up the edges and troubling neat distinctions. This is done, then as now, through recourse to the particular: to the bumpiness of layered media, to

⁵ Robert Zakanitch in interview with Charles Sabba. Quoted in Arthur C. Danto, “Pattern and Decoration as a Late Modernist Movement,” in Swarz, ed., *Ideal Vision*, op. cit., 7-11; 8.

⁶ Melissa Meyer and Miriam Shapiro, “Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled—FEMMAGE,” *Heresies* 1:4 (Winter 1977-8), 66-9. Reprinted in Stelz and Stiles, op. cit., 151-4.

materials with their own histories, to *things* rather than ideas. Those distinctions that P&D trained its sites at and sought to bring down—distinctions between serious and unserious, pure and kitschy, patriarchal and marginal—have proved far more infinite than the dualisms of modernism ever suggested. Today’s artists work within and across the variegated interstices of race, gender, sexuality, painterliness and mass culture, local and global, the many shades between synthesis, celebration, and critique.

P&D’s real contribution lies not in the conceptual messages derived from it, but in the specific ways it gave material form to such concepts. I have attempted to outline a few of these above. Proliferation, excess, interface, and the metaphorical weight of material continue to be viable modes today, beyond the modernist horizon. The decorative was, and is, a way not to replace one canon with another, but to insist on the multiplicity and divergence of contemporary experience. It is a way of uncovering Athena in the details, of declaring that luxuriance and large comprehension (along with narrowness, ignorance, glee, anger, memory, et al) dwell not in the universal but in the personal and the particular.

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