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# Reassessing Pattern & Decoration, the Last Art Movement of the Twentieth Century

by Glenn Adamson

"It is easy to be ironic about P&D. It can be hard to look it in the eye." So writes Hamza Walker, director of LA's LAXART, in the multi-author catalogue for "With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art, 1972–1985," an exhibition opening next month at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA).[1] Curated by Anna Katz with Rebecca Lowery, the survey is one of a number of major international exhibitions about the Pattern and Decoration movement launched in the past year. Viewers from California to Europe are being treated to a wide range of works from this oft-neglected episode in 1970s art, one in which member artists rebelled against restrictive modernist abstraction by vigorously embracing craft, color, and cultural content.

Miriam Schapiro: *Again Sixteen*

The deluge began last year with "Surface/Depth: The Decorative After

*Windows*, 1973, spray paint, watercolor, and fabric on paper, 30½ by 22½ inches. © Estate of Miriam Schapiro/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery.



Miriam Schapiro," curated by art historian Elissa Auther at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York. The show juxtaposed works by one of P&D's founding figures with related examples by younger artists. Meanwhile, there have been no fewer than four major exhibitions in 2019, all foregrounding Pattern and Decoration while also opening up to a broader purview. The movement's key protagonists, a tight circle based in New York and California—Cynthia Carlson, Brad Davis, Valerie Jaudon, Richard Kalina, Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, Kim MacConnel, Tony Robbin, Schapiro, and Robert Zakanitch—are being shown alongside other artists who shared their visual impulses, but not necessarily their intellectual goals.

In Europe, where P&D was collected early and in depth, two exhibitions are currently on tour. A version of "Pattern and Decoration: Ornament as Promise," co-organized by Esther Boehle at the Ludwig Forum in Aachen and Manuela Ammer at MUMOK in Vienna, will open at Budapest's Ludwig Museum next month under the title "Pattern and Decoration," while "Pattern, Crime and Decoration"—curated by Lionel Bovier, Franck Gautherot, and Seungduk Kim—can now be seen at Le Consortium in Dijon after debuting at Mamco, Geneva, in late 2018. Back in the United States, curator Jenelle Porter's "Less Is a Bore: Maximalist Art and Design" at the ICA Boston is a spectacular swathe of over-the-topness. It is the most thematically broad and visually intense show of the lot, while MOCA's "With Pleasure" is arguably the most scholarly. The publication accompanying the MOCA show also addresses the role of the curators and critics who supported the movement, including Jane Kaufmann, John Perreault, Jeff Perrone, and particularly Amy Goldin, whose vibrant voice was lost tragically early when she died of cancer in April 1978. It all adds up to an extremely convincing case for the relevance of the Pattern and Decoration movement, which Katz sees not as a divergence from more weighty avant-garde matters, but on the contrary, the key turning point in recent art.

To grasp the force of this argument, it helps to expand on an observation about P&D by *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter: it was "the last genuine art movement of the twentieth century."[2] In a weak sense, this is true just because of the great fragmentation that came right after—the rupture of postmodernism. The bellwether "Pictures" show at Artists Space in 1977, coinciding with P&D's peak, augured a crisis of authorship, most clearly exemplified by appropriation-based practices. Though postmodernist art shared certain strategies with Pattern and Decoration work—fragmentary collage and an emphasis on the signifying surface—it tended to be more theoretical and introverted, often hostile to "grand narratives" of progress. From this point on, art movements could be only subcultural spasms, or worse, marketing ploys. In the conceptual chess game inaugurated by Duchamp, in which each successive avant-garde movement was understood as a dialectical response to its forerunners, postmodernism was checkmate.

To many at the time, by contrast, P&D seemed ridiculous and irrelevant. Writing in *Artforum* in 1981, artist and critic Thomas Lawson characterized the pluralist blanket of the movement as nothing

but a decorated funeral shroud for abstraction, the "last gasps of a long overworked idiom."[3] The movement's detractors had been trained to believe that decoration was simply bad abstraction, the condition that a painting or sculpture fell into if it lacked, well, whatever made it good art. This was of course circular reasoning, and the Pattern and Decoration crew saw right through it. But unlike postmodernism, which would shatter the canon irreparably, P&D sought the opposite: a radical extension of relevance. "We were seeing films from all over the globe and listening to world music," Kozloff has said. "The hermeticism and provincialism of the New York art world became painfully obvious."[4]

Childhood memories, she noted, were a source of inspiration for many of the artists: "Zakanitch's grandmother's wallpaper, Schapiro's yard sales, and trips up and down the escalators at Bloomingdale's."[5] The P&D artists also exalted polychrome pottery, Celtic illuminations, woven carpets, tiled walls, printed silks, Persian miniatures, quilted blankets—"everything," as Robert Kushner puts it, "that was left out of Janson's *History of Art*."[6] Some artists actually learned the skills associated with these "minor" art forms—MacConnel and Kushner spent time repairing antique kilims—while others just quoted them, as painted motifs. Even modernist abstraction, notionally the movement's antithesis, was part of its hybrid vocabulary. Schapiro had previously been a hard-edge painter, as had Goldin before establishing herself as a critic. Jaudon has retained a singularly rigorous formalism over the course of her long career, making paintings that are equally in dialogue with Islamic calligraphy, Gothic architecture, and early Frank Stella.

What the P&D artists did reject was modernist restraint. As if it had left them ravenous, they gorged themselves on inspirations of all kinds, all at once, from cultures across the world and throughout history. This "promiscuity," Katz argues, is what made P&D such a crucial breakthrough. It inaugurated a new phase of art history, a phase that we still and may forever inhabit, in which any qualitative hierarchy that manages to establish itself is considered ipso facto illegitimate. The movement's members understood the gravity of this. To truly accept decoration as equal to fine art, Goldin saw, was "to deny the very possibility of revolution—art history is just one thing after another."[7] John Perreault, poet and critic, agreed: "art proceeds—it does not progress."[8] Artist Jeff Perrone more positively described a "new space where the low and the high no longer battle it out: we're at peace and breathing again."[9] This is why we are seeing so many shows about P&D now. Its enthusiastic embrace of multiculturalism and multiplicity feels like a far more useful model for the present than the nihilistic endgame of postmodernism. Why mourn the death of the author, if we can all be authors together?

But this utopian impulse presents its own difficulties. At the time, Pattern and Decoration was often dismissed because its sources were thought to be trivial. Today, when discourse about cultural appropriation is much further developed, the problem looks to be the opposite: we respect other cultures too much to treat them as quarries to

mine. It is true that, as curator and critic Michael Duncan writes in the catalogue for "Pattern and Decoration: Ornament as Promise," "the cross-cultural pillaging" undertaken by these artists was intended to "bend and expand the tropes of Western art."[10] However, as Katz points out, though the P&D group never intended to be exploitative, "appreciation does not always hold up as a defense against appropriation."[11] Kozloff puts it succinctly: "We were honest, but naive."[12]

In assessing this critical question, it is important to bear in mind that while the Pattern and Decoration artists were exclusively white men and women, they hardly saw themselves as powerful arbiters of the art world. ("With Pleasure" includes figures like Sam Gilliam, Al Loving, and Howardena Pindell, but there was little direct contact between these artists and the core P&D group.) For its time, though, the Pattern and Decoration movement was unusual in advancing marginalized voices and vocabularies. Kushner describes it as "a coming out about what we were attracted to," suggesting an implicit queer aesthetic, but its most evident ideological allegiance was with feminism.[13]

Pattern and Decoration artists saw the history of women's work—particularly domestic crafts—as a forgotten canon that could be reclaimed as a source of contemporary expression. Connections to the feminist movement were numerous: Schapiro had been one of the leaders of the *Womanhouse* project at CalArts in 1972, some early and important texts by members of the P&D group were published in the feminist journal *Heresies*, and several of the participants were involved in consciousness-raising and other practices. For Kozloff and Schapiro, especially, an interest in women's art led to an exploration of Asian, African, and Latin American cultures, where techniques like weaving and pottery are more often practiced by female artisans. This way of bringing politics into art also resonated with artists outside the main group: the prominent feminist and conceptual artist Elaine Reichek says, "when I heard 'pattern,' I thought about knitting patterns, developmental patterns, patterns of colonialism."[14] P&D was, then, a generative model, one that remains pertinent for recent art. Its preferred technique of "cut-and-paste" has rightly come to be seen as an inadequate way of dealing with cultural difference. But it was ahead of its time in advancing an intersectional aesthetics, in which identity is conceived as a matter of selective affinity.

It is important to emphasize that while P&D did make room for visual pleasure, and plenty of it, it was not hedonistic. The movement has occasionally been treated as a welcome relief from thinking too hard—as in a Hyperallergic article by Anne Swartz about the current exhibitions, which enthuses, "art has again decided to BE HAPPY and make pretty." (Caps very much in the original.)[15] But there was more method than madness in the movement. One revelation of "With Pleasure" is its inclusion of the Criss-Cross collective, based in Boulder, Colorado. This countercultural experiment, which emerged from the famed 1960s hippie commune Drop City, was devoted to pursuing pattern as an anti-hierarchical force, a "democracy of parts,"

in the words of its member George Woodman (husband of the great ceramist Betty Woodman).[16]

The Criss-Cross painters, who also included Gloria Klein and Clark Reichert, were fascinated by systems of symmetry and tessellation. Most of the core P&D group did not share this interest in hard-core mathematics, an exception being Tony Robbin, whose paintings were informed by his studies of four-dimensional geometry. The others did, however, bring an equally rigorous consideration to more culturally embedded patterns. Kozloff made the astute observation that ornament was a "third category of art," neither abstract nor mimetic, but just as susceptible to theorization as either.[17] As early as 1966, in an essay in *Arts* magazine, Goldin had reacted to debates over opticality—which pitted Clement Greenberg's ideal of visual transcendence against the flickering, transitory effects of Op art—by doing something few other critics bothered to: looking closely at the material substance of the works. (She hilariously described Jules Olitski's spray technique, for example, as producing an effect that was "airy, rather flatulent.") This led her to conclude that "the formal problem of the incompatibility of visual mass and optical space"—that is, the attempt to narrow the distance between the image and what it was made from—had led to "the so-called emptiness and reductiveness of contemporary painting." Goldin predicted this would not last: "Artists are not notably renunciatory—they don't give up anything they want."[18]

It took her about a decade, but in decoration, Goldin obviously felt that she found the answer to this conundrum. Her 1975 essay "Patterns, Grids, and Paintings," as close as the P&D movement ever came to having a manifesto, argues that rugs and ceramic tiles have an intrinsic density and complexity, thanks to the inextricable relationship between their visual and material registers. This produces an aesthetic object that is "incredibly tough," able to accommodate interruption and variation in a way that conventional abstract painting cannot. She also distinguished between the autonomy of the modernist artwork and the contingency of pattern, which actually gains in effect when placed in a strong context: "The conceptual richness of pattern can be fully realized only through the juxtaposition of related patterns."[19] This was an inversion of the usual assumption of decorative inconsequentiality. In effect, Goldin was saying that pattern had everything that modern art lacked, or perhaps, had simply lost touch with. A rug was something to look up to.

Perrone adopted a similarly positive view of contingency. Writing of the signature P&D maneuver of the floating motif—excised from a source image and rescaled, as in MacConnel's spliced-together paintings—he argued: "Decoration becomes decontextualized by virtue of its being borrowed. . . . Removed from its usual role, the decoration becomes both sign and design, both itself and quoted material (as in the dual situation of [Jasper] Johns's *Flags*)."[20] In retrospect, this line of thought, which borrowed from the semiotic theory then just coming into fashion, suggests one area of overlap with postmodern theory. The idea that decoration can be at once itself and a reference to "the

decorative" at large—both a visual and a value system—resonates with the "double coding" that design theorist Charles Jencks claimed for communicative architecture. For Perrone, an early adopter of deconstructivist theory, that duality also related to Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*—the inconclusive quality of language, which always remains open to subsequent interpretation, and derives its meaning through endlessly ramifying internal difference. It was just this sort of open-endedness that Perrone found in the decorative, writing that it can "always be understood as other than, different from any base or established basis or bias. . . . Grid and function, as paradigms of the ideal and real grounding, are the very bases from which the decorative deviates and flies free: it flutters on their surfaces."[21]

Once we see past the lush opulence of Pattern and Decoration—looking it in the eye, as Hamza Walker says—it becomes legible by putting these ideas into practice. Kozloff's installation *An Interior Decorated* (1978–80) demonstrates the power of rich juxtaposition that Goldin advocated. The work beautifully embodies Perrone's notion of decoration that is both applied and autonomous, dressing the gallery in a riot of vertical and horizontal planes of ceramic tile and printed silk that are raised off the walls and floors on columns and a platform. Kozloff emphasized this matter-of-factness, writing that she wanted to escape the "metaphors" in her earlier works, which transcribed ornamental motifs into abstract compositions, and instead create "an environment in which the ornament would be literal and physically palpable."[22]

If Kozloff reclaimed architectural space for the purely decorative, Schapiro folded the logic of patterning inward, into dense compositions. In her "femmage" paintings—the term is a portmanteau of feminine, collage, and homage—multiple fragmentary patterns are arranged and overlaid, sometimes in an intentionally sentimental format like a heart or a fan.[23] These works manifest a deconstructivist technique comparable to the one Perrone pursued in his writings, for example, in the way that their frames cascade right into the core of the images; as Auther notes, this "complicate[s] the categorization of ornament or decoration as merely supplemental, secondary, or peripheral to the 'real' or deeper meaning of a work."[24] As with Kozloff, materiality was of the utmost importance for Schapiro: she used fabric, glitter, handmade paper, and other elements associated with hobby craft. In Perrone's terms, these materials were in a "dual situation," both a signifier of craft and the genuine article. Schapiro was simultaneously indicating her political sympathies with unheralded amateur makers, and also forcing the question of her own status, and by implication that of any professional artist, into the open. Who, she implicitly asked, gets to decide whether an artwork is serious or not?[25]

It is this last idea that constitutes the Pattern and Decoration movement's most enduring challenge. Zakanitch and Kushner were once asked at a College Art Association conference to clarify their thoughts about their exuberant, oversize floral compositions. Were they

saying their work was any different from wallpaper? They replied, "We're not. Wallpaper is better!"[26] The implication was that the vast, contingent world of commercial design might be preferable to the precious self-regard of the art gallery.

Not every P&D artist would have gone that far, even rhetorically. But all felt that the art world was far, far bigger than had previously been imagined. And they were willing to think through the implications of that dramatic inclusiveness, in ways we are still catching up to today. Ultimately, this may come down not so much to celebration—a word that gets thrown in P&D's direction frequently—but rather to modesty. They saw that art is itself in a "differential" condition, gaining much of its meaning through adjacencies and affinities.

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