eric firestone gallery

HYPERALLERGIC

The Pattern and Decoration Zeitgeist

by Anne Swartz
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A rising tide of romanticism in contemporary art has galvanized a resurgence of what was once called Pattern and Decoration. P&D for short, was, in short, an art movement begun in the mid-1970s that made decoration key to art making. Cynthia Carlson's wallpaper, Jane Kaufman's feathers and beads, Valerie Jaudon's seductive grids, Tony Robbin's reliance on kimono patterns, Miriam Schapiro's incorporation of embroidered handkerchiefs, among others, were grouped together as an efflorescence of the decorative impulse. The work, often consisting of swirly patterns and flowery ornament (thus coded as female), was greeted as a relief from the sobriety of conceptual art. Now, again — reacting against what sometimes seems like art's relentless address of injustices, and news of the day — art has again decided to BE HAPPY and make pretty.

Miriam Schapiro, "Tapestry of Paradise" (1980) acrylic, fabric, glitter on canvas, 60 x 50" (© Miriam Schapiro/Artists Rights Society, New York; courtesy Brooklyn Museum of Art)

Re-emerging is a kind of women's work authorized by the Feminist Art Movement: an expansive vision focused on pleasure, optimism, joy, and against violent imagery. These impulses are similar to those stimulating P&D, a style notable for just such qualities. A current exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design looks at the legacy of Miriam Schapiro's decorative work, and another at the Bronx's Longwood Art Gallery @ Hostos considers the revival of P&D. Recently, several artists shown at the Volta and Armory fairs evinced P&D qualities, and there are several P&D museum exhibitions planned for this fall. One beginning in Aachen, Germany, will travel to Vienna; another will go from Geneva to Dijon; and a third opens next year in Los Angeles. Each one will look at P&D through a different lens.

Brilliant color and gorgeous patterns seemed a leitmotif in works by several artists at the Volta and Armory art fairs in March of this year. At Volta, KiiK Create, the collaboration of artists Manoela del Pilar Madera Nadal and David Gray Edgerton, occupied a space with its signature fetching, vibrant geometric installations. Highly graphic in bold outlines of the forms, the severe diagonals animated the space, thereby attracting small children wanting to play in the booth.

In the Armory show, at the Wentrup Gallery booth, Nevin Aladağ's "Social Fabric" of 2017 is typical of this Turkish artist's interests in pastiche. She combines carpet pieces of Iraqi, African, Chinese, American, and other origins to crossbreed the patterns, highlighting the funky, sexy look of abandon and imprecision. Also, Sanford Biggers had a strong presence. Biggers's patterns and textures sumptuously occupied the David Castillo Gallery booth with four quilt-based wall works, a wonderful decoratively patterned linoleum floor, and a feather-covered sculptural figure, as well as smaller pieces on the outer walls. Reached at the American Academy in Rome, where he is currently a Fellow, Biggers claims his connection to Kozloff, Schapiro, and P&D openly:

> I was in grad school and uninspired by the never ending dialogue about Ab Ex and Minimalism when I had the pleasure of a few meetings with Joyce Kozloff, who I was quickly becoming a fan of. Joyce introduced me to Miriam Schapiro's work and I became inspired by how she left abstract expressionism and began to conflate non-western artistic references, heavy pattern, domestic materials, formalism and feminism. I was later able to see many original collage and *femmage* works of hers when we were in a group show together with Eric Firestone [*Fresh Cuts*, Eric Firestone Gallery, 2016]. In addition to challenging the western canon, Miriam, Joyce and the P&D movement as a whole offered a model of how artists can address inequity aesthetically and institutionally.

Each of Biggers's constructions was a conglomeration of familiar textiles, a dense medley of layered significations about domesticity. Also, as part of the special grouping of Platform artists at the Armory Fair, Sarah Cain, Jeffrey Gibson, and Amalia Pica each offered some dimension of color, patterning, decoration, appropriation, and palimpsest to their imagery.

Surface/Depth: The Decorative After Miriam Schapiro, currently at the Museum of Arts and Design assesses the legacy of Miriam Schapiro, the only member of the original P&D group no longer active. (She died in 2015.) Schapiro's work looks awesome in the space. She's known for moving from spare, abstract, geometric forms to abundant, dense surfaces on canvases sometimes shaped like hearts, fans, or houses. There we see a great deal of art and ephemera included too — important to enable understanding of the origin story of her accretionary process — those dense surfaces didn't just build themselves. The whole show is a visual feast, contextualizing Schapiro's lovely paintings for a new generation. In addition to being an accomplished maker herself, Schapiro used highly decorated surfaces in her *femmages*: collages involving remnants from women's creativity or from their lives. She was also a teacher who helped students use their personal content to make art. Josh Blackwell, who actually had her as a teacher, is included in this show. His work repurposes everyday plastic and fiber as a three-dimensional variation on the gestural language of painting. Additionally, Jasmin Sian, Edie Fake, and Jodie Mack are all delights in this show, and provide a thankfully broad reading on the notion of decoration.

Installation view: (left) Miriam Schapiro, "Mexican Memory" (1981), acrylic, fabric and glitter on canvas, 48 × 96 in. (121.9 × 243.8 cm); (right) Sanford Biggers, "Ooo Oui" (2017) textiles, fabric, antique quilt fragment, sequins, 60 × 74 3/4 in. (152.4 × 189.9 cm)(© 2018 Estate of Miriam Schapiro / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Another filtration of P&D was evident in *The Neo-Victorians: Contemporary Artists Revive Gilded-Age Glamour*, at the Hudson River Museum, accompanied by Jennifer Angus's "Dying of Curiosity," (2018) a site-specific installation in Glenview (the adjacent historic home) which also emphasized the decorative with some patterning elements. Many of the domestic and naturally inspired works displayed in this exhibition that closed in May, evinced the organic, repurposed beauty associated with P&D. Much as original P&D group members Joyce Kozloff and Kim MacConnel were earlier inspired by tiles from around the world and Jaudon by the Alhambra, Donna Sharrett draws visual insight from far-flung sources. Sharrett uses Gothic cathedral rose windows in her *Arrangements* series, several objects of which are included in this show, such as "Nothing Else Matters" (2012) which is a memory piece with process elements recalling women's work generally and her mother specifically. The romance and the sweetness of the surface draws you in and the patterning of the composition slowly mesmerizes — probably the same way sacred geometry works.

Both Nancy Blum and Ebony Bolt use botanical imagery. Blum focuses on the robustness and bravura of the forms. Bolt relies on the trellis as a backdrop for a wonderland of city characters wearing expressions that endlessly recur. The repeated pattern of the wallpaper simultaneously underscores the gritty reality of her city streets and their beauty. Bolt's juxtapositions gently tug charm from the most unenticing faces, elevating them, and her latticework holds growth which yields inventive possibility for the city.

A smaller exhibition, REVIVAL: Contemporary Pattern and Decoration combined doctrinaire P&D strategies like pastiche, decorated surfaces, sparkle, glitter, grids and patterns, and sensuously ornamented objects consisting of craft elements. This show, an exhibition project conceived by El Museo del Barrio and organized and presented in collaboration with Hostos Center for Arts and Culture and the Bronx Council on the Arts, is by far the most difficult to penetrate because of the abundance of work on view. I was glad to see Damali Abrams and Mickalene Thomas's collages included in this show, since I have long thought their works on paper have resonances with the P&D sensibility. Because of the dense installation of works, I ended up picking one to focus on, spending more time looking at Dutch-Surinamese artist Remy Jungerman's "Horizontal Obeah Tjeke" of 2016–18. The construction is a horizontally organized series of rectangular elements with delicately cross-hatched, linear-patterned and subtly colored, blocked areas, contrasted with broad, kaolin-whitened areas. The artist is in Brooklyn for a year-long residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Program, so he explained to me:

> The title of the work is a combination of different words that refers to the influence of the Atlantic Ocean in the sharing of geometry and patterns with the Americas and how these patterns got meaning in the African diaspora religion, especially Suriname. Obeah is a religious practice developed among enslaved West Africans. Tjeke is a dance style practiced by the Surinamese Maroons for honoring the ancestors.

The abstract, non-hierarchical gridded patterned elements with global references in Jungerman's compelling work show how appealing and satisfying these P&D qualities remain for artists.

In, our current cultural temperament, an age of irony that favors negation, disaffection, and severe formalism, expressing pleasure in visual complexity and beauty is infrequent. Cynics mask their prudishness, their unwillingness to probe pleasure, memory and play that occur in combination. Yet, we still desire to see beauty, and these exhibitions reveal a phenomenon of its populist engagement emerging. How and where P&D originated can help us understand why it is having a resurgence.

In the 1970s, P&D did not emerge as a clear style with a set manifesto or single patron, but instead was a diffusion of exhibitions, panel discussions, and meetings. The main group included Brad Davis, Cynthia Carlson, Valerie Jaudon, Jane Kaufman, Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, Kim MacConnel, Tony Robbin, Miriam Schapiro, Ned Smyth, and Robert Zakanitch, but there were dozens of other artists closely linked to the moniker and its offshoots.

For these P&D artists, art as ornamentalism was welcomed, an alternative to abstraction and representation, what Joyce Kozloff termed "the third direction." This idea is central to P&D. Robert Zakanitch recently told me that once freed from looking only at the artworld, "the imagery coming into that work was endless." The P&D artists ranged unfettered, beyond the museum, studio, and gallery, bringing back whatever beauty they would encounter in the world to make their art glow. Inspiration came from everywhere — Henri Matisse, flea markets, rug shops, domestic textiles, quilts and wallpaper; glitter was welcomed as much as the grid.

The radicality of the original P&D group's postmodern strategy of appropriation stemmed from the desire to use cultural interchange to undermine the structural violence of the dominant culture towards women and indigenous and non-western people. Now, bucking the authoritarian, heterosexist white man's moment, once again gender play and the decorative rendered on attire, craft, and domestic items appeal.

The art of this revival is highly sensory, stimulating to the eye, and often to the hand. It optimistically looks to make something out of nothing, and make it personal and readily accessible to viewers. Many of these artists, as other artists do now, created objects or environments that referenced the domestic, the quotidian, the garden. Returning to sentimentality, extending content, and broadening references, and adding visual richness verges on art as seduction. But what's the problem with art which appeals to the whole experience of life — mind, body, and soul — and draws from ideas and sources beyond a narrowly defined set of parameters and concerns? P&D asked these questions decades ago and thankfully they recur again in more eloquent, intimate, and complex decorative art.