

Resurgence of Resistance

How Pattern & Decoration's Popularity Can Help Reshape the Canon

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“Decoration has always been particularly despised in art discourse,” said the late art dealer Holly Solomon decades ago, recalling the time in 1977 she installed a group of “Pattern and Decoration” artists in her booth at Art Basel. “The show was immediately controversial—a bit like the child everyone beats over the head when he’s got nothing better to do.”¹ This off-the-cuff remark sounds dramatic, until you read 1970s–’80s criticism calling out P&D—as Pattern and Decoration was often called—as regressive or just vapid.² At the time, Solomon said, “it seemed that all the art shown in every gallery had to look alike.”³ Minimalism was the institutional darling, but not for Solomon. Once, at her gallery, she hosted a performance by P&D artist Robert Kushner, in which he wore a costume made of tree branches, antique gauze, raffia, and various other materials. Solomon bought the costume for her own collection afterward, and, when Kushner delivered it to her apartment, casually placed it beside a painting by very-much-established Jasper Johns.

The press material and catalogue for MOCA Los Angeles’ current exhibition, *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985*, make it deliberately clear that the P&D movement had champions in its time—Solomon, dealer Tibor de Nagy, critic Amy Goldin, and curator John Perreault among them. Yet the show, curated by Anna Katz, makes other claims to exceptionalism. It is “the first full-scale scholarly North American survey of the groundbreaking yet

understudied” art movement, according to the press release. Indeed, while the Hudson River Museum put on *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art* in 2007, it included significantly fewer artworks, and the recent *Surface/Depth: The Decorative After Miriam Schapiro* at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York did not attempt comprehensiveness. Other recent exhibitions, of which there have been a surprising number, have not been in North America: such as the one at MAMCO in Geneva (2018) or the one that traveled from Ludwig Forum in Aachen (2018) to mumok in Vienna and the Ludwig Museum in Budapest. This surge in exhibitions is significant because, from 1986 until the early 2000s, hardly even any minor exhibitions featured P&D as a movement, and 20th century art histories largely fail to mention it. The movement does not even garner footnotes in the widely-used textbooks *Art After Modernism*, *Postmodernism* (noteworthy given P&D’s prolific, very Po-Mo appropriation of decorative motifs), or the quite heavy *Art in Theory: 1900–2000*. Some of the work at MOCA had been in museum storage since it was acquired and other work only sparingly shown, such as Neda Alhilali’s exuberantly layered, textured acrylic-on-paper collage, and Susan Michod’s undulating, comically exuberant expanse of quilt-like shapes made with stamps.

Writing of the 2008 Hudson River show, the *New York Times*’ Holland Cotter explained that P&D was alienated in part because it defied Minimalism’s dominant foothold in the art world. And certainly, while P&D artists often employed strategies similar to the Minimalists—the grid as important to them as to, say, Carl Andre—these strategies deliberately undermined the reigning trends toward pared-down, non-referential object-making. “Let the art historical record show [...] the continuing debt we owe [P&D]” for taking Minimalism down a peg, proclaimed Cotter.⁴

But how exactly should the record go about showing this? As institutions,

1. Laura De Coppet and Alan Jones, “Holly Solomon,” *The Art Dealers* (New York: C.N. Potter, 1984).



Robert Kushner, *Fairies* (1980) (detail).
Acrylic on cotton, 99 × 135 inches. Image courtesy
of the Marieluise Hessel Collection,
Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies,
Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.
Photo: Chris Kendall.



Ree Morton, *One of the Beaux Paintings* (1975).
Oil on wood and enamel on celastic, 24 x 24 inches.
Collection of Linda, Sally, and Scott Morton.
Image courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York.
Image: Tony Walsh.

critics, and historians continue to acknowledge the art historical canon's glaring flaws, how do we invite previously marginalized movements and artists into the narrative without downplaying their defiance of the dominant art movements of their time? Further, as formerly under-narrated artists make their way into the bigger, established histories, can this prompt those bigger histories to reshape and become less rigid?

Exhibitions of underrepresented artists thrill in part because they promise to pull back a curtain of sorts. They prove the existence of troves of work we barely know, made by artists who were working in the shadows of overly-famous figures, suggesting a history that is more varied, potent, and intricate than the one we've been taught. The thrill only grows when the art itself breaks rules of its time, like the work in MOCA's *With Pleasure* does, with its pattern mashing and funky, seductive materiality. Across the show—which includes painting, sculpture, and textiles, all made between the early 1970s and mid-1980s—imperfections coexist warmly with unapologetic prettiness. Kim MacConnel's painted furniture is both too brightly colored and too roughly rendered to be conventionally tasteful. Cynthia Carlson titled her floral painted walls *Tough Shift for M.I.T.* (1981), a knowing reference to her installation's button-pushing presence at the elite institution for which she first made it. The piece is more idiosyncratic than either a William Morris wallpaper or wall drawings à la Sol LeWitt, and engaged in an unruly conversation with both. Ree Morton's 1975 celastic sculptures of bows (*Beaux Arts* she cannily called them) treat frivolous subject matter with a mastery that makes them subliminally about the canon and what can belong there.

The very presence of so much P&D work at a major institution offers an opportunity to reconsider the movement's art historical narrative, but also the narratives of "resurgences" in art more generally. We are in a moment when rediscoveries happen

at an almost alarming rate, for two main, uncomfortably-paired reasons: first, the diversification of the art world has made it glaringly evident how many women, artists of color, and queer artists never got their due; second, the contemporary art market has grown only more insatiable, prompting dealers and collectors to seek out "important" art to acquire. Dealers are sensing an opportunity "to cultivate a new market," artist Barbara Kruger told the *New York Times* in 2016, speaking about the increasing interest in underrecognized female artists.⁵ This coincided with a surge in interest in work by artists of color as well—the paintings of Sam Gilliam, sculptures of Betye Saar, and abstract works by the late Alma Thomas have become in demand by institutions and are also increasingly expensive. There is, of course, nothing wrong with artists from earlier eras making money—assuming the money goes to them or their estates, not auction houses—but the market often does not encourage complicated narratives. For instance, a recent press release for a show of Alma Thomas' work at Mnuchin Gallery praised her as "a pioneering figure" who worked alongside Color Field peers, but did not elaborate on why Thomas had not had a solo gallery exhibition since 1976. Without acknowledging the reasons for historical exclusions—Thomas' personal priorities, race, class, health, and gender all played a role—we offer quick fixes without actually expanding and reshaping the canon.

While P&D has been sidelined, *With Pleasure* includes a number of artists who have been corralled into other art historical narratives. Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, and Alan Shields were recently shown at LACMA alongside Gee's Bend quilters; Ree Morton's work is often shown in a Post-Minimalist context; and Lynda Benglis is often contextualized within Minimalism. A number of women in the exhibition were included in *WACK!*, the feminist art show hosted by MOCA just over a decade ago. But P&D itself was a movement by design, and deserves to be discussed as such.

2. Such as Thomas Lawson and Donald Kuspit, discussed later in this essay, or John Russell Taylor who said "there is too much accent on the seeing side of things and too little on the thinking," in the *London Times* on May 13, 1980.

3. De Coppet and Jones, "Holly Solomon."

4. Holland Cotter, "Scaling a Minimalist Wall with Bright Shiny Colors," *The New York Times*, Jan. 15, 2008.

5. Hilarie M. Sheets, "Female Artists Are (Finally) Getting Their Turn," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2016.

The group officially began with a series of meetings organized by painter Robert Zakanitch in 1975—among the attendees were Kushner, Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, and other artists already working with pattern and decorative arts as source material. Most of these artists had already taught or shown together. The group decided to call themselves Pattern & Decoration, unlike so many other art historical movements that were named later at the whims of others (Abstract Expressionism ostensibly named by inaugural MoMA director Alfred Barr; Color Field painting named by critic Clement Greenberg). Some of the artists involved had been Color Field painters or Minimalists before and made a decisive shift in style—a deliberate attempt to address limitations and rigidities in the Modern Art canon. For Zakanitch, this meant a place between abstraction and representation, and for Schapiro, a way to dismantle the historic trivialization of feminine crafts.

Critic Amy Goldin, who taught alongside Schapiro at UC San Diego, also attended the meetings, because she was trying to write critically about folk art, traditional arts, and decoration (“[N]o one had done that,” recalled Kozloff⁶). In 1975, she wrote a probing essay called “Patterns, Grids, and Paintings,” in which she tried to articulate why pattern-driven works invited derision from art world elites. “[T]he nature of pattern implicitly denies the importance of singularity, purity, and absolute precision,” she wrote.⁷ She noted that P&D artists, like many Minimalists, employed the grid liberally, though out of interest in repetition’s role in decoration (Valerie Jaudon’s paintings would read as Minimalist exercises if not for their arches, curves, and quilt-like palettes). Later, Jaudon and Kozloff further unpacked prejudices against craft and pattern in their immensely readable, humorous 1978 essay “Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture.” They poked at purity, sarcastically calling it a “newer more subtle way for artists to elevate themselves.”⁸ By aspiring toward such purity, they

argued, artists propelled the “myth that high art is for a select few.”⁹ They too were thinking about how to dismantle art historical prejudices.

P&D’s detractors tended to dismiss its questioning of the canon, framing the movement as regressive and too aligned with late Modernism. That P&D artists still employed the language of abstraction contributed to this reading. Artist and critic Thomas Lawson, writing in 1981, grouped P&D in the with “the numerous painting revivals of the latter part of the ’70s,” which “proved to be little more than the last gasps of a long overworked idiom, modernist painting.”¹⁰ Critic Donald Kuspit, writing in 1979, argued that, by employing some of the same technical and material strategies of Modernism, P&D feminists curtailed the critical potentials of their own work. He described their work as “a feminism which means to entrench itself, to become as ‘corporate’ and establishment as the masculine ideology it presumably means to overthrow.”¹¹ (Artists who had a political message, he seemed to imply, could not afford to indulge in good composition or material beauty.) Yet, years later, Kuspit changed his tune, admitting that, back in the 1970s, he had found his pleasurable reaction to Robert Kushner’s work in particular discomfiting. He had not known how to theorize it.¹²

Kuspit *did* know how to theorize about Pictures Generation artists, such as Sherrie Levine, whose work he saw as “more significant for what it stands for than for what it is in itself”¹³—identifying a kind of meta, cynical distance that P&D artists almost universally eschewed. Recently, curator and historian Jenni Sorkin posited that part of the reason P&D receded from prominence as the Pictures Generation artists—who also emerged in the 1970s, and also reveled in appropriation, though more wryly—cemented positions in history books was that the latter group had behind them an elite critical apparatus (Kuspit, Douglas Crimp, Benjamin Buchloh, and Craig Owens: all contributors to the high-minded journal *October*).¹⁴ In

6. Joyce Kozloff, *Joyce Kozloff: Co+ordinates*, ed. Nancy Princenthal, Phillip Earenfight, Joyce Kozloff (Carlisle: The Trout Gallery, 2008), p. 46.

7. Amy Goldin, “Patterns, Grids and Paintings,” *Artforum*, September 1975.

8. Joyce Kozloff and Valerie Jaudon, “Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture,” *Heresies*, 1979.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Thomas Lawson, “Last Exit Painting,” *Artforum*, October 1981.



Nancy Graves, *Acordia* (1982). Bronze with polychrome patina, 92.25 x 48 x 23.5 inches. Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Nancy Graves: © Nancy Graves Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo: Chris Kendall.



Above: Robert Zakanitch, *Angel Feet* (1978).
Acrylic on canvas, three parts, overall 94.25 x 172.50
inches. Image courtesy of the Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York, gift of an anonymous donor.
Image © Whitney Museum, NY.

Below: Kim MacConnel, *Untitled* (1982).
Acrylic on upholstered sofa, 31 x 96 x 46 inches.
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.
Gift of The Prop Foundation. Photo: Pablo Mason.

contrast, Goldin, a compelling critic who died prematurely of cancer in 1978, may not have cared to aggressively promote the movement's importance even if she'd lived. ("By all accounts, Goldin had no interest in advancing either herself or her power, or, for that matter, in advancing anyone else," pointed out a *Los Angeles Times* feature on her legacy¹⁵). Perhaps part of what she, like certain P&D artists, disliked about the art world was how it privileged narratives of invention and advancement. When you are resistant to bravado-fueled narratives of progress, it is hard to guarantee your position in them. It is also hard to guarantee that, if your work does find its way into said narratives, your defiance will accompany it.

Writing in the *New York Review of Books* about the renewed interest in spiritual art and early-1900s artist Hilma af Klint in particular, Susan Tallman worried that those inserting af Klint into the mainstream art historical narrative might be misrepresenting the artist's own interests. "[T]he claim for af Klint as an inventor of abstract art runs into two serious problems," wrote Tallman. "The first is that it doesn't seem to match how she thought the work should function. The second is that abstraction was 'invented' in the same sense that the Western Hemisphere was 'discovered.'" Tallman noted that af Klint—whose Guggenheim show was highly attended and widely praised, even though her estate had been unable to give her art away after her 1944 death—considered certain of her paintings vehicles for spiritual channeling, and others were attempts to map spiritual planes. "To what degree does celebrating these things as works of art, and celebrating af Klint as their creator, invalidate everything she was hoping to achieve?" asked Tallman.¹⁶

As an exhibition, *With Pleasure* does not invalidate all that P&D artists hoped to achieve, largely because it does not treat the movement as unimpeachable or purely one thing. The catalogue keeps art historical imperialism under scrutiny, questioning P&D artists' use of patterns from other

cultures (should issues of cultural appropriation have been more forefront?). The inclusion of artists who were not at Zakanitch's meetings ensures a more diverse story of P&D's presence in art, and, as its title implies, *With Pleasure* gives the art space to just be sensually present. None of this work fits snugly into the story we know, because we never actually knew the whole story. If we can remember that we still don't, we may slowly learn to shape a truer, wider, and weirder narrative.

Catherine Wagley writes about art and visual culture in Los Angeles.

11. Donald Kuspit, "Betraying the Feminist Intention: the Case Against Feminist Decorative Art" *Arts Magazine*, 1979.

12. Donald Kuspit, "Robert Kushner's Happy Consciousness," in *Robert Kushner* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1987), p. 21.

13. Donald Kuspit, "Sherri Levine," *Artforum*, December 1987.

14. Jenni Sorkin, "Patterns and Pictures: strategies of appropriation, 1975–85," *Burlington Contemporary*, May 2019.

15. Malin Wilson-Powell, "Worldly Art Critic's Work Resurfaces," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 19, 2003.

16. Susan Tallman, "Painting the Beyond," *The New York Review of Books*, April 4, 2019.