Recognition

In the 1970s and '80s a bold group of American artists embraced vibrant color, ornament, and craft.

By Glenn Adamson


foundations

“It is easy to be ironic about P&D. It can be hard to look in the eye.”

So writes Hamza Walker, director of L.A.’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). Curated by Anna Katz with Rebecca Lowery, the survey is one of a number of major international exhibitions about the Pattern and Decoration movement that have opened so far in 2019: all foregrounding P&D’s founding figures with related examples by embracing craft, color, and cultural content.

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 Booth at the Ludwig Forum in Aachen and Manoak 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 “Pattern and Decoration” so far. Porter’s “Less Is a Bore” show opened at the MOCA in 2017, where it opened to a wide range of works from this oft-neglected episode in late 20th-century art, one in which member artists rebelled against the austerity of 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.”

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 movement was understood as a dialectical response to the art world’s atrocity. 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.”6 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.”

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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.”7” In a weak sense, this is true: the P&D movement was understood as a dialectical response to its forebears, postmodernism, was checkmate. It 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.”

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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 says, was “to deny the very possibility of revolution—art history is just one thing after another.” John Perreault, poet and critic, agreed: “art proceeds—it does not progress.”

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.” 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 end-game 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 quasars 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 pilfering” undertaken by these artists was intended to “bend and expand the tropes of Western art.” However, as Katz points out, though the P&D group never intended to be exploitative, “appropriation does not always hold up as a defense against appropriation.”

Kozloff puts it succinctly: “We were honest, but naive.”

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.

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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 Ritter says, “when I heard ‘patterns, I thought about knitting patterns, developmental patterns, patterns of colonization.” 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 a “democracy of parts,” as Katz points out, though the P&D group never intended to be exploitative, “appropriation does not always hold up as a defense against appropriation.”

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into fusion, 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 Perrow, an early adaptor of deconstructivist theory, that duality also related to Jacques Derrida’s concept of difference—the incommunicable quality of language, which always remains open to subsequent interpretation, and derives its meaning through endlessly mutating internal differences. It was just this sort of openness-endedness that Perrow found in the decorative, writing that it can “always be understood as other than, different from any base or established basis or bias. Gold and function, as paradigms of the ideal and real, are the very bases from which the decorative grows, and homage—multiple fragmentary patterns are arranged and overlaid, sometimes in an intentionally sentimental format like a heart or a fan.” These works manifest a deconstructivist technique comparable to the one Perrow pursued in his writings, for example, in supplemental, secondary, or peripheral to the “real” or deeper meaning of a work. 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 Perrow’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 unbridled amateur makers, and also forcing the question of her own status, and by implication of any professional artist, into the open. Who, she implicitly asked, gets to decide whether an artwork is serious or not?

It is this last idea that constitutes the Pattern and Decoration movement’s most endearing challenge.


Zakachnik and Kozloff were once asked at a College Art Association conference to clarify their thoughts about their work. Were they saying their work was any different from wallpaper? They replied. “We’re not. Wallpaper is better!”

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 “different” condition, gaining much of its meaning through adjacencies and affinities.

GLENNA ADAMSON is a critic and art historian based in New York.
