
UNSPECIFIED

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six artists inspired by moda’s collections
excluded from the fine art canon to the extent that the ultimate insult to an artist was to compare his or her work to the lowest forms of domestic decoration: thus (in 1920) the critic Ludwig Gom wrote of Paul Klee's work 'To me the paintings are only coloured carpets'; forty years later Harold Rosenberg accused Jackson Pollock of being in danger of producing 'apocalyptic wallpaper' if he continued with his method of dripping paint across ever larger canvases. But the recuperation of the decorative and domestic, begun in the 1960s and 70s with Pop and feminism, has produced a situation in which pattern, fabrics and thread are no longer marginal but mainstream. Building on this legacy of earlier efforts to rehabilitate despised materials and marginalised practices, the works in PURL successfully evade pejorative definitions and expose as arbitrary and artificial the boundaries between high and low, art and craft, hand-made and hi-tech, masculine and feminine, as well as those between painting, drawing, weaving and stitching.

A common thread linking the work of these otherwise very individual artists is an interest in exploring the process of making; in particular, the process of making by repetition, whether it be the repeated loop in knitting, the accumulated strands in weaving the multiplying marks of cross-stitch, the re-iterated blocks of a pattern, drawing, stitching, weaving and knitting - and repetitions or representations of these processes - have a clear narrative dimension, reflected in common metaphors: we speak, for example, of 'spinning a yarn', of 'piecing together' an account of events, and of 'embroidering the truth'. Writing has much in common with needlework and weaving - the finished script or printed text runs on in rows, each dependent on the one preceding idea are pulled together, woven into a ordered sequence, and the reader follows the thread of the argument through. This analogy between stitch and language runs through PURL from Jane Langley's delicate painted 'cross-stitch' patterns, in which each mark is the equivalent of a letter or fragment of code (remembrant of early computer programming), to Michelle Charles's 'knitted' linear loops, which can be read as a cursive script, a vigorous homespun calligraphy.

For much of the 20th century, avant-garde art was uncomfortable with domesticity as subject matter and with decoration as a strategy. The domestic and the decorative were identified with tradition, convention and conformity whereas Modernism - as embodied in art and architecture - was characterised as radical, experimental, risk-taking. The decorative was set in false opposition to the functional, and ornament was deemed as decadent and 'criminal', and equated with moral debasement. Pattern and decoration have been consistently derogated, and were actively
process, notably its precision. Here she has responded to a fragment of fabric printed to imitate a tapestry weave. As an incomplete repeat it embodies that aspect of weaving that particularly appeals to her: its 'un-framed' space, and the implication that the piece can continue boundaries. This echoes Lisa Corrin's observation that when an artist chooses to use thread it is as though the canvas - the age-old symbol of all we have come to recognise as Art - has been unravelled, its weft and warp the raw matter for re-fabricating the formerly acknowledged limits of artistic activity. Artists have often chosen to use thread as a conscious challenge to the hegemony of painting, and as a rebellion against the conventionally gendered hierarchy of materials. For Addis, thread functions as pigment, in a weaving the dyed threads are simultaneously the motif and the ground, the surface and the support. In her woven pieces, pattern - predictable and ordered - is disrupted by computer-generated rules, which are thus both systematic and arbitrary. The resulting haphazard fluctuating weave questions conventional definitions of 'pattern'.

As Sadie Plant has noted, the textile arts preceded, and prefigured, the computer age: 'Weaving was already multimedia: singing, chanting, telling stories, dancing and playing games as they work; spinners, weavers and needleworkers were literally networkers as well... the textures of a woven cloth functioned as the means of communication and information storage long before anything was written down.' Sewing, weaving and knitting continue to provide us with abundant metaphors for the ways in which we communicate, connect with others, and develop, maintain and support social and familial networks - the fabric of society. Sewing - sharing patterns, swapping fabrics, working together on the same piece - has often served as a way for women to create their own social networks, a web of connections to family, friends and community. To quote just one instance, in her novel The Age of Innocence (set in the 1870s) Edith Wharton describes how Mrs Archer and her daughter Janey would retire after dinner to the drawing room where they 'stitched at two ends of a tapestry band of flowers destined to adorn an occasional chair in the drawing room of young Mrs Newland Archer [the son's wife to be]'. Needlework can be a device of social conformity, but also the means of a subversive defiance - under the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan, some girls managed to continue their forbidden education by gathering together in sewing circles, their books hidden in baskets of dressmaking materials.

Laurie Addis, originally a painter, adopted weaving for its history and the inherent character of the process, notably its precision. Here she has responded to a fragment of fabric printed to imitate a tapestry weave. As an incomplete repeat it embodies that aspect of weaving that particularly appeals to her: its 'un-framed' space, and the implication that the piece can continue boundaries. This echoes Lisa Corrin's observation that when an artist chooses to use thread it is as though the canvas - the age-old symbol of all we have come to recognise as Art - has been unravelled, its weft and warp the raw matter for re-fabricating the formerly acknowledged limits of artistic activity. Artists have often chosen to use thread as a conscious challenge to the hegemony of painting, and as a rebellion against the conventionally gendered hierarchy of materials. For Addis, thread functions as pigment, in a weaving the dyed threads are simultaneously the motif and the ground, the surface and the support. In her woven pieces, pattern - predictable and ordered - is disrupted by computer-generated rules, which are thus both systematic and arbitrary. The resulting haphazard fluctuating weave questions conventional definitions of 'pattern'.

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A fascination with pattern emerges as another unifying theme in this exhibition. Jennifer Wright's works explore optical illusions and the ways in which pattern mutates through different media - children's plastic 'hama' beads, needlepoint, and a digitally printed fabric with the same pattern - so that bead equals stitch equals pixel (or at least its visual equivalent), and the mass-produced motifs into the hand-made and the hand-made is in turn translated by computer into a representation at one remove, of the stitch and bead. The digital version may then become a template for remaking the pattern with beads or thread. The pattern is seen to be evolving but it is also disrupted at the point of transition from one medium to the next; in the process of re-making it fragments, loses coherence. The relationship between the different media is coloured by the relative values attributed to the hand-made and the machine-made, and to 'industrial' units, such as the bead, set against hand-crafted stitches. Wright's pamaking work of making and translating her pattern from one medium to another speaks eloquently of the essential bedazzlement, the mindless repetition, that characterises much women's work, and especially needlework. Each bead, stitch and digital image contributes to a cumulative execution of routine - calling to mind Millet's painting of 'Pennyroyal's Mariana stretching her aching back as she stands up from her embroidery: the work which embodies her experience of the slow passage of time, and her repeated refrain 'I am aweary...' The choice of the 'hama' beads, with their garish luminous colours, reads as an assertion, a demand to be noticed - rather than blend harmoniously into a background of muted self-denial, this woman's work
Perkins Gilman's famous novel describes this wallpaper as the antithesis of those patterns constructed according to logical laws or principles which can be summarised as 'radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry'. And as the design reformers of the 19th century recognised, pattern, however logically formulated, can also be deceitful, acting as a disguise or an illusion. It can be disorienting, and repetition can itself transmute a motif. Kathleen Mullani takes elements of a pattern, and through transcription and repetition transforms them in sometimes unexpected ways, disrupting their identity and legibility. In Imprint-Rosefoxglove she has explored floral repeat textile patterns. She investigates the effects of 'migration' on a motif as it is translated from detailed hand-made pencil drawings, via the computer, into small-scale digital print; this may in turn be scaled for painting. She has used carbon paper, with its distinctive blue colour, to establish the drawing through tracings and imprints. Her methods of overlaying and distorting the imagery give the drawings a texture which mimics the folds and weaves of cloth. The colour, and the sense of flux within and between each repeat, suggest the shimmering fluidity of silk and satin; the artist herself has referred to the mutable liquid quality of pattern and to the way in which the reconfiguration of the source material produces unforeseen effects so that 'Pattern cascades and falls down the page, clusters form and fade. Patterns emerge and disappear.'

Pattern has often emerged in painting, only to be outlawed as an inadmissible 'other'. In PURL that most insistent yet self-effacing principle of modernist painting – has been stretched, teased out, tied up and unwieldy, interrupted and elaborated. Exhibiting its rich and subtle eloquence, pattern has been convincingly rehabilitated, and we find art and craft reconciled, their old quarrel patched up.

Gill Saunders January 2004

1 Adolf Loos, Ornament und Verbrechen, 1908, published in English as Ornament and Crime, Selected Essays, California, 1998, pp.167-75
2 Quoted by Alan Powers in review of Markus Brüderlin, Ornament and Abstraction, Yale, 2002 in Crafts, no.177, July/August 2002, p.58
8 Sir John Everett Millais, Mariana, 1851, Tate Britain
10 In a statement about Imprint-Rosefoxglove prepared by the artist for the author, 2003
LAURIE ADDIS  wall 27232, rule 150. 2004 Linen. 243.8 x 137.2cm (detail)

MICHELLE CHARLES  Large Knitting I. 2003 Oil on paper. 101.6 x 127cm
JENNIFER WRIGHT 5. Count. 2006. Digital print and thread on cotton. 118cm x 174cm (detail)

JANE LANGLEY Autumn Fall. 2003. Oil and silverpoint on panel. 100cm diameter
MICHELLE GRABNER Untitled. 2004. Flashe on paper. 20.3 x 20.3cm

KATHLEEN MULLANIFF Imprint-Rosefoglove. 2004, digital template (detail)
Curators
Lesley Hoskins, Jane Langley, Kathleen Mullaniff

Graphics
Bluemove Communications

Photography
Paul Boocock (cover)
Martin Ball (Laurie Addis)
F.K. P. (Jane Langley)
Tom Van Eynde (Michelle Grabner)

Galleries
Michelle Charles’ work courtesy of Anthony Grant, Inc., NYC
Michelle Grabner’s work courtesy of Rocket Gallery, London.

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