

HYPERALLERGIC

Revisiting the Joy of Pattern and Decoration

The Pattern and Decoration movement was a hard-charging assault on traditions both ancient and oppressive. It was also an explosion of joyously liberated impulses.

By Carter Ratcliff

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L O C K S G A L L E R Y



Installation view of *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985*, June 26–November 28, 2021, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (all photos by Olympia Shannon)

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, New York — Some works of art are conducive to concise summary. A painting by Morris Louis can be described as an abstraction filled with space of the kind Clement Greenberg called “purely optical.” Though Greenberg never gave that sort of purity a persuasive definition, his succinct accounts of work by Louis and other color field painters ushered them into their lofty places in the modernist canon. Those who tended that canon prized his concision as much as the notion that readily definable developments could be arranged in simple, seemingly inevitable sequences. Neatness counted and nothing was neater, more orderly, than art history understood as the ascent of each visual medium to its respective essence — “opticality,” in the case of painting.

Parallel to Greenberg’s modernist canon ran another in support of Minimalism. After rising to the apogee of their power, in the 1960s, these canons splintered into a series



of ad hoc variations cobbled together in support of whatever was hot for half a decade or just a season. We have for years been living in an era of slapdash canons, each one soliciting our approval with eager assurances and dubious premises. So it is bracing to recall that half a century ago an exuberant group of American artists rejected the very idea of a canon and all the assumptions that prop it up. They quickly acquired a label: Pattern and Decoration, an unusually accurate moniker, for these artists assembled their works from decorative patterns found in wallpaper, fabrics, and elsewhere.



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Joyce Kozloff recycled elements of Islamic architectural ornament. Merging that source with the filigree of Celtic book illumination and the forms of Gothic architecture, Valerie Jaudon brought Pattern and Decoration to the verge of austerity. Most of the work gathered under this large tent is lush, sensuous, and, to eyes obedient to the old canonical proprieties promulgated by Greenberg and the like, overloaded. From a distance, Howardina Pindell's paintings are cloudy expanses of high-keyed color. Up close, you see that their surfaces are alive with an array of small circular bits of paper, each its own color and each contributing to a field of flickering, playful energy that converts pattern into texture.

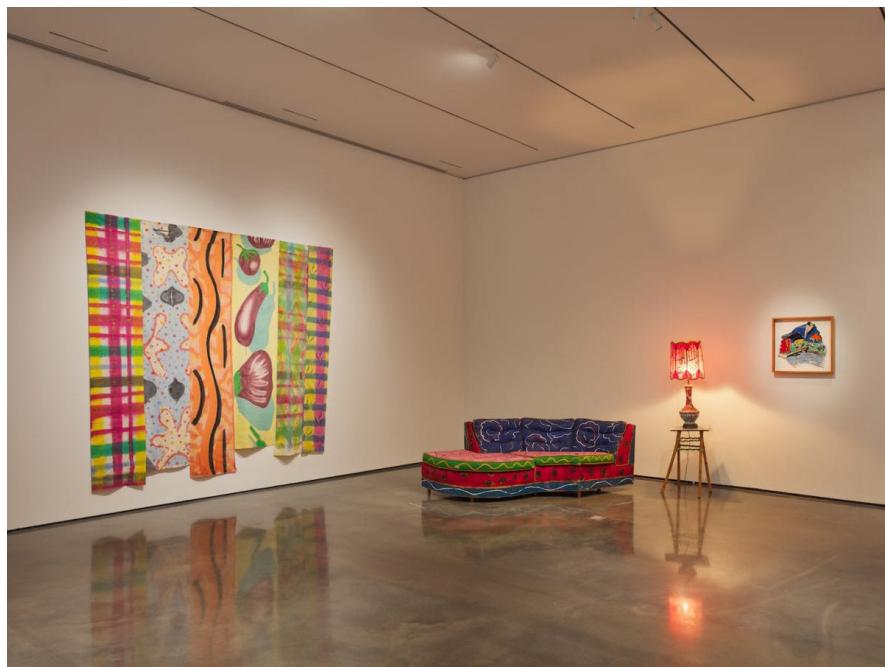
These three artists do not share a style with each other or with any of the 42 artists included in *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985*, an exhibition currently on view at the Hessel Museum of Art at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. What they have in common is their refusal to respect the orthodoxies that shaped canons and regulated taste in the 1960s and on into the '70s — orthodoxies that, in rickety form, are still with us.

The orthodoxy on which all the others rest is the belief that an unbreachable barrier separates high, “serious” art from merely decorative imagery. Its implications are that “serious” art is male, decorative work is female, and thus of far less value. This ancient artifact of Western culture was anathema to Kozloff and Jaudon, who were politically active feminists, as were other practitioners of Pattern and Decoration, including Pat



Lasch, Jane Kaufman, and Miriam Schapiro, coiner of the word *femmage* — a combination of “female” and “collage.”

P&D was a hard-charging assault on traditions both ancient and oppressive. It was also an explosion of joyously liberated impulses. Schapiro was not afraid to arrange splashy, floral images in big, heart-shaped wall pieces overflowing with sentimentality. Kim McConnell, a male member of the group, felt no need to suppress his penchant for flagrant whimsy, nor did Cynthia Carlson fear that she might be accused of designing wallpaper. In fact, she did cover gallery walls with patterns that featured repetitive, brilliantly squiggling motifs, some in high relief. The Bard exhibition presents a recreation of an early Carlson installation, as well as a room filled with McConnell’s light-as-air wall hangings and vivaciously painted furniture.



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With Pleasure was organized by Anna Katz, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, where the exhibition opened in October 2019. It opened at the Hessel Museum in June of this year, when the COVID-19 pandemic had abated, at least in New York State. Among Pattern and Decoration’s early supporters were Amy Goldin, John Perreault, and other New York critics familiar with — and, in many cases, friends of — artists working in that city. Katz’s familiarity with the Los Angeles scene produced a P&D show that includes figures from the West as well as the East Coast. From this expansiveness emerges a contrast: the New Yorkers tend to juxtapose patterns with disparate color schemes (shades of Matisse), whereas Constance Mallinson, Neda Al-Hilali, and other Californians cover their surfaces with a single pattern. The work of these artists provides the movement’s contributions to the history of the allover image, though Robert Zakanitch provides a major exception.

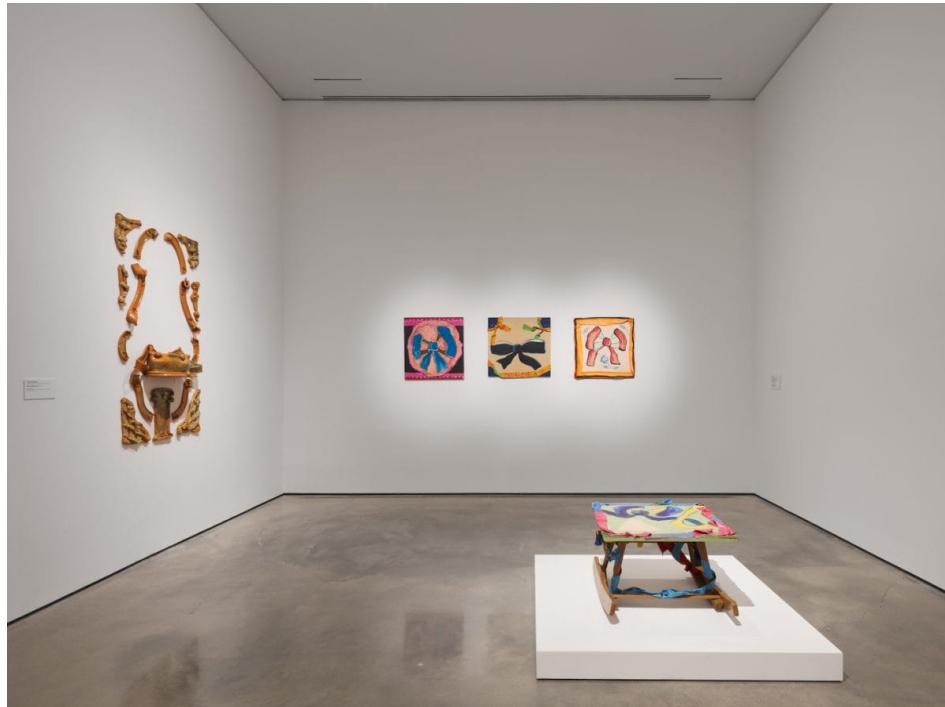
A New Yorker with a flair for the painterly gesture, à la Willem de Kooning, for decades Zakanitch (now 86) has produced wall-sized paintings we could see as no less infinite, potentially, than Jackson Pollock’s dripped canvases. Yet there is a distinction to be drawn. Pollock sought transcendence. Zakanitch is animated by recollections of the embroidery and



stenciled surfaces that embellished the interior of his grandparents' house. The grand scale of his paintings evokes the intensity of remembered feelings, not the wide-open spaces of the sublime. Pattern and Decoration owes an immense debt to family traditions fostered by the domestic settings that provide so much of its imagery. To merge the motifs of Tibetan thangkas with those of African Kuba-cloth, Faith Ringgold enlisted her mother's quilting expertise.

By including Ringgold, an artist not usually linked to Pattern and Decoration, Katz suggests that the movement has no firm boundaries, hence there is no point in trying to establish a P&D canon — and good reason to dismiss the canon-making project entirely. Canons have long been and still are mechanism of exclusion, hierarchies that privilege carefully constructed mainstreams over supposed margins, men over women, white artists over artists of color, Western over non-Western traditions — and, as we've seen, "serious" form over the decorative.

Among Katz's more inspired inclusions is Al Loving, who made his mark as a severely geometric painter. Feeling toward the end of the 1960s that his art had grown too self-referential, he began piecing together scraps of fabric in wall hangings that allude to curtains, clothes, and his grandmother's quilts. In these works, the decorative has a lived-in feel. It feels carnivalesque in Frank Stella's "Khar-Pidda" (1978), a large wall construction from his *Indian Birds* series. Here, curving metal forms bear zigzag streaks of hot color overlaid, in their turn, with thick sprinklings of glitter. Stella did not of course belong to the original band of P&D



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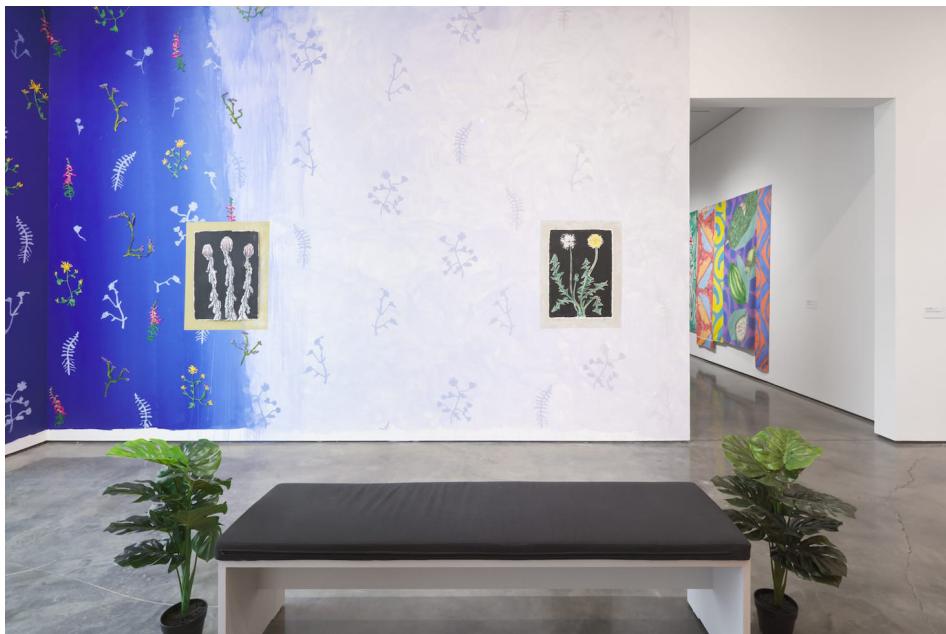
artists. He was, however, included in several Pattern and Decoration surveys organized toward the end of the '70s, as was the perennially canon-defying Lucas Samaras, represented in this show by a large fabric piece one could see as a crazy quilt, a sardonic comment on the high art of abstract painting, or both at once.



With Pleasure's biggest surprise is "Accordia" (1982), a tall polychrome sculpture by Nancy Graves, who is usually assigned a tentative place in the lineage of American monument makers founded by David Smith. Cast from corrugated cardboard, five Japanese fans, something very like a giant petunia, and other, less identifiable objects, "Accordia" poses, gestures, and eludes every attempt to sum it up and tuck it away in a stylistic compartment. Thus it looks entirely at ease amid the constant border crossings of Pattern and Decoration.

As they embraced the decorative, the ornamental, and even the cosmetic, the artists in this exhibition did not simply dismantle art-world hierarchies. Rooted in exasperation, their art flowered into an affirmation with the power to blur the borders that separate the aesthetic from everything else. Throughout, *With Pleasure* shows art spilling over, into life. Life is lived in the present and the work in this show has a vitality as fresh now as it was five decades ago.

With precision and generosity, Katz curated a brilliant exhibition — and a large one containing many notable artists I don't have the space to mention. It is unlikely that there will be a P&D show as impressive as this one anytime soon and that is reason to be thankful for the catalogue. Beautifully produced, it is anchored by Katz's survey, an exemplary piece of art-historical writing amplified by half a dozen essays on topics ranging from pertinent developments in interior decoration to the politics of Miriam Schapiro. In addition, there are reprints of early writings by the artists Joyce Kozloff and Susan Michod and two critics, Amy Goldin and John Perreault. These days, exhibition catalogues generally meet a high standard. Even so, this one is outstanding, an indispensable contribution to our understanding of art and its possibilities.



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