



# LESSONS IN PROMISCUITY:

## PATTERNING AND THE NEW DECORATIVENESS IN ART OF THE 1970s AND 1980s

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Robert Zakanitch  
*Dragon Fire*, 1983



In 1975 in New York a group of artists gathered in the Warren Street loft of Robert Zakanitch to discuss a shared tendency that had emerged in their work in the preceding several years. Joyce Kozloff in her colorful paintings was combining patterns gleaned from architectural ornamentation, pottery, and textiles observed in Mexico, Morocco, Turkey, and Spain (fig. 1); Tony Robbin was using a modified spray gun and patterned stencils to create spatially complex grids in lyric colors (pp. 122–25); Zakanitch was making paintings of massive, luscious blossoms in repeated patterns that evoked wallpaper and linoleum rugs (fig. 2); and Miriam Schapiro was collaging found bits of lace and other domestic fabrics associated with women’s lives in boisterous compositions (fig. 3). Joining them was Amy Goldin, an art critic with a strong interest in Islamic art, who had identified an “oddly persistent interest in pattern” in the 1975 Whitney Biennial.<sup>1</sup>

It is tempting to imagine that they gathered in secret, huddling together to confess their shared trespass, their violation of one of the strongest prohibitions of modern art: the decorative. But in truth their art was exuberant, and so were they, giddy with the thrill of destabilizing entrenched hierarchies, and the possibilities that unleashed. They identified other artists who were drawing motifs, color schemes, and materials from the decorative arts—artists who were freely appropriating floral, arabesque, and patchwork patterns, and arranging them in intricate, almost dizzying, and sometimes purposefully gaudy designs—artists whose work pointedly referred to a pluralistic array of sources, from embroidery to Persian carpets, Japanese kimono designs, and American quilting traditions—and welcomed them into the fold, holding subsequent meetings with a motley roster of participants: Scott Burton, Cynthia Carlson, Lenore Goldberg, Rosalind Hodgkins, Valerie Jaudon, Jane Kaufman, Robert Kushner, Kim MacConnel, Kendall Shaw, Nina Yankowitz, Mario Yrisarry, and Barbara Zucker, among others. They chaired Artists Talk on Art panels in SoHo with topics such as “Is Painting One of the Decorative Arts?” And in 1976 Kaufman organized *Ten Approaches to the Decorative* at Alessandra Gallery in downtown New York, the first group show of the artists whose movement would be variously known as “pattern painting” or “the new decorativeness” before Pattern and Decoration, or P&D as it is commonly known, took hold.<sup>2</sup>

Almost without exception, then as now, every account of P&D defines the movement by what it was not. Its emergence is routinely positioned against what was felt as the nearly tyrannical hegemony of the modernist protocols of purity, reduction, and self-reflexivity,



**Fig. 1, top:** Joyce Kozloff, *tent-roof-floor-carpet*, 1975. Acrylic on canvas, 80 × 96 in. (203.2 × 243.84 cm). Collection of David and Eileen Peretz  
**Fig. 2, left:** Robert Zakanitch, *Cotton Seed*, 1975. Acrylic on canvas, 84 × 102 in. (213.36 × 259.08 cm)  
**Fig. 3, right:** Miriam Schapiro, *Flying Carpet*, 1972. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 60 × 50 in. (152.4 × 127 cm)

<sup>1</sup> Amy Goldin, “The ‘New’ Whitney Biennial: Pattern Emerging?,” *Art in America*, May/June 1975, 72–73.

<sup>2</sup> For a timeline of the major events and milestones of the Pattern and Decoration movement, see Anne Swartz, “A Chronology of Pattern and Decoration,” in *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975–1985*, exh. cat., ed. Anne Swartz (Yonkers, NY: Hudson River Museum, 2007), 113–19.



3 Several critics assessed that P&D constituted one of two new emergent movements in the mid- and late 1970s signaling a change in taste and value, the other being New Image painting. See Janet Kardon, *The Decorative Impulse*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1979), 3; Sam Hunter, introduction, in *New Image / Pattern & Decoration from the Morton G. Neumann Family Collection* (Kalamazoo, MI: Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, 1983); and Carrie Rickey, “Decoration, Ornament, Pattern, and Utility: Four Tendencies in Search of a Movement,” *Flash Art*, June/July 1979, 20.

4 John Perreault, “Issues in Pattern Painting,” *Artforum*, November 1977, 33.

5 John Perreault, *Persistent Patterns*, exh. broch. (New York: Andre Zarre Gallery, 1979), n.p. The brochure was published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized by and presented at Andre Zarre Gallery, New York, January 30–March 3, 1979.

6 John Perreault, “Room with a Coup,” *SoHo Weekly News* (New York), September 13, 1979, 47.

of which the cool gray slabs of Minimalist painting and sculpture seemed to be the apogee.<sup>3</sup> “Pattern painting is non-Minimalist, non-sexist, historically conscious, sensuous, romantic, rational, decorative.” So begins “Issues in Pattern Painting,” an essay published in *Artforum* in 1977 by *SoHo News* senior art critic and curator John Perreault to coincide with the opening of his twenty-six-artist exhibition at New York’s P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center; *Pattern Painting* was the first museum exhibition of the movement, and remarkably, seventeen of the artists featured were women. With the show, Perreault heralded the arrival of P&D, crediting it with returning vitality and vigor to art after a long period of sensual starvation inaugurated by modernism, apotheosized by Minimalism, and further sustained by Conceptual art: “Naked surfaces are being filled in; lifeless redundancy is being replaced by lively fields that engage the eye as well as the mind.” Even better, with P&D, content was returning—“content beyond self-reference and the immediate art context.”<sup>4</sup> In 1979, in an essay for the brochure accompanying the Andre Zarre Gallery group show *Persistent Patterns*, an exasperated Perreault would ask, “Do we really need one more monochromatic, non-inflected surface?”<sup>5</sup> And in a review of Joyce Kozloff’s 1979 installation *An Interior Decorated* at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, he repeated his plea, and again looked to P&D as a beacon: “We need more than silent cubes, blank canvasses, and gleaming white walls . . . interiors that are more like empty meat lockers than rooms to live in. Pattern Painting and Decorative Art may be coming to the rescue.”<sup>6</sup>

There are, however, two central problems with defining P&D as anti-Minimalist, aside from the fact that Pattern and Decoration often shared Minimalism’s architectural scale; emphasis on repetition and nonhierarchical composition through deployment of the grid; and resistance to the gestural, expressive mark. First, the values P&D uproariously challenged were not only recent values, or even exclusively aesthetic ones. What was on the table—the chopping block, as it turned out—were the very systems of valuation that had dominated Western art history for centuries, and the primary focus was the hierarchy of fine arts above decorative arts, the cognates of the latter being ornament, craft, decoration, applied arts, and sometimes folk art. P&D unsettled and troubled the coding by the academy, the discipline of art history, the museum, and the market of the wide range of arts historically associated with women’s traditional activities in the home and non-Western cultures as decorative and thus secondary, or worse.

7 The terminology of inclusion and exclusion, also presented in Hamza Walker’s essay in this volume, was articulated at the moment of P&D. See Carrie Rickey, “Why Women Don’t Express Themselves,” *Village Voice*, November 2, 1982, 79–80; and John Perreault, *Patterning Painting*, exh. cat. (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1979), n.p.

8 See Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Claiming Space: Some American Feminist Originators*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: American University Museum, 2007), 44.

Second, P&D is as much an art of opposition as it is one of affirmation, structured by positive, celebratory relationships to its sources and aesthetics and to the plenitude of the visual world. Pattern and Decoration is an abstract art, but it is emphatically not self-referential. P&D artists saw themselves as opening their art up and out, letting the world in by way of the decorative. Their work refers to architectural ornamentation, jewelry, fabric design, stained glass, miniatures and manuscripts, embroidery and other “minor” arts associated with women’s work, textiles, and mosaics, and revels in the sheens, glazes, knits and knots, and patterns of the decorative arts. P&D understood modernism as a puritanical art of exclusion—of progressively stripping away or excluding forms and materials deemed extraneous—and sought to create an art based on both aesthetic and political principles of inclusion.<sup>7</sup>

As just one example, Howardena Pindell—inspired by African textiles she saw in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1972 *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* show (a touchstone for many P&D artists), and by a 1973 trip through East and West Africa, where she encountered kente cloth in Ghana and free-form textiles in Nigeria—took the canvas off the stretcher.<sup>8</sup> She sewed together strips and grids of canvas, only to cover them with paint that functions as a receptor, an adhesive for paper chads, glitter, thread, talcum powder, and perfume, verboten materials considered too kitschy, crafty, and girly—too “extra” (pp. 90–93). The unofficial P&D battle cry was “More is more,” and Pindell’s work demonstrates an aesthetic inclusivity—of notably decorative materials and references to textile traditions deemed inferior to fine art in the Western tradition—that was nothing less than a gesture of political necessity.

While critical, P&D is not cynical, and the gestures P&D makes are those of love and embrace. The artists sincerely deployed their pheasant feathers and glitter and whimsy and bows, their polyester-weave fabric borders glued to the surface of the canvas in luscious, intense superimpositions and juxtapositions of dense, rich patterns, and they invited the viewer to take equal pleasure in them. This point

9 Eva Hesse, quoted in Katy Siegel, *High Times Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*, exh. cat. (New York: D.A.P./Independent Curators International, 2006), 117. Valerie Jaudon commented about her decision to approach the decorative differently than Hesse: “She had forbidden the word ‘decorative’ be used with her work. And I imagine that was why she was using all this disgusting material, so that no one could call her work decorative. Believe me, they never called it decorative—that slimy, polyester, rubber stuff. I saw her response to the decorative, of having to deny something so heavily, and I didn’t want to do that. Then I thought, well, let’s just admit it, don’t be afraid of the pretty, or anything else for that matter, don’t be afraid of being classified as something. You have to simply go with it. At a certain point, I remember thinking, I’m going to make the most beautiful painting that I can possibly make.” Valerie Jaudon, interview by Shirley Kaneda, *BOMB*, Winter 1992, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/valerie-jaudon/>. According to Jaudon, Joyce Kozloff encouraged her to accept the term: “We actually hated the word, but then Joyce said, ‘God we might as well admit it and say it.’” Jaudon, quoted in Sam Hunter, *Valerie Jaudon*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Amerika Haus, 1983), n.p. Robert Kushner reflected, “Art that led out of the ‘art box,’ away from a cold minimalism, was essential as a reflection of our desire to create a rich, complex, and encompassing art. We were even willing to accept that taboo word—decoration. Earlier, to say that a work was ‘decorative’ signified a trivial intention. We all took on that burden and declared that the decorative was the only way to fully describe the kinds of sources we were looking at and incorporating into our art.” Kozloff and Kushner, “Pattern, Decoration, and Robbin,” in *Tony Robbin: A Retrospective, Paintings and Drawings 1970–2010* (Orlando, FL: Orlando Museum of Art; Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2011), 2.

10 Jeff Perrone, review of *The Decorative Impulse*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Philadelphia, *Artforum*, November 1979, 81.

has to be labored, largely because “decorative” was, and overwhelmingly still is, one of the worst accusations to hurl at an artist—a dirty word, a profanity, the “only art sin,” as Eva Hesse once said.<sup>9</sup> Above all, “decorative” is wielded to diminish. Therein lay perhaps the greatest of the risks that P&D artists ran: the risk that their adversaries would not bridle at their provocations, their challenges to good taste and other modernist orthodoxies, but rather would claim that P&D was “too nice, too digestible, too easy to like and look at.”<sup>10</sup> And in many instances, this bore out; P&D was frequently dismissed without even the description “mere,” for throughout the twentieth century, to say “decorative” was to imply “merely decorative.”

To be sure, P&D had its detractors, but the movement was recognized in dozens of museum exhibitions, at institutions ranging from the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (figs. 4–6), to the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels; Galerie d’Art Contemporain des Musées de Nice, France; Institute of Contemporary Art, Richmond, Virginia; SculptureCenter, New York; Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, Texas; and Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, to name just a few. In New York, the group clustered around Holly Solomon Gallery, the women’s cooperative Artists in Residence (A.I.R.) Gallery, and the editorial board of the journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. Southern California P&D centers included the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Valencia (present-day Santa Clarita); the Department of Visual Arts at the University of California, San Diego; and the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles. The movement’s critical and curatorial advocates included April Kingsley, Jeff Perrone, Perreault, Carter Ratcliff, and Carrie Rickey.

Among the most remarkable characteristics of P&D is its total sincerity—it is a postmodernist art of appropriation with no distance from or suspicion of the sources it cites. Though P&D was commercially and critically received in the US and Europe, by the early 1980s



**Figs. 4–6:** Installation views of *The Decorative Impulse*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, June 13–July 21, 1979

it had been eclipsed commercially by Neo-Expressionism and steam-rolled critically by a postmodernism mandating irony. It is safe to say that by the mid-1980s Pattern and Decoration had fallen by the wayside of art history: it appears in only a few survey texts, including Corinne Robins’s *The Pluralist Era* (1984), Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard’s *The Power of Feminist Art* (1996), and Irving Sandler’s *Art of the Postmodern Era* (1996), but no major textbooks; additionally, the work is very seldom exhibited in permanent-collection displays, and until recently had not been given a full-dress museum exhibition.

The preponderance of decorative sensibilities and craft-based practices in contemporary art, of which the meteoric rise of ceramics in recent years is emblematic, points to an influential legacy, one that is ripe for reconsideration. But more urgent are the challenges issued by P&D to hierarchies, hegemonies, and binaries of which the secondary status of the decorative still remains a cipher in some quarters. In 1979 curator Harald Szeemann wrote of Pattern and Decoration that “a new audience indeed needs to be won for art, and likewise a new species of artist, one that regards its work as an homage to those legions of anonymous craftspeople who have created ornaments over the centuries, or as a contribution to women’s liberation—and hence as a gift to the present day.”<sup>11</sup> His rallying call strikes me as being as compelling and necessary today as it was forty years ago. Perhaps the time has finally come to be that audience, to hear the full-throated contention advanced by pattern painters and decorative artists that so long as we dismiss the decorative—denigrating it as mere embellishment—we fail to recognize the historical creative and intellectual achievements of women artists and of non-Western artists the world over.

This exhibition and publication seek to redress this art historical omission by both reconstituting the Pattern and Decoration movement’s foundations and tracing its broad reach in postwar American art practice from the period 1972 to 1985. In doing so, *With Pleasure:*

11 Harald Szeemann, “A Selective Summary of the Contents: Decorative Art Today,” *Du*, June 1979, n.p.



*Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985* expands well beyond the established roster to consider artists whose contributions to the movement have been largely unrecognized, as well as artists who are not typically considered in the context of P&D. Indeed, it presents artists whose work of the period shares significant conceptual, political, or aesthetic territory with P&D alongside those who are widely recognized as comprising the core of the movement. In asking how and why it was plausible and meaningful for a broad range of artists to rush headlong toward that which they were taught to fear and hate, emulating decorative art sources, courting decorative effects, and approaching their work as decoration, we make visible heretofore unseen ways in which the embrace of decorative forms and patterned surfaces in the 1970s and early 1980s opened up new avenues in three major aspects of postwar American art: feminism, abstraction, and installation art.<sup>12</sup>

A WOMAN’S WORK IS NEVER DONE AND ALWAYS DONE

In addition to attending those formative “pattern meetings,” many of the artists associated with P&D were actively engaged in another kind of regular meeting: consciousness-raising groups. And art history was having its consciousness raised, too. P&D’s embrace of the decorative was in large part shaped and driven by feminism and the development of feminist art historical methods that demystified the logic and rhetoric of value assignation. There is no more paradigmatic and timely example than Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” an analysis of the contexts and systems of art by which greatness was constructed and from which women were structurally excluded.<sup>13</sup>

In brief, Western art’s distinction between fine art as conceptual knowledge and applied art as technical knowledge emerged in the early modern period; by the eighteenth century, when a distinction between artists and an artisan class had been drawn along gender lines, decorative art had begun to be associated with femininity.<sup>14</sup> So feminist P&D artists raised domestic handicrafts associated with women’s work as a matter for revision and reclamation. For example, that quilt making should not be considered an achievement equal in value to that of abstract painting was reassessed as arbitrary, and not at all random. Indeed, they viewed this as part and parcel of the marginalization and disenfranchisement of women from culture and every other sector. While P&D included a broad range of artists, many of whom were not motivated overtly by feminism, I maintain that P&D’s reappraisal of the status of the decorative must be understood in the context of the feminist art historical assessment that, to paraphrase Patricia Mainardi in her now-canonical “Quilts: The Great American Art,” the definitive institutions of American culture,

including museums, schools, and art history, were under the control of a small class of people (white males) who used their power to gerrymander the definition of art around the accomplishments of all those who are not white and male.<sup>15</sup> P&D belonged to this effort to rewrite art history, a movement whose goals have yet to be fully met.

Miriam Schapiro, who was born in 1923, making her two decades older than the vast majority of P&D artists, is the critical protagonist of this particular story. Upon her rapid feminist awakening—which saw her transform from a well-regarded Abstract Expressionist painter of the 1950s and hard-edge Minimalist painter of the 1960s, showing at New York’s André Emmerich Gallery, to cofounder, with Judy Chicago, of the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in 1971 and codirector of *Womanhouse* in 1972 (fig. 7)—Schapiro’s modus operandi was to make a public art out of her private life as a woman. Her lifelong mission became the validation of the traditional activities of women, which even she herself “had always dismissed.”<sup>16</sup> Schapiro’s commitment was less to the decorative per se than to the domestic, which she identified as the locus of women’s and thus feminist art: “I do not mean that domesticity is so great. Despite the stench of slavery and despite the need to do so many chores, women still made art. So the historical fact remains that they made art in the home and not in a studio down the road.”<sup>17</sup>

Of primary importance is her notion of *femmage*, which port-manteau combines “female” and “collage” (and “femme” and “homage”) to identify additive, assemblage-like creative activities



**Fig. 7:** Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro pictured on the cover of the exhibition catalogue for *Womanhouse* designed by Sheila de Bretteville (1972)

12 For her 2007 exhibition *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975–1985* at the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY, curator Anne Swartz identified eleven core figures of the movement: Cynthia Carlson, Brad Davis, Valerie Jaudon, Jane Kaufman, Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, Kim MacConnel, Tony Robbin, Miriam Schapiro, Ned Smyth, and Robert Zakanitch.

13 See Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *Artnews*, January 1971, 22–39, 67–71.

14 See Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

15 Patricia Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art” (1973), in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 344.

16 Miriam Schapiro, “Notes from a Conversation on Art, Feminism, and Work,” in *Working It Out: 23 Women Writers, Artists, Scientists, and Scholars Talk about Their Lives and Work*, ed. Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 296.

17 Miriam Schapiro, interview with Ruth A. Appelhof, in *Miriam Schapiro: A Retrospective, 1953–1980*, ed. Thalia Gouma-Peterson (Wooster, OH: College of Wooster, 1980), 47.