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Back and Forth: It's a Huge Rich Visual Feast Out There¹

As I have started to glean over the past months since starting my MFA studies, art history is usually explained and visualized through a timeline in which one artistic movement or style of creation is linked, by its cultural and stylistic influences along with the groupings of artists who were swayed by them, from one to the next over a period of time. But I have started to think of recent history in general (let's say the past one hundred years or so)—and this can be applied to art history as well—as more of a pendulum. One that very slowly sways back and forth, and occasionally from side to side, or even at times slightly off center. This “historical pendulum” makes its way from one extreme of the cultural, political, and stylistic belief spectrum, until over time it ends up on the opposite side, where these same belief systems seem to have morphed into something that resembles the antithesis to what came before it. And then as it starts its slow return back over to the other side, history (now tinged in a more technologically advanced light, looking slightly slicker and with better teeth) starts to repeat itself.²

¹ Part of the title to this paper was appropriated from a quote by Pattern and Decoration (P&D) artist Robert Kushner, in which he speaks about the development of the P&D movement and how its creation was partly in response to the “extremely limited dialogue” available through abstract and minimalist art, as well as the artist's desires to use the whole world for inspiration. “Enjoy it, it's a huge rich visual feast out there.” (Swartz 12)

² I began to formulate my ideas around this in 2018, with the advent of a rash of celebratory and nostalgic media and literary coverage that coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the year 1968 (also the year of my birth), and its associations with “the summer of love,” the Vietnam War, and the national unrest around civil rights that culminated in events such as the riots sparked by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and during the National Democratic Convention in Chicago. To me these themes, their imagery, and the feelings that they engendered eerily seemed to echo some of what was going on politically and culturally in the US and in Europe today.

Maybe my idea should actually be rebranded as the “50 Year Historical Pendulum Theory”? After all, fifty years might be just enough time for new generations to largely forget the oppression and negative aspects of the past half century, and/or for the visual culture to become nostalgic for what was.

I will admit that this is not a very scientific theory, it's really more of a working impression of various disparate information gathered through my recent readings and personal observations. But it does seem to me that as each new generation comes of age, the popular culture and its attached belief systems, trends, and fashions, have sprouted in exact opposition to what has come before it. Maybe this is just human nature (something any parent of a contrarian teenager experiences on a daily basis), or it could be the natural evolution of our collective consciousness. At worst, it might be that over time, the new generations just start to forget what came before and how bad it might have been. At best, it is a rediscovery of something that is beautiful, and it is resurrected because it deserves to be remembered and memorialized.

The Pattern and Decoration (P&D) movement, originating in the United States and coming out of the late 1960s modern art world and on through its heyday into the 1980s, is an artistic genre that definitely helps me to argue my "historical pendulum" thesis. As described by Anne Swartz, the editor of the catalogue *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975-1985*, from an exhibition held at the Hudson River Museum in 2007:

Optimistic and progressive, it was important as a new pathway for artists facing a crisis in painting ... Artists involved in P&D used decoration, pattern, beauty, and visual pleasure as a response to the restrictive aesthetics of the contemporary art world and its market. They wanted to fill the vacuum left by minimalism and sought a way out of the rigidity of formalist and conceptualist impulses of the prior decade. (Swartz 12)

Swartz goes on to speak about the P&D movement's importance in "challeng[ing] presumptions about the definitions of art versus craft, West versus East, and inclusion versus expansion, especially as some of these issues were addressed by the feminist movement."

(Swartz 12) These aspects along with the P&D movement's use of "pattern, decoration, and ornament" (all elements closely associated with the feminine), as well as with creative pursuits that were traditionally considered to be "women's work," were in direct contrast with the American abstract expressionist and minimalism movements of the previous decades (both of which sought to create art free of anything but the materials and effort it took to make them.)³

(Gabriel 8) Indeed, Swartz categorizes P&D as "one of the last of modernism and one of the first of postmodernism." (Swartz 12)

Intriguingly, over time the P&D movement has slowly become largely forgotten from the art historical record. And while it is probably not uncommon for a certain aesthetic in artform to go out of style, I think that it is most likely very rare for a movement that was rather popular for its time both culturally and in the art market, to become virtually overlooked from a historical perspective. Sadly, the most likely reason for this, it's association with feminism, women, and all things considered to be "feminine" on the material level, is an all too common and repetitive refrain in the art world. (Swartz 33, 34) But, interestingly, while P&D was strongly associated with feminism (especially through its connection to feminist artists such as Miriam Schapiro⁴

³ Just as the P&D movement's artists faced, what Anne Swartz called a "crisis in painting" in the late 1960s and early 70s, and they did this by tackling themes of beauty and visual pleasure which were in direct opposition to those employed in the abstract and minimalist art that came before them. Two decades earlier, the American Abstract Expressionists in New York City were facing a "crisis in painting" of their own. Coming out of WWII and the trauma that that period induced, these artists were searching for a voice in their work that would express how they felt about the horrors resulting from the war. Mary Gabriel in her recently published book *Ninth Street Women*, put it this way "... they could no longer paint or sculpt the reassuring 'things'—objects, landscapes, or people—that had occupied their predecessors for centuries. To do this would be false, tantamount to nostalgia for an innocent past that had most likely never existed in the first place." (Gabriel 8) The result for these artists was abstraction.

⁴ Miriam Schapiro was a contemporary of the feminist artist Judy Chicago. She collaborated with Chicago and other women artists on the landmark feminist installation *Womanhouse* from 1971-72, which was considered to be a "milestone in the history of contemporary art." (Swartz 31) In 2018, in what amounted to a "historical reboot," the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC put on an exhibition called *Women House*. This new show was an homage to the original one, and it delved into questions around "domestic spaces" and a women's "place" in our culture, featuring the work of 36 women artists from around the world. (Information about *Women House* was taken from promotional materials about the exhibit which was held from March 9 through May 28, 2018).

and Joyce Kozloff), as well as through its link to decorative adornment and beauty (all elements reflective of the “feminine” in art), it wasn’t truly considered to be a “feminist” art movement.

This was due largely in part to the fact that many of its original practitioners were men, including artists Robert Kushner, Kim MacConnel, and Robert Zakanitch, to name just a few. (Swartz 12)

While there were unquestionably broad aesthetic themes and technical styles that defined and unified P&D (i.e., feminism, women’s work, Islamic and Asian art, pattern, craft, decoration, architecture and architectural detail, and links to Matisse’s stylistic influences,⁵ especially through his later work with paper “cutouts”), I think that one of the more interesting aspects of P&D’s emergence onto the art scene lies behind the original group’s desire for artistic “community”⁶ and its need to explore themes of beauty in their work, as it was felt to be “both necessary and restorative for our contemporary lives.” (These are issues that I too grapple with in my own work and creative practice.) It also seems that by formalizing their ranging topical interests into one unifying artistic “movement” it allowed them, at least for a time, to gain critical legitimacy around their art. I got the impression that these aspects seem to have originally been driven more aggressively by the men in the P&D scene, who were most likely used to having their ideas taken seriously, and didn’t care for what Michael Botwinick (who provided the Foreword to the catalogue for the 2007 Hudson River Museum P&D show) termed the “softly negative influences” implied upon them and their artform due to the association with the “feminine.” Now, they wanted to have their work to be taken seriously as well. And for their

⁵ Many of the P&D artists cited Matisse as an influence, and Anne Swartz wrote that “Matisse had embraced the idea of an art of ease, comfort, and delight; the P&D artists adopted a similar concept but wanted to make it valid in their age.” (Swartz 18)

⁶ In Arthur C. Danto’s essay *Pattern and Decoration as a Late Modernist Movement* (included in the *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975-1985* catalogue), he discusses the founding P&D artists Robert Zakanitch and Miriam Schapiro’s early meetings in which they discussed organizing their new way of creating into a movement. Danto quotes Schapiro saying, “If there’s a period in history when a number of artists are working in a similar way, what’s interesting is for these artists to talk to each other.” (Swartz 9)

part, the women were tired and overwhelmed “by the baggage of history and its rebuke of decoration” as well as “the pejorative association with beauty” in art. (Swartz 4-16)

Finally, in viewing the P&D movement and its aesthetics in comparison to my own work, I do see many common similarities. I also employ the use of pattern, bright colors, ornamentation, mark making, collage and details absorbed from the world around me. And I share the wish with them to “embrace the desire to have [our] art “scanned” and to have the viewer spend “a great deal of time and attention on it, not simply to glance at a surface that [has] limited activity.” (Swartz 21) I also identify with what was written about the artist Cynthia Carlson, who’s approach was described as “one of enticing the viewer, urged on by her increasing awareness of feminism and her interest in making paint more tactile and dense.” Although, I would say that our visual styles are very different, with her approach relying much more on “geometric abstraction” and adhering to a traditional grid like pattern, and mine being more organic in “surface animation.” (Swartz 58-60) I suppose you could say that I too partake in that “huge, rich visual feast” of information and inspiration that is out there in the world.

As for history, both art-wise and in general, from this standpoint if you can expand your perspective outwards, I think that it is possible to begin to see some of the broader themes⁷ encapsulated in the P&D artistic movement, and their political implications come into sharper view. After all, P&D was born from the turbulent political and cultural wars of the late 1960s and 1970s, and these cultural themes and political ideals were themselves push back born in response to previous generations (artists included) who were influenced by the Depression, war, and the morally restrictive atmosphere of the decades they were living through. From there it is

⁷ In the foreword to the catalogue *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975-1985*, Michael Botwinick characterizes some of these broad themes as “identity, gender, power, authority and authenticity.”

not such a far leap until you start to see similarities to what is happening in our world today.⁸ Are you beginning to see the pendulous *back and forth* pattern yet?

Works Cited:

Gabriel, Mary. *Ninth Street Women, Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art*. Little Brown and Company, 2018.

Swartz, Anne. *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975-1985*, contributions by Temma Balducci, Arthur C. Danto, and John Perreault, Hudson River Museum 2007.

⁸ To parallel the issues from the late 60s and 70s that are listed above, I will characterize today's broader political and cultural themes as "#MeToo, the Black Lives Matter movement, the rise in hate crimes, nationalism, and social media obsession and the polarization and isolation that it creates."