PATTERN RECOGNITION

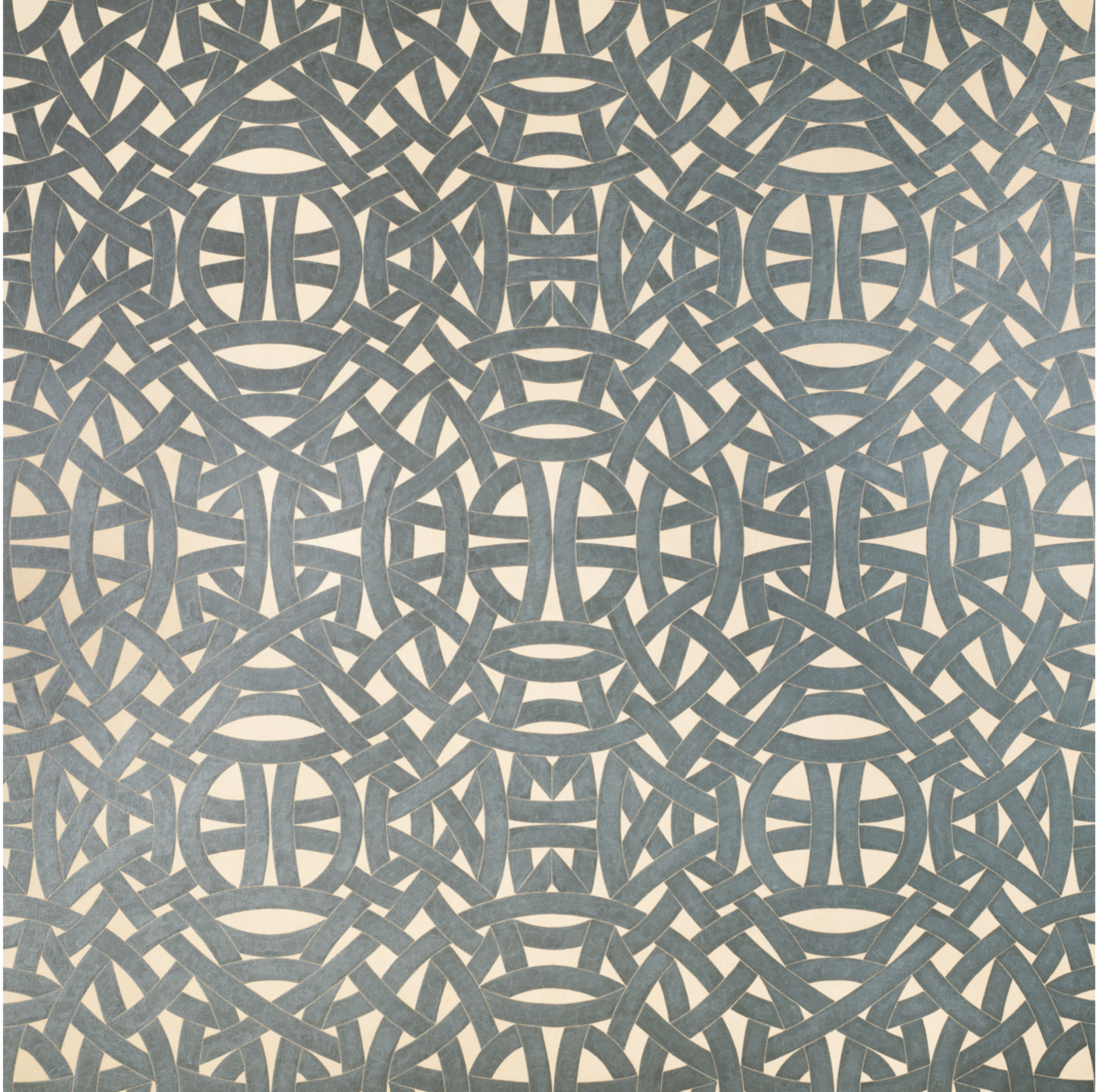
Lynne Cooke on the Pattern and Decoration movement

By Lynne Cooke

Joyce Kozloff installing *Homage to Frank Furness*, 1984, at the Amtrak train station, Wilmington, DE, 1984.

IN AN APPRECIATIVE 2016 REVIEW of new work by Valerie Jaudon, critic David Frankel noted that the Pattern and Decoration movement, of which Jaudon was a prominent member, had long been held in disrepute. "In the

early ’80s,” Frankel wrote, “I remember a colleague at *Artforum* at the time saying it could never be taken seriously in the magazine.”[1] In retrospect, what makes this dismissal so striking is that, in the mid-’70s, *Artforum* contributed significantly to P&D’s emergence into the spotlight, publishing key texts by its advocates along with numerous reviews of its shows. Amy Goldin’s “Patterns, Grids, and Painting” (1975) and Jeff Perrone’s “Approaching the Decorative” (1976) were among the early touchstones for P&D’s heterogeneous cohort, riled by the unmitigated critical support for diverse ascetic and masculinist tendencies pervasive in the painting of the moment. However, by the mid-’80s, eclipsed by newer developments—the Pictures generation, neo-geo, et al.—P&D was increasingly coming under fire for positions now considered controversial: for the purported essentialism of its versions of second-wave feminism, for a naive advocacy that masked acts of Orientalizing and primitivizing, for cultural imperialism. More fundamental “problems” largely went unnoted, including a lack of the kind of conceptual depth expected of cutting-edge practices: In their commitment to the decorative, P&D artists prioritized surface over subject matter, the former serving primarily as a vehicle for sensuous effects. Not least, the art world’s entrenched sexism fostered the occasion for its denizens to belittle and sideline a movement renowned for the dominant role played by women in its genesis and trajectory.



Valerie Jaudon, *Bellefontaine*, 1976, metallic pigment and oil on canvas, 72 × 72″. © Valerie Jaudon/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

Until recently, the disparaging assessment offered by Frankel's colleague largely prevailed. Consider the Fondation Beyeler's ambitious exhibition "Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art," which opened in June 2001 to coincide with that year's edition of the prestigious Art Basel fair. The sprawling survey ranged from Gauguin to Mondrian to then-new art stars such as Peter Kogler. Surprisingly,

given its subject, the show included no works by artists associated with the P&D movement.[2]

The sea change began in 2018 with the opening of the first of four major P&D-centered shows that would tour in Europe and the United States over the next three years. Each exhibition shone a different light on the last of the strategically organized art movements of the twentieth century, yet common to all was a significant representation of women. The first of the quartet, “Pattern and Decoration: Ornament as Promise,” debuted at the Ludwig Forum in Aachen, Germany, and was drawn from the holdings of the Peter and Irene Ludwig Foundation, whose namesakes avidly collected this work on visits to New York in the late ’70s. In the version of the show installed at Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, curator Manuela Ammer homed in on thirteen artists, most of whom were cornerstones of P&D’s extensive, loose, and shifting cohort, their works running the gamut from painting, sculpture, ceramic tiles, and multimedia installation to performance and video. “Pattern, Decoration & Crime,” which originated at the Musée d’Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva, featured twenty-eight artists, including several Continentals—Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Simon Hantaï, and Claude Viallat—whom the organizers felt shared “formal concerns” with their American peers. In their titles, both exhibitions reference Adolf Loos’s seminal and infamously misogynist and colonialist polemic “Ornament and Crime,” published in Vienna in 1908. While Loos and Ammer agree that ornament is superficial—or, to use the former’s term, “degenerate”—Ammer assigns a positive value to the queer and feminist identities that found such propitious conditions in ornament’s decorative excess and gendered coding.

View of “Pattern and Decoration: Ornament as Promise,” 2019, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna. Foreground: Tina Girouard, *Air Space Stage I, II*, 1972/2019. Photo: Stephan Wyckoff.

Curiously missing from the two American shows was a willingness to think outside heteronormative categories and binary gender relations. Focus on feminist positions came at the expense of ways in which certain of these works may be read as queered. Similarly, the workings of the masculinist privilege that ascribes riskiness to male artists’ engagement with decoration while demeaning that of their female counterparts go unexplored.

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Rambunctious and opulent, “Less Is a Bore: Maximalist Art and Design,” at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, embraced not only ’70s designers and

artists—notably, Lucinda Childs, Nathalie du Pasquier, Sol LeWitt, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, and Ettore Sottsass, all contemporaries of the original P&D coterie—but expanded their roster to include subsequent generations. Fleshing out curator Jenelle Porter's capacious vision of "maximalism" were works by a miscellany of those whom she viewed as its current exponents, Polly Apfelbaum, Tord Boontje, Leigh Bowery and Fergus Greer, and Haegue Yang among them. In total, some forty-four divergent players assumed walk-on parts in a dense, upbeat, high-voltage installation.

Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, *Grandmother*, 1983, pigment on cotton sateen, dimensions variable.

By contrast, "With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985"—which originated in 2019 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, before traveling to the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York—focused on the movement's prime years

while extending the time frame back to 1972. Thus the organizers emphasized California progenitors such as *Womanhouse*, staged at CalArts, where Miriam Schapiro was then teaching along with Judy Chicago. That fall, Goldin, who would become the movement's most committed supporter and apologist, began a New York–Harvard commute to attend classes on Islamic art by revered scholar Oleg Grabar. In naming the show, curator Anna Katz put into play an unresolvable ambiguity that ultimately cleaved her project. The exhibition's title opens to two distinct readings. In one, the subject is the P&D movement within the larger context of American art between 1972 and 1985; in the other, the subject is broadly thematic: decoration and pattern in American art during the given time frame. At the Hessel Museum, where works by artists originally associated with P&D are indistinguishably mixed in with those of nonaligned contemporaries and precursors under a series of generic subheadings, the second reading prevails. The accompanying publication, by contrast, clearly performs the first. Katz's introductory essay, together with the newly commissioned scholarly texts and ancillary materials, concentrates on the movement.

View of "With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985," 2019–20, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. From left: William T. Williams, *Tale for Shango*, 1978; Ned Smyth, *Rapallo*, 1980; Ned

Smyth, *Untitled (Black with Blue and Gold)*, 1980; Joyce Kozloff, *Striped Cathedral*, 1977. Photo: Jeff Mclane.

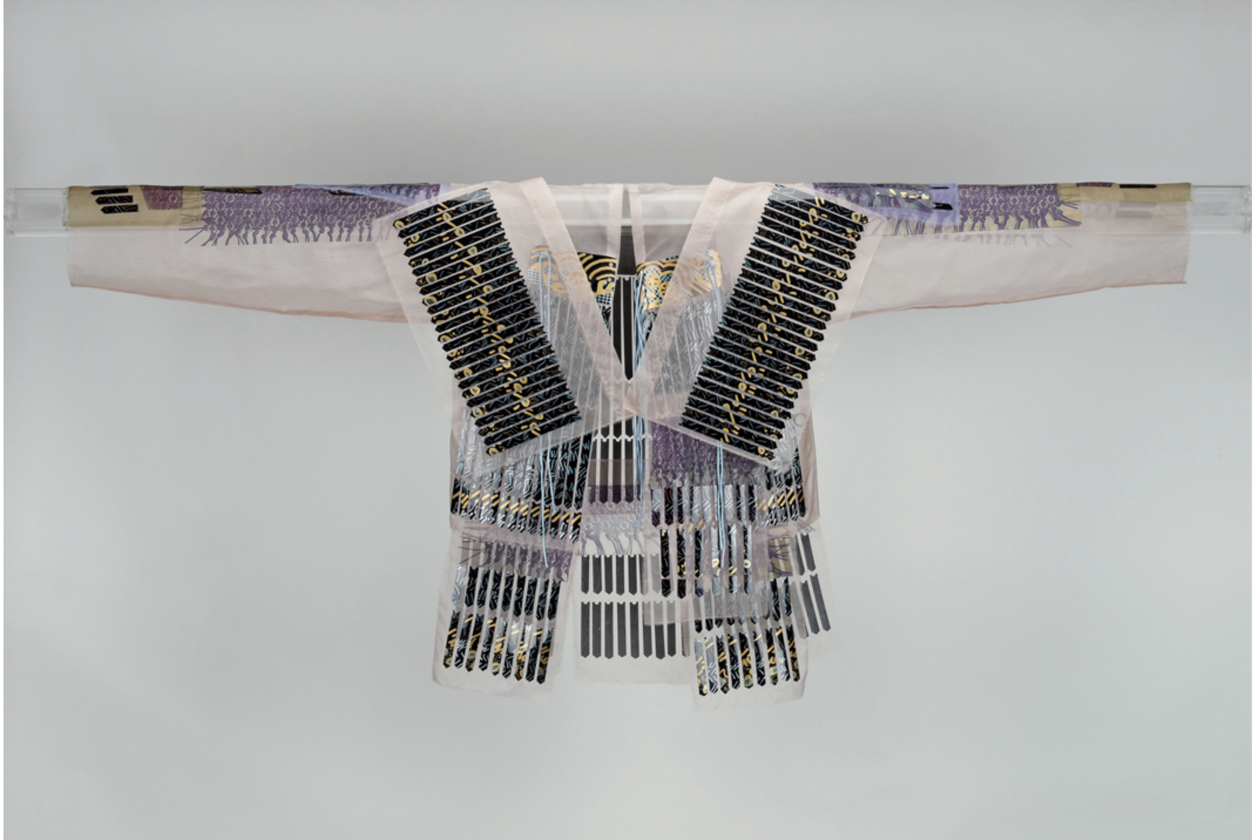
That said, Katz's recuperative agenda—the rehabilitation of an unjustly neglected artistic phenomenon—is at the same time threaded through by a corrective impulse. Reflecting today's urgent issues, she enlarges the fluctuating network of original participants to include artists who "would've, could've, or should've" been part of it—had they not, like ceramist Betty Woodman, lived largely away from the coastal centers and self-identified as craftspeople. A similar fate awaited those who, like William T. Williams, created abstract paintings that, while indebted to Islamic visual traditions (a determining preoccupation of many P&D artists), nonetheless fell outside the purview of its exclusively white protagonists. Katz's broad brush raises the possibility of additional blind spots. Why not, for example, amplify the sartorial forays of Schapiro and Robert Kushner by adding Katherine Westphal's gorgeous hand-printed paper kimonos? These were standouts among the experimental works made by textile artists in both California and New York exploring forms of wearable art in the '70s and '80s. Though preoccupied with vernacular and historic craft traditions, P&D evinced scant interest in the ascendant postwar studio-craft movement then attracting widespread public attention. Critic Barbara Rose speculated that snobbery was the basis for the disregard fine artists showed their professionally trained counterparts in the applied arts.[3] But in the case of P&D artists, anxiety about their works' status and by extension their own professional standing may have contributed to a reluctance to be aligned with their natural allies, contemporary practitioners delegitimized as "minor."

Robert Kushner wearing his *Purple*, 1975, New York, February 6, 1976. Photos: Harry Shunk.

Kim MacConnel, an early P&D member, recently characterized the diverse affiliate as “like minds with an astonishing array of differing interests.” By expanding those already loose networks to accommodate current ideological concerns, “With Pleasure” risks distorting the heady mixture of reactive, contingent, and necessarily partisan perspectives motivating the movement’s formation, even as each member pursued her own artistic agenda. Arguably, what’s needed at this moment is something more than redemptive and remedial curatorial approaches that situate P&D artists within larger

frameworks, whether of progenitors, of contemporaries, or of legatees who broadly shared the movement's diverse aesthetic preoccupations. Fundamental to its recuperation is a historically framed granular parsing of its central aesthetic preoccupations—above all, the slippery and highly subjective concept of the decorative.

IN LATE 1974, spurred by what Jaudon described as their frustration with the narrowness of the criticism of the day, a small, intergenerational group of abstract painters began meeting in downtown Manhattan lofts. Inclusive, exuberant, and colorful, their often newly minted aesthetics were patently at odds with the austere reductivist abstraction then dominant. Challenging the narrow, medium-specific issues regnant in painterly discourse, they drew on modes of decoration found in both the great non-Western cultures of the past—above all, Islamic traditions of abstract patterning—and humble vernacular and domestic crafts gendered as women's work. Excited to recognize others with like-minded concerns but apprehensive of the critical opprobrium they anticipated, they discussed with Goldin the advantages of framing themselves as part of a movement. Key to their thinking were lessons learned from the women's movement, with which several were personally involved: the tactical value of group endeavor, collective action, networking, and consciousness-raising. In 1975, what soon became known as Pattern and Decoration jelled in a series of public convenings: artists panels, talks, and a gallery show organized by one of their own, quilter Jane Kaufman, tellingly titled "Ten Approaches to the Decorative." Critical recognition rapidly followed, along with market validation. By decade's end, group shows had appeared in public and private venues across the nation; others were taking place in Europe. Sales rocketed, such that many core members became preoccupied with managing their escalating careers. Seemingly, they no longer had time to get together. By the mid-'80s, the group's momentum had stalled.



Katherine Westphal, *Black Samurai*, 1977, image transfer, felt-tip pen, silk organza, plastic tape, silk cord, 31 3⁄8 × 67″.

In this by-now-codified account, their galvanizing feelings of anxiety are regularly restated. In fact, there was remarkably little substantive or sustained art-world resistance to their recursive vision of painting's expansive domain.[4] By the time the P&D movement was underway, art that engaged with the decorative and with abstract-adjacent forms of pattern was widespread, if largely absent from critical discourse.

In 1970, Frank Stella, the preeminent abstract painter of the moment, had predicted as much in the catalogue to his first retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. "My main interest," he noted with reference to his most recent works, "has been to make what is popularly called decorative painting truly viable in unequivocal abstract terms." Stella nonetheless immediately qualified his revelation: He meant "decorative . . . in a good sense," he explained, instancing Matisse, whose manifestly ornamental *papiers découpés* were then garnering unprecedented acclaim.[5] If there were "good"

versions of decorative, then there must be “bad,” but what those were Stella left unmentioned. To the mandarin theorists who championed his art, the work of P&D painters likely embodied the latter, but they typically refrained from making any accusation: Silence can be an effective tool of dismissal. However, for other exponents of ’60s purist abstraction, such as Perrone, who rapidly changed course, the writing was on the wall. Their wholesale embrace of P&D suggests that recent variants of hard-edge geometric and systems-based abstraction had been found wanting: etiolated, insular, hollowed out. Were this not the case, how else to account for the movement’s critical and commercial success virtually from the outset?

View of “Frank Stella,” 1970, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Foreground, from left: *Ifafa II*, 1964; *Fez*, 1964. Photo: James Mathews.

In 1979, legendary curator and art-world influencer Harald Szeemann traveled to New York to check out for himself what in Europe was touted as the latest manifestation of the avant-garde. Though much impressed by its preponderance of women artists, Szeemann immediately recognized that P&D was far from transgressive, or even subversive, in an era that had spawned radical forms of expression in photography, video, film, performance, and

Conceptual art. Excepting Tina Girouard, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, and Ned Smyth (whom he doesn't mention in the article he wrote on returning home), the movement's protagonists never abandoned painting as their primary reference point. Thus, far from signaling a substantive break with the immediate past, P&D represented a return, Szeemann concluded, to the kind of "relaxed" art of abstracted forms arranged decoratively on a flat surface that Matisse had propounded as long ago as 1908 in his "Notes of a Painter."

Ned Smyth, *Portale Fish & Fabric*, 1979, mixed media on paper, 35 × 45".

Barely two years after writing that seminal text, Matisse visited a groundbreaking exhibition of Islamic art in Munich; the encounter would trigger for him a lifelong fascination with that greatest of decorative cultures. His epiphany was far from unique. Countless others—from Klee and Kandinsky through Stella and P&D initiators Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff—would follow in

his wake. In his 1979 text “The Decorative Impulse,” Perrone claimed that the P&D cadre was drawn to Islamic art as part of a “constant attempt by artists to drive art out of its antisocial tower and back into the everyday world.” That goal would be realized literally by Jaudon and Kozloff, whose aspirations to create public art and architecture led to commissions for civic plazas, the New York subway system, Amtrak stations, and corporate campuses.

Valerie Jaudon, *Trio*, 1998, oil, metallic pigment, and resin on three canvases.

Installation view, Citicorp Building, New York. Photo: Bill Taylor. © Valerie Jaudon/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

By the dawn of the new millennium, the repeated and sustained engagements by Western artists with Islamic art across the previous century made clear that the narratives of modernist art history could no longer be written without consideration of abstraction's ongoing intersections with pattern and decoration. "Far from being a repository of outmoded traditions, [ornament] has played a constitutive role in modern art," Markus Brüderlin concluded in his 2001 introduction to *Ornament and Abstraction*. That said, the interrelated concepts of decoration, ornament, and pattern are anything but universal, monolithic, and fixed. Whether made by a viewer or by the artist, the judgment that an artwork is decorative is qualitative, ideologically freighted, and inevitably shaped by context. And while pattern is typically put in the service of decorative impulses, exceptions may be found even within the precincts of the P&D community, as seen in the art of Tony Robbin. In the large-scale paintings suffused with lyric color that he produced in the '70s, Robbin modeled overlapping multidimensional spaces by melding and layering patterns appropriated from Japanese art and architecture, and elsewhere. In the '80s, he furthered these complex optical explorations by way of computer programming. Decoration was anathema to his endeavor.

When casually employed today, the term *decorative* may still serve as a shorthand slur. Yet it carries little real weight, and not only because the richly nuanced ways in which the decorative consumed artists and critics throughout the modernist era are undeniable. The efflorescence over the past two decades of art practices incorporating textile materials and techniques, predicated on issues of patterning and ornamentation, has largely dispelled any residual negativity. Disappointingly, none of the contributors to the catalogues of these four shows follow their predecessors' examples or, with the benefit of hindsight, systematically tease out the operations of those ubiquitous if elusive concepts in searching detail. Each publication reprints articles from the heyday of P&D by leading advocates Goldin, Perrault,

Perrone, Szeemann, et al., together with artists' statements old and new. Since much of this material is readily available online, its foregrounding suggests a shared conviction that authoritative formulations and interpretations continue to reside in the hands of the movement's progenitors.

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The catalogues consequently fail to build on the few scholarly contributions that challenge long-held accounts. In an essay on Jaudon published in 1996, Anna Chave demonstrates that continuity and indebtedness are as evident in the artist's nuanced work as rejection. A decade later, in a second important text, Chave explored the significant groundwork laid in the late '60s by a band of "outlaw" women artists with overlapping concerns, among them Lynda Benglis, Louise Fishman, Harmony Hammond, Ree Morton, and Howardina Pindell.[6]

P&D's long eclipse in mainstream art-historical narratives may explain not only the tenacious grip of formative interpretations but also the lack of in-depth, fine-grained studies of principals such as Girouard, who died last year and whose work commands increasing attention. Her distinctive mode of legitimating decorative practices involved the use of found lengths of vintage fabric, which she manipulated into provisional architectural structures for the performance of dance and ritual ceremonies. Somewhat of an outlier in the P&D community, Girouard was immersed in circuits around Gordon Matta-Clark, artists' group Anarchitecture, and New York alternative space 112 Greene Street. A close reading of her singular work and career would productively complicate the critical dicta that position P&D as a self-propelling polyglot ensemble fixated on contesting a hegemonic painting discourse.

Tina Girouard, *Lie No*, 1973. Performance view, 112 Greene Street, New York, September 1973. Tina Girouard. © Tina Girouard/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The relative dearth of recent scholarship that drills down on P&D’s primary artists and issues makes it difficult to weigh its legacy. How, for example, to distinguish its impact on later generations from the broadly based cultural trend that Porter dubs maximalism? How might its prescient navigating of questions of identity illuminate contemporary explorations of subject positions based in race and gender? Neither definitive nor exhaustive, these four reprises of the hitherto better-known-about-than-known movement are nonetheless a welcome sign of change. Finally, the door has been cracked open.

Lynne Cooke is senior curator for special projects at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. She is currently at work on “Braided Histories,” a planned 2023 exhibition that will explore affiliations and interchanges between abstract artists and textile designers and producers.

Miriam Schapiro, *Heartland*, 1985, acrylic and fabric on canvas, 85 × 94″. © Estate of Miriam Schapiro/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

NOTES

1. David Frankel, "Valerie Jaudon," *Artforum*, February 2016, 238.

2. Another apposite example might be *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), the textbook with perhaps the deepest influence over the shape of contemporary art history, which also omits any mention of Pattern and Decoration.

3. See Barbara Rose's review of "Objects: USA," the vast show that in 1969 brought contemporary American crafts to national attention: "Crafts Ain't What They Used to Be," *New York*, June 19, 1972, 72–73.

4. Donald Kuspit's diatribe "Betraying the Feminist Intention: The Case Against Feminist Decorative Art," *Arts*, November 1979, 124–26, is the nonpareil.

5. William S. Rubin, *Frank Stella* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 149.

6. Anna Chave, "Disorderly Order: The Art of Valerie Jaudon," in *Valerie Jaudon*, ed. Rene Paul Barilleaux (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 9–47, and "Outlaws: Women, Abstraction, and Painting in New York, 1967–1975," in *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*, ed. Katy Siegel (New York: DAP, 2006).

Joyce Kozloff, *If I Were an Astronomer: Boston* (detail), 2015, mixed media on canvas, 37 × 55".

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