

between a place and candy: new works in pattern + repetition + motif

by Kate Liebman

NORTE MAAR FOR COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS IN THE ARTS
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A good group show is like a good dinner party. As the guests—or the works—interact, new topics arise, and something might be learned. Conversation occurs at a constant hum, with interludes of laughter or argument. In this respect, Norte Maar's *between a place and candy: new works in pattern + repetition + motif* does not fall flat. There are dozens of inevitable tropes that the works in this well-curated show cluster around, including questions of scale, weaving, cultural identity, materiality, and imagery. In addition, the show suggests two unexpected affinities among these artists' works: the intersection between pattern and landscape, and the use of repeated line to induce a sense of balanced energy in a geometrically structured piece. But first and foremost, *between a place and candy* shows the impact of the 1970s Pattern & Decoration (P&D) movement, a group of disparate artists dedicated to providing a viable alternative to the slick Minimalist art pervasive at the time.

The show is simultaneously historically rooted and forward-looking, revising the long-standing misconception that pattern and the decorative arts (textile work, design) are devoid of artistic or philosophical meaning. One of the founding members of the P&D movement, Robert Zakanitch, has a piece in the show, and it is his "Hanging Gardens Series (By the Sea)" (2011/12), that introduces us to the unpretentious effort of this movement. The large gouache and pencil piece consists of a wall of simplified, flattened floral forms, above which a series of quickly rendered, confidently drawn cartoonish waves crash. His drawing exists on the surface of the paper, but suggests a shallow depth because of the gently modulating blues painted underneath the circular flowers. Zakanitch's piece suggests that decoration, pattern, and ornamentation can be beautiful and useful.

Now, 40 years after the P&D movement first coalesced, the 30 artists whose works are featured in Norte Maar's show continue to develop that alternative, the alternative that accepts pattern as a valid way to arrive at art. Neither a cohesive group nor an established movement, these artists use systematic repetition to create works with a surprising range of visual diversity. By making visually engaging pieces, many of the artists create work that directly challenges the canon's failure to recognize the complexity of pattern and decoration, and incorporate that complexity into its discourse.

With careful and sustained looking, landscape lends itself to pattern. It changes, and the artists Kerry Law, Jeri Coppola, and Niki Lederer record those shifts. Perhaps they discover or uncover existing patterns, or perhaps they are victims of apophenia (the urge to find pattern in meaningless data). Either way, their art mediates and reconfigures patterns of landscape. Though different media (painting, photography, and sculpture), these four pieces all use repetition and multiple units to establish the patterns they see as time passes.

Kerry Law's "Empire States" series (2011-2013) documents the iconic building at night, over time. The top third of the building—its lit facade and lightning rod—sit in the bottom half of each 12 x 12 inch canvas. Sometimes center, sometimes left or right of center, the building becomes a character in a story. Law often makes the sky with a single horizontal brushstroke of dark blue or black, interrupted by the building's thin, vertical lightning rod. The windows are painted in thick impasto, and even through thick paint, we register the material as a source of light. The building seems to have a personality, to have different moods: jubilant: a firework erupts near it; reserved: its top shrouded in fog; confident: set against a flat sky. The gridded presentation and the motif of the work lend it to being read as if each painting were part of a storyboard. Indeed, Law's paintings recall the building's starring role in Warhol's 8-hour film *Empire*, which films the building during a summer night in 1964.

Like Law, Coppola is concerned with the movements of landscape in time. She has arranged 48 discrete gelatin prints in "Treading Water VII" (2015) to create a large image of crashing waves, with spray and momentum, but without a shoreline. The grid tempts the viewer to find a pattern, even if we can only see "off-rhymes": a photograph of a wave breaking in the lower-right quadrant resembles another photograph in the top left, but the higher one is flipped. Captured in an instant, Coppola's photographs take time to decipher because of how she abstracts the subject through intense cropping. Her black-and-white photographs could be the spray of any ocean, any lake.

Lederer brings things from her neighborhood (Williamsburg) directly into her work. The landscape—or rather, the detritus left in the landscape—is the material. In "Northside Gyre" (2015) Lederer has assembled dozens of cleaned, colorful plastic containers into a large, gently twisting column. She organizes the plastic by color: white, blue, white, green, yellow, blue, red, blue, purple, blue. Out of sepia plastic, Lederer has constructed a small puppy who pokes its head out from the trash. The significance of the dog is unclear, but she certainly gets away with perching the plastic animal atop the almost-rainbow plastic. Though cleaned, organized, and no longer useful, the plastic remnants

do not evade recognition. Lederer's sculpture (dog included) does not transform the individual components, but it does inject a bit of humor into the serious topic of waste.

In contrast to Law's paintings, Coppola's photographs, and Lederer's sculpture, the show contains a group of painters who make abstract work out of the most basic of means: line. Through its simplicity, the line generates visual force. Joan Witek, Rob de Oude, and Libby Hartle use straight lines to make work that repeat geometry to produce work with an optical punch. Their works feel both balanced and energetic, existing in a state of stable—or frozen—opposition.

Witek's precisely planned and exquisitely executed "Massai (P-158)" (2012) stands out among the paintings. She has measured and drawn a barely perceptible graphite grid onto a white ground and then dragged a black oil stick within the gridded bounds both vertically (in the left three boxes) and horizontally (in the right three boxes). As a single, contained gesture, the oil stick's pigment records the time of its making. As it tapers at the ends, we see the change in pressure of the artist's hand. The near contact—yet separation—of these drawn lines creates an optical density: the painting seems to quiver, to breathe.

Though just as methodical as Witek's work, de Oude's image is more spontaneous. He lets an optical pattern arise by painting a series of thin, colored lines. The title, "Dislodged" (2014), reflects how the artist has removed his unique touch from the work through his process. He places each line by adjusting a self-made rig to vary the distances between the marks. Systematic and careful, de Oude's method allows him to "find" two, stacked "X" shapes. Unlike "Massai (P-158)," "Dislodged" has a uniform surface appearance and does not hold time in the same way Witek's almost-romantic painting does. His lines are thin, strings almost, and the paint is thinly applied. This thinness reinforces the distance de Oude has created between himself and his mark.

There are only so many ways lines can intersect: vertical against horizontal to create a crucifix, or diagonal (at some angle) to create an "X". Perhaps it is not surprising then that Hartle also utilizes this "X" shape in her large graphite drawing "Untitled #21 (Arrow)"(2015). Hartle layers graphite marks on paper, cuts the drawings into strips, and then collages the strips to form the "X" or the arrows, pointing in, toward each other. Her marks are dense, but do not feel over-worked or stale. Reminiscent of Stella's black paintings, "Untitled #21" registers how sustained, obsessive focus can compress time and contain it in a physical residue. Like Witek's painting, Hartle's drawing offers us a topography of its facture, a record similar to that provided by the tree's rings. Indeed, "Untitled #21" resembles wood grain. Her obsessive line drawing is not dissimilar to the orant's use of prayer beads. Just as the tactility of the beads aids the orant, and as the hand moves over each bead, Hartle moves her pencil, making yet another line.

The odd title of Norte Maar's show is lifted from the "Objects" portion of Gertrude Stein's modernist poem *Tender Buttons* (1914): "In between a place and candy is a narrow foot-path that shows more mounting than anything." The phrase itself might have no semantic, logical meaning. But the disjunctive—albeit grammatically correct—phrase opens up to a multiplicity of possible meanings, of possible interpretations. Likewise, the selection of works in *between a place and candy*, might reveal "a narrow foot-path," a way forward that has incorporated the methods of P&D and the artists' own interests to make contemporary work.

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