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SORTING THROUGH DISTORTION

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SORTING THROUGH DISTORTION

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Painting

by
Kathryn Claire Hutter
December 2006

Accepted by:
Heidi Jensen, Committee Chair
Dave Detrich
Sydney Cross
ABSTRACT

The relationship of the recurrent visual signals in contemporary culture and the physical routine of living in the culture begin to build as layers in the fabric or patterns of everyday. My use of pattern (both mass produced fabric, and painted surface) imitates the repetitious nature of visual stimuli in American culture as well as the viewer’s familiarity with object and image recognition. I investigate the language of signals and human thinking relying heavily on the viewer’s link to familiarity and how that may provoke them to read the paintings. To do this, I draw directly from the use of everyday banal objects such as a spray bottle, hair dryer, car, or Pac man. I orient the objects on a surface of discounted patterned fabric. This body of work exposes my method of sorting through signifiers and further distorting the context in which they exist through cultural or societal categorization of age, irony, and visual seduction. I look to Pop Art, Pattern and Decoration (P&D), the Do it Yourself Movement and contemporary artists referring to the stimulus of visual society to sift through my interest in engaging a balance between high and low art.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of work to my family who has shaped who I am.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the faculty at Clemson, especially Heidi Jensen, Dave Detrich, and Syd Cross for helping me find my voice and place in art. I would also like to let my fellow graduate students know how influential each and every one of you have been in this work, and in my life I will carry you with me always.
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SORTING THROUGH DISTORTION

While representing our contemporary visual experience I create patterned layers of paint that adhere to the multi-patterned networks woven into the everyday experience and examine how pattern and object function visually as well as culturally. It is important to observe and be aware of elements affecting the seemingly most mundane aspects of life and look for the quirkiness of those banal objects/moments. These aspects are essentially what distinguish our routine from the others’, how we sort through the chaos of life and make it interesting. Within the realm of painting material, layering, and the overall performative process become ways to build up and work out elements and meaning, while remaining a potentially physical process of manipulating surface. It is also the way I make my everyday experiences and objects surrounding them interesting, I give them life by painting them in layers where they may not necessarily belong.

My use of pattern (both mass produced fabric, and painted surface) imitates the repetitious nature of visual stimuli in American culture as well as the viewer’s familiarity with object and image recognition. This body of work exposes my method of sorting through signifiers and further distorting the context in which they exist through cultural or societal categorization of age, irony, and visual seduction. I Look to Pop Art, Pattern and Decoration, the Do it Yourself movement and contemporary artists referring to the stimulus of visual society to sift through my interest in engaging a balance between high and low art. “High” art meaning the sophistication and technique involved in the act of painting and “Low” meaning the widely recognizable, mass-produced quality of the material used. As Linda Yablonsky addresses in the article, What makes a Painting a Painting, “Having absorbed high culture and low, painting has turned itself out in mixed-media assemblages, that include both organic and synthetic materials…It has borrowed from commercial illustration and architectural, tattoo, and textile design, and exhibited itself as sculpture or in various combinations of all the above, in both abstraction and representation” (96).
The pattern in my paintings is analogous to the compulsive activity of sorting. The layers correspond to this intense and somewhat chaotic act, represented by their different treatments. Transparent paint referencing a veiled, or filtered view is sometimes completely obliterated by a flat opaque layer of vibrant color referencing a marketing, or packaging source material (or vise versa). In regard to the paint application, Sociologist Henri Lefebvre makes a statement relating to urban space that resonates strongly within my process. He states, “the way urban space signifies is by ‘dos and don’ts’, spaces that allow and disallow” (qtd. in Highmore 135). I apply this in describing the why and the way I use paint. The transparent glazes act as veils, allowing the viewer a filtered view of what lies beneath. Many of the painted edges of the objects reveal pieces of objects or shapes hidden beneath persuading the viewer to figure out what that object is, or how the layer placed over it changes it. The thicker opaque paint, usually painted in a vibrant color, or a seductive gradating effect forces the viewer to concentrate on the object it defines and its seductive quality. These opaque layers often strengthen the original tactile quality of fabric, while the transparent obstructs or denies the character of the fabric. Evidence of the original fabric left on the edge of the frame allows the viewer to connect what once was and is no longer.

My work focuses on structures of pattern and basic object association within a distorted framework of fragments and repeated elements. The shaped structures of the paintings emphasize this, as well as further obscuring Lefebvre’s idea of allowing and disallowing HOW the viewer sees. These everyday banal objects are suddenly brought into a new life by changing their context and by manipulating their relationship to the painting’s structure. The shaped canvases are distorted pieces of what ultimately is a larger puzzle.

The shapes play a game of abstraction with what is on the surface. In some instances the viewer may see the shape as dictating the patterns within, in some cases the patterns within distort the shape, and in some cases compositionally, have nothing to do with the outer shape at all. The shapes not only provide a sense of distortion, but also run parallel to the absurdity of the objects in relation to each other and the context in which they are being presented. This distortion occurs daily
in associations we make when observing objects depending on their context whether it be art, marketing, a domestic setting, or urban life. The “shape” (environment) in which the object exists becomes the framework in which the object then is observed, and in this case almost completely abstracted. The viewer is left to wonder what aspect of the painting is more absurd, the objects, their relationship to each other, the incessant painted repetition, or all of the above!

The act of changing the use of fabric with a discounted past, reorienting the environment objects exist within, and controlling what the viewer is allowed to see and not to see through paint becomes a way to individualize my everyday experience. Author, art and film theorist, and perceptual psychologist Rudolf Arnheim states in the book *Visual Thinking*, “The reactions to monotony go all the way from conscious defense to the purely physiological wearing off of impulses generated in the brain by a static situation” (21). A reaction or “conscious defense” to the everyday repetition of life is abstracted and contained in my work. This may seem absurd as the painting process becomes time consuming and laborious, however, it is for those reasons that I am drawn to it. By forcing myself to labor over four or five objects I enter into a new relationship with them. The objects no longer hold their inherent or learned meaning; I see them now as shape containing an animated, individual quality because of their dexterity and durability on the surface that becomes one way to adapt/sort through everyday contemporary aesthetic experience.

Everyday life suggests the ordinary, the banal, and as French Marxist Sociologist Henri Lefebvre claims, “it connotes continual recurrence, insistent repetition” (qtd. in Highmore 128). The elements of “continual recurrence,” and “insistent repetition” Lefebvre points out begin at the earliest stages of human development. From early childhood through adult maturation the development of intelligence results in a combination of the aesthetic as well as physical experience. As children, learning is a cognitive activity in which the brain is trained how to see objects and make basic associations through repetition. Moving into adulthood however, these basic associations become much more complex and begin to collect attached meaning. Where and how the meanings are formed take place in a highly distorted world of visual chaos and experience.
Contemporary aesthetic experience can be further broken down into a language of symbols and signals seen in both urban and rural everyday life. I investigate the language of signals and human thinking relying heavily on the viewer’s link to familiarity and how that may provoke them to read the paintings. The signs or objects used are chosen based on their banality and the relationship they have to the specific fabric pattern. I allow the viewer to relate on a very basic level to the idea of symbol or signal with the use of the silhouette. The detail is stripped from the object, leaving a simple silhouette that I am free to manipulate through multiplication, placement, orientation and scale. I use the very things I am occupied with and surrounded by to engage in a conversation with them and about them. These signals become more complex as they are layered and begin to converge with other repeated objects. The initial reaction may be a connection to a function/physical activity, a memory, an era, a particular group of people, a sensory reaction, or stimulation through the shape and color of the object. The reactions, connections, and meanings signals have to each individual are heavily reliant on a learned visual language and its context.

The importance of object recognition in the development of human intelligence is extremely important in understanding its relationship to a learned visual language. Development of object association and environment has been the basis of major psychological research for psychologist Jean Piaget. From 1950 to his death in 1980 Dr. Piaget conducted extensive research on the cognitive development of human thinking and the nature of children’s learning. Many of his observations become key players in the discussion of how object and repetition aid in the development of human intelligence. Piaget discusses three major factors contributing to intellectual development in young minds as: ‘accommodation, assimilation and equilibrium’ (Goswami 257). “Accommodation is the process of adapting cognitive schemes for viewing the world (general concepts) to fit reality. Assimilation is the complementary process of interpreting experience (individual instances of general concepts)…” (Goswami 259). These observations are important in applying repetition and the object as crucial elements in the development of knowledge in a young human mind. Simple objects seen in a child’s environment not only carry inherent object/skill connection, but can also determine how a
child alters their actions to a familiar object, or visa versa. Assimilation and accommodation are the actions the mind takes in adapting to object and environment.

As a child matures the actions of assimilation and accommodation become more complex and begin to become heavily influenced by contextual changes prevalent in contemporary society. The meanings or connections an object has as an adolescent can change dramatically as that child moves into adulthood depending on the environment the individual is surrounded by. As the human mind ages and goes through cognitive maturation, it moves beyond mental representations and enters the realm of symbols.

In the case of my work, the environment is contemporary visual society. An example of the collision of adolescent, adult and societal object association is the painting titled, *Hot Innocence* (Fig. 1.1). In this piece bunny heads with bowties are painted and repeated around the distorted structure each containing within a pattern of either hearts or cherries. The hearts existing in the center bunny heads as well as the cherries on the outer bunny heads are drawn to mimic what a young girl might doodle in her notebook as an adolescent. Even upside down the hearts and cherries are such clichéd shapes that the orientation becomes unimportant. They become very child-like and innocent and are filled in with flat, opaque pink and red paint to further strengthen the childlike quality. The blue hot rod flames however, contrast the hearts and cherries. These flames have strong references to a male dominated world of cars and hot chicks. This emphasis of course changes the innocence of the bunny heads with bowties, hearts and cherries. The double meanings then begin to surface and the distortion of the entire context of the objects and shaped structure become rather ironic.

In a select few of the paintings the aspects of categorization and distortion are emphasized in a much more thematic way. One example of this is emphasized in the painting titled *Rad* (Fig. 1.2). In this particular piece a particular object and color is painted relating specifically to an era. Pac man and cassette tapes are painted in a reference to bad screen-printing and obnoxious color, all prevalent aspects of the 1980’s. This is one example of the way human beings respond or link meaning to
object, through a process of categorization. From the pattern in the fabric, to object, to color, each has a strong connection to the 1980’s with reference to pop culture.

The painting titled *Survivor* (Fig. 1.3) is an example of thematic object categorization, and adult vs. adolescent. This work focuses on specific animal silhouettes that again, play a game of abstraction with the viewer. The major players in this specific game become aspects of paint and fabric. The viewer is challenged to figure out what is imposed and what is original pattern. The animals are represented in a very childlike simplistic fashion, but engage a much more sophisticated investigation of paint. I find this intriguing in process as well as observance. Playing a game while creating a game is something I wish the viewer to take away while looking at this particular piece, as well as the other paintings. The abstraction that also occurs in the process of how one normally looks at pattern is important in this piece. The relationship the imposed pattern, and original pattern have to each other forces the viewer to look beyond their original idea of pattern as a correct and structured organization.

Ironic plays another important role in this particular body of work. The irony in these specific works is apparent in the fact that the rather banal objects are being recognized as anything but what they actually represent. In the painting titled, *Hell’s Kitchen* (Fig. 1.4) for example, household objects such as a spray bottle and a broom are paired with a cell phone and rather chic striped patterned fabric. The function of these objects is completely removed forcing the viewer to connect with them in a different way. The broom can no longer sweep, the cell phone is disconnected from it’s original network, and the spray bottle doesn’t actually spray anything. Organized in a radial pattern the objects become a basis for a visually active surface, which contrasts with the diagonally oriented black and pale-pink stripes. The brooms painted in an opaque, flat, fire-engine red appear to be floating in oblivion on the lower half of the painting, while above they play a game of visual hierarchy with the spray bottles and stripes. Many of these affects can be seen in packaging and advertising, where objects are being used to communicate messages having little to do with what the object actually does. In retrospect these are all ways in which subconsciously human beings sort
through chaotic visual matter, by figuring out a system, whether that be visual or physical and placing the objects and meanings heavily influenced by society within that system. It all becomes an act of editing and sorting which the patterns in my work, visually and metaphorically allude to.

The communication the work has with the viewer becomes a process of abstracting awareness through simplification of form and context. Arnheim suggests, “one cannot recognize something as a thing known, expected, or to be reacted to unless it is discriminated by its sharply defined character” (29). Simplifying a familiar object to its basic elements and altering its environment, forces one to adapt the initial knowledge of the object to fit into its new environment as both Piaget and Arnheim observed. The abstraction in the work is used as a way to remove the viewer from a familiar setting in which these objects would normally appear. In some of the work the objects remain direct silhouettes of a household utensil, or a popular icon, while in others it becomes something more difficult to decipher.

The shapes in some of the paintings become transformed through abstraction to an unrecognizable stage, relying more heavily on an abstract idea of symbol/signal in which the viewer is then called upon to make their own associations as to what the object is (or was) and how it is oriented on the surface. These pieces represent a reliance on visual seduction used most recognizably in packaging and marketing. This is exemplified in the painting titled, Melts in your Mouth (Fig. 1.5) in which the abstraction of object is used to emphasize surface and visual seduction. In this particular piece the painted surface relies on contrast, transparent, opaque, and textured surfaces to displace the objects repeated from their original habitat.

Also playing a major role in this game is color. The title references a popular slogan attached to M&M candy, which is analogous to the color choices in this painting, The colors are “candy coated” which is a link to the world of packaging/marketing and visual seduction in the painting. The specific objects used are a part belonging to a cappuccino machine, a hair dryer, a scotch tape dispenser, a key and the familiar polka dot. Whether the viewer sees these particular objects is where my focus on the idea of familiarity and abstraction become strengthened. These objects are so far
removed from their function, and any detailed description that the associations attached to them serves no real purpose, as it does in other pieces. This is one way in which object can be taken out of it’s original context and used as surface pattern focusing on the retinal, seductive visual importance pattern can play within contemporary society.

Visually seductive pattern also becomes the key factor in the piece entitled *Heart Scrunchies* (Fig. 1.6) where the objects origin is completely abstracted and the tension between surface and structure becomes the main emphasis. The shapes appear to be squeezed by the frame or vise versa, the scrunching of the objects is skewing the frame. There are faint remnants of layers beneath and flower pattern which expose evidence of a past surface, past patterns which become a reference to the act of editing or sorting so apparent in all the work included in this body.

The references to everyday, pattern, color, and process in my work draws heavily from Pop Art, Pattern and Decoration Art movements, and more recently the Do it Yourself movement. Although each of these particular interest groups have seemingly different intentions they each play an important role in the creation of my work. Aesthetically, the work makes strong parallels to the aesthetics of Pop Art, prevalent in the 1960’s through the 1980’s. Pop Art writer and critic Suzi Gablik breaks down the pop aesthetic goals into five main points:

1. Breakdown of the conventions of the picture plane. 2. The substitution of industrial techniques and materials for oil paints and a pre-occupation with man-made objects as far removed from nature as possible. 3. The expansion of art’s frame of reference to include elements considered [until then] as outside its range, such as technology, kitsch, and humor. 4. A move to a more extroverted and impersonal subject matter associated with the urban environment. 5. Greater mobility and flexibility toward art in general, whereby every situation is more total and inclusive of the simultaneous levels which occur in actual experience. (15)

Pop artists used common everyday objects to bring certain activities and consumerist ideas to the public eye. Art became a mass produced world during the reign of the pop Artists, which drew
strong parallels to modern America at the time. It was important to Artists such as James Rosenquist, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Jeff Koons, Elizabeth Murray to bring to the forefront how important stimulus in our environment is and how much it affects us in a vibrant, visually seductive way.

More contemporary artists using stimulus gathered from the visual chaos of today include Polly Apfelbaum and Lari Pittman. Polly Apfelbaum draws from contemporary color schemes found in packaging in her vibrant, often patterned, hybrid work of installation painting. Lari Pittman constructs large-scale paintings of intricate social and design savvy patterns capitalizing on their visual chaos. An aspect of living in a social and visually dominated culture is being aware of how it affects us and how we react to it. This is the importance I draw from Pop Art as well as Apfelbaum and Pittman’s work in connection to my own work.

Aspects of the Pattern and Decoration, or P&D painters’ movement of the 1970’s ring loud throughout my work as well. The domestic roots, as well as the egalitarian approach seen in P&D painting to the merging of high and low art are aspects I draw from in forming my work. Amy Goldin, a noted critic for the P&D painters movement stated that it “involves the maker in a relationship to the world around him that is much more intimate and practical than the specialized, alienated world of professional art” (Ollman 1).

My work exists somewhere in between an “intimate and practical” world and an “alienated world of professional art.” The abstract language of my work references both high and low art. The Do it Yourself movement with roots in the punk, or anarchic late 1980’s and early 90’s relies heavily on finding more creative and economical solutions to the everyday object and it’s function in individual’s lives. My use of fabric is not only an economical solution to the expense of typical “high art” material, it provides an instant connection with something mass produced and easily accessible in contemporary society. DIY also has an appeal to the hand made, or individually crafted as the obviously hand drawn outlines, apparent brushstrokes, and visible layers of paint do in my work. The viewer is then invited to figure out how and what the piece was created out of. Creator and
writer for the chic DIY magazine *Readymade*, Shoshanna Berger discusses the movement in a recent interview with Sierra magazine. In the interview she makes a strong statement:

I think [the DIY movement is] very specifically part of the DNA of our generation, the first generation to grow up with personal computers and this huge saturation of media geared toward us…young people grew up sitting in front of one screen or another, which takes us away from the more tactile, artisan world that our grandparents lived in. We hanker for that feeling of reward when you make something with your hands, creating something out of nothing. (qtd in Hattam 3)

It allows for the individual to feel more like an individual with a direct connection to “things” connected to everyday routine.

Lefebvre writes in *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, ‘Everyday life is made of recurrences: gestures of labour and leisure, mechanical movements both human and properly mechanic, hours, days, weeks, months, years, linear and cyclical repetitions, nature and rational time’ (qtd. in Highmore 128). The relationship of the recurrent visual signals in contemporary culture and the physical routine of living in that culture begin to build as layers in the fabric or patterns of everyday. The overlapping, and layering of patterns in my paintings emulate an application of the same elements in life. I use objects, color and recreated pattern on top of mass produced pattern that can be picked out of experiences in one’s day. The fabric contains within itself signals to a categorization or sorting of aspects of culture, irony, and visual seduction. The placement of painted objects in patterns of their own further the search for connection to a specific everyday or cultural situation relying heavily on learned visual language. By further removing the objects from their original functions and environments the viewer is faced with the development of their own visual language and what that brings to each painting and how important that connection rings true in the patterning of everyday life.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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