

The Art World of the Seventies

When I came to New York in 1970, Minimalism was king and sculptor Don Judd was first Knight. I was a captain on two squads of usurpers. Yet there is no Pulitzer Museum of Spatial Complexity in Art, and no Pulitzer Museum of Pattern Painting. There is, however, a Pulitzer Museum of Minimalism in St. Louis, build by Tadeo Ando in 2001. The building has an infinity pool and a stark, featureless interior. As visitors walk down a short stairway, they naturally touch the gray cast-concrete walls. Their fingerprints—a dark, spreading, amorphous, fungal-like stain—are the only signs of life in the building, and they interfere with its intent. It is a mausoleum, like the pill-box gun emplacements and ancestor tombs I knew as a child on Okinawa—a good place to be dead, no place to live, and no place to visit unless you have a taste for the morbid. Contemporary museum architecture (as in the Pulitzer, MoMA New York, and the East Wing of the National Gallery) constructs a vicious circle: only puffed-up Minimalist sculpture looks good in these spaces, so only Minimalism is shown, so only Minimalism is museum quality, so naturally museums should be built to show it off. There are painting galleries in the East Wing, but you have to enter low, hidden places to go there, as if you were going to the bathroom.

When I was doing stand-up (it's a long story), I had a routine about the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. My character was a Puerto Rican curator applying for a job there. The building is white; the walls are white; the ceiling is white; the floors are white. "And every freakin' painting in the place is black. Do you know that they have the only black Mark Rothko ever made?" (This was inspired by an actual show I saw there.) My character suggested that they bring in some color, maybe some rum, and have a party.

The same Lutheran purity aesthetic ruled in melancholy Denmark. In 1989 the Center for Art, Science, and Technology (COAST) at the Danish Technical University (DTU) commissioned me to make a 17-meter, three-story quasicrystal sculpture, a *kvasicrystal* in Danish, to hang in the atrium of the administration building. One could walk under, all around, and even through the sculpture, as a bridge spanned the atrium. The sculpture's structure appeared to change from triangles and hexagons to cubes or to

five-petal stars, depending on the angle of view. Colored, translucent acrylic plates filled parts of the skeletal node and rod structure. Light from the skylights cast colored images on the floors and walls, lit the pentagonal faces of the shiny aluminum nodes, colored the lines of the rods, and reflected a light show on the ceiling—a riot of color and geometry. The building was set in a campus grid of laid-up stone walls that oozed dampness in a climate that sleets six months a year (I worked there in December and thought I was in the trenches of Verdun). When the sculpture was completed, administrators put aside their “in” and “out” stamps and moved their chairs out onto the balconies to watch the kaleidoscopic show. DTU put the sculpture on their stationery and Christmas cards; prospective students wanted to be photographed under the *Kvasi* with their parents. But ten years later, the new rektor and his dour architect wanted to return the building to its morose 1960 Danish Modern origins. There was a struggle, Rektor Omar der Savonarola prevailed, and the sculpture was demolished.

When I was an art history professor (it’s a long story), from 1970 to 1975, I was duty bound to make a case for Minimalism, and I taught that Pop and Minimalism were two sides of the same coin, that both movements addressed the cultural issues of the postwar manufacturing boom. Ours was the only industrial country that was not bombed to ruins, so naturally we took the lead in making stuff and filling up the world with it. Pop art expressed our ambivalence about all these new, must-have items: of course, they were junky but, then again, they were cheap. And Minimalism tried to re-sanctify the preciousness of objects, which are, after all, an artist’s meat and potatoes. That was the world of the fifties as expressed in the art of the sixties, but beginning in the seventies and continuing today, other, very different cultural issues demand our attention.

Consider the sources of Pattern Painting, or Pattern & Decoration as it came to be called. Aside from the human body, patterns are the most ubiquitous image that humans make. All over the globe, throughout human history, people have made patterns. The objects are compelling: Japanese kimono and obi, Acoma pottery painting, Inca feather costume, Persian mosaic, Victorian wallpaper, European lace, Venetian marble inlay, African textiles, and Mayan architectural ornament. The decade of the seventies was a time when these objects came to us in New York and Los Angeles, and it was also a time when it was easy for us to go to them. On a trip to Japan in 1972 (where I had spent the

first years of my life), in addition to visiting still Zen rock gardens we also saw the riotous, colorful Shinto shrines; my adventurous girlfriend, Rena, along with Hiroshi and his wife, Nancy, and I spent a lot of time in the department stores looking at textiles. Also supporting the point of view of the Pattern Painters was Ernst Gombrich's 1979 book, *Sense of Order*, which argued that pattern making, far from being a lighthearted impulse to decorate, was instead a serious attempt to train the right brain to process information holistically, as opposed to the left brain's linguistic and sequential processing, and that this serious purpose was behind the universality of pattern. Gombrich's argument made good sense to the Pattern Painters and confirmed what we had been talking about all along. The magic of patterning showed Pattern Painters that all traditions were our tradition; it was a world style, and we were making world art. New York, reductivist Minimalism seemed parochial.

Broadly speaking, the seventies were when the shift from hardware to software began: systems, processes, cybernetic structures, interactions of all kinds were new subjects of intense study, and the specific items, the computers and video technology that supported these systems and processes began to be taken for granted. Heinz von Foerster invited me to a cybernetics symposium at the University of Illinois/Urbana at this time. Talk about open format! A "presenter" was sitting on a blanket with a stack of small rocks; a "player" would sit down and do something; then the presenter would do something else. Silently a game, or a pattern, would emerge—or not. What was the difference? And why did it happen? A guy ran into the conference holding a fistful of dollars over his head and screamed, "I've got dollar bills and a dog!" Several people took him up on the what, the proposition?

Conceptual art, although Minimalist in appearance, also investigated the curious arbitrariness of thought systems. The summer I graduated from the Yale School of Art, I took a job as manager of the loading dock at Paul Rudolph's famous Art and Architecture building while I waited for my teaching job at Silvermine to begin. Dennis Oppenheim was working that summer for the architecture department designing earthworks for highway medians. Some of his designs had to be adjusted, as they provided ramps to force wayward cars into oncoming traffic, but Oppenheim soon got the hang of it and was happy making models in the deserted school building. Two things made me worth

knowing: I was a good listener who could write, and I had a car. I drove Oppenheim around the industrial areas of New Haven, looking especially for salvage yards with tailings (waste products from industrial lathes, huge mounds of aluminum angel hair next to heaps of brass clippings), which he wanted for various Earthwork sculpture projects. At his invitation, I commuted to NYC during my first year of teaching at Silvermine to meet Peter Hutchinson and Robert Smithson. I wrote about all three for *Arts*, *Art International*, and *Artnews* and was well on my way to becoming the art critic for the Earthworks movement, but I did not want to be a writer who painted and so I dropped it.

The lesson for me, however, was the positive experience of the importance that ideas could play in contemporary art. Thought systems in the abstract could be the subject and deep content of art—a challenging proposition, a challenge to do something fundamental to consciousness. Even today from a perspective of almost forty years, few people realized that Pattern Painting, with its multiplicity, its juxtaposed and superimposed structures, was part of this intellectual effort, that Pattern Painting had philosophical ambitions, that it also attacked issues of consciousness. To us, our philosophical goal seemed a bigger and more contemporary project than formalist art, which focused only on individual, simple clumps.

When I moved into my Franklin Street loft in New York in 1970, I began spraying paint through stencils. I modified the spray gun by jamming toothpicks into some of the holes to make a tool that spit out little dabs of paint *à la pointillisme*. I cut large stencils in Islamic patterns or in simpler patterns that were “drawn” (or cut) in perspective. I could further draw on the canvas by matting out sections of the canvas with tape and newspaper (the *Times* was good, providing many large sheets cheap). The canvases were laid on the floor with the stencils on top. Next to the paintings were watercolor papers taped to the floor and topped with smaller stencils (spray drawings), and I would spray the whole set-up at once. Within a few years, I met painter Jane Kaufman, tall and both elegant and tough, and Whitney Museum curator Marcia Tucker, who was smart, open, and carried her body and her learning easily. They were both generous personalities who wanted to put like-minded artists together. Besides, there were then just a very few galleries in Soho to hang out in, and it was easy to meet people. Minimalist painter Robert Zakanitch visited my studio. He left, shaking his head

dismissively, saying that I was doing wallpaper. Next thing I knew, Bob was a leading Pattern Painter doing gorgeous wallpaper paintings. Collector Larry Aldrich also came to the studio at this time. He was a man in love with *schmutz*, and he wanted to buy my multicolored radiator, which had backstopped the excess spray.

Painter Mario Yrissary included me in a meeting in his loft to prepare for his February 1975 *Artist Talk on Art* panel entitled “The Pattern in Paintings.” Robert Zakanitch held a “Pattern” meeting at his loft in 1975, and there I met Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, and Miriam Schapiro for the first time. Several meetings were held the following year, first in Schapiro’s studio, then in Kozloff’s. Many of the leading practitioners and theorists of Pattern Painting were in the women’s movement. Indeed, our Pattern Painting consciousness-raising meetings and supportive networking were based on their experience with consciousness-raising groups. As these meetings continued, our philosophy progressed: we realized that we need not be defensive about our enthusiasms, that *decorative* and *craft* were not bad words, and that beauty was not an ugly concept. Texture, richness, color, detail—these could be part of important art. Serious did not have to be so dry—white boxes in a white room—that your tongue stuck to the roof of your mouth. “Women’s work,” such as quilt, lace, and basket making, deserved loving consideration. (After much debate, we decided to call ourselves Pattern and Decoration, or P & D, but Pattern Painting still stuck, too.) Consequently, this art movement is often equated with feminism by feminist critics and historians, but in fact they do a disservice to the artists, both women and men, when they reduce it to a one-word slogan.

Also part of Pattern Painting was the new mathematics of tessellation, which was described in the general press, as well as in books by a group from the Royal College of Art in London. Originally a catalogue of the seventeen major ways to fit tiles together to cover a plane precisely, the mathematics of tessellation was expanded in the seventies to the covering of curved surfaces, to irregular and quasi-regular tilings, to the filling of three-dimensional space with constant or self-similar units, to sophisticated analyses of the Islamic traditions we all loved. Our movement was open to this mathematics and appreciated the practical help it could provide. The most craft-oriented decorati were

among the most interested. Mathematics, as in algebra or calculus, was completely alien, but this kind of geometry was considered natural.

Jane Kaufman talked her dealer, Tony Alessandra, into having a show of the new style, called *Ten Approaches to the Decorative*, in September 1976. Of the ten artists exhibited, Valerie Jaudon, Kaufman, Kozloff, Schapiro, Zakanitch, and I were later identified with Pattern Painting. It was the first time our work had been shown together, and seeing our work side by side in a gallery convinced all of us that we were a group, and that each of us could be energized by the other's particular enthusiasms and discoveries within a shared aesthetic. Critic Jeff Perrone put us on the map with a long, well-illustrated article in the December 1976 issue of *Artforum*. Perrone was both supportive and fearful of the new work, and he spent much of the article discussing ways in which we were or were not like Frank Stella, which—grateful as we were for the ink—was a bit like the *New York Times* discussing how *The Daily Worker* was and was not like the *Wall Street Journal*.

The next big group show was in Brussels at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in early 1979. Joining the artists mentioned above were Robert Kushner, Kim MacConnel, and Tina Girouard. By the time of the Brussels show, we were a confident, self-aware movement, all selling well in Europe and to a lesser extent in the States. (Big-time European art dealer Bruno Bischofberger bought twenty-five of my paintings in one fell swoop.) The Pattern and Decoration reunion exhibition at the Hudson River Museum in 2007 dropped Girouard and added Cynthia Carlson, Brad Davis, and the lone sculptor Ned Smyth. This group of five men and five women was a historically accurate re-creation of the ideas and energy of what Holland Cotter called “the last genuine art movement of the 20th century, which was also the first and only art movement of the post-modern era and may prove to be the last art movement ever” (*New York Times*, January 15, 2008).

Pattern Painting and Spatial Complexity (a group that does not have an accepted name but does have a shared aesthetic), though seemingly opposite in tone, were really two sides of the same coin—very different mintage from the fifties and sixties. Like the Pattern Painters, the Spatial Complexity group detested Minimalism and its stranglehold on the avant-garde. Both groups resented the irony and camp of Pop, by then a competing

establishment style, as both the Pattern Painting and Spatial Complexity groups ardently searched for a coherent worldview relevant to a new, more engaged, set of values. Still, most of these Space artists worked in monochrome at the time, and, aside from myself, these male artists were uncomfortable associating their work with Pattern Painting (much less Pattern and Decoration), especially when it morphed away from painting itself to installation art. And so, in spite of a philosophical compatibility of the work, the two groups looked very different stylistically and were assumed to be hostile camps.

Most of the artists in the Spatial Complexity group had a connection to Al Held, as either former students or assistants, or just as friends. From Al's point of view, I was a soft college kid, as were the other young men in this group. Al had dropped out of high school and lied about his age to join the war effort as a Navy diver. It was a dangerous, physically demanding job where survival depended on his own ability and effort. Held had the build for it, though; he was compact and beefy. Al was always a bit jealous of my education (Yale graduate school, after all) and my ability to write out my thoughts. For the most part, I and the others had cushy teaching jobs, whereas Held took his GI bill in Paris to study art and then drove a cab as part of the nescient artworld in New York. Still, at thirty-five when I met him, Held was teaching at Yale and showing in the best gallery in New York. You never escape your personality: Al was a bully, and it was said of his early work that he used the brush as a blunt instrument. His later work, too, had a coldness of surface that belied the richness of the space. Truth be told, he was never overtly hostile to me, though his affection waned and waxed. Al was tough on himself too, never satisfied with what he had accomplished, which allowed him to remain creative his entire life.

I liked what was happening in my Pattern Painting meetings, and artists who were interested in building convoluted spaces that by necessity included the use of illusion were just as much in need of togetherness, just as much out in the cold, as my Pattern Painting friends. And so I organized more formal meetings to accompany rounds of studio visits and art talk in bars. Bill Conlon, Richard Friedberg, Fred Guyot, and Al Held were regulars, and sometimes art critic Irving Sandler and sculptor (and Bucky Fuller follower) Ken Snelson attended. We met at my loft at least once and maybe altogether four or five times over the course of a year or so.

The talk of the Spatial Complexity group was about the books and science magazines we read. Our meetings reached a crescendo in the spring of 1979, when there was an Einstein centennial celebration consisting of public lectures. I sat in the same row as the great physicist Paul Dirac; the physicist Dennis Sciama was a riveting speaker, and many others lectured during the three days of the conference. We artists argued about how to visualize the complex space of contemporary physics, and especially how to tease out a new way of thinking, a new set of values—the either/and logic of the quantum world rather than the either/or logic of classical mechanics. If we made works in which time ran both forward and backward, where cause follows effect, where there are several concurrent paths from past to present, where many spaces lay on top of one another—if we could do any of that, we would be imitating nature as opposed to retyping yesterday’s news. As Bill Conlon remembers the meetings: “There was a mystery about the space of physics, and a celebration of ideas. We sought to make our work relevant to modern ideas.”

Subject Space was the name of our first exhibition, curated by Ellen Schwartz for the Pratt Institute galleries in Brooklyn and Manhattan. (Al refused to participate.) In the accompanying catalogue, Schwartz wrote: “[Their work is] characterized by the desire to find beauty in complexity and satisfaction in their effort to fathom the unknowable. . . . The resulting inconsistencies, paradoxes, and contradictions in their work are seen as positive qualities. . . . Robbin establishes a spatial warp that is at once logical and discontinuous, in front of us and around us.”

The artists of the Spatial Complexity group settled on a general visual strategy of putting more than one space in the same place at the same time. The problem for the space painter (or sculptor) is how to make space without making a painting of railroad tracks and telephone poles receding into the distance. Lattices, patterns, and geometric figures such as cubes and cylinders repeated in patterns were often used to define space. The problem was to make these markers for space be tenuous and generic enough so that they lost their objecthood and became spaces, plural, that were overlapped and interwoven in paradoxical ways. Conlon, Guyot, and Held made the same area of white be a hole to the background, a sheaf in the mid-ground, and a plug on top of the painting. Friedberg made structures of different scales that physically interpenetrate and weave in

and out of each other. The challenge for all was to see how many spatial readings could be held in the mind at the same time. I came to feel that five was the magic number; at first, one would see these spatial structures one at a time; eventually by repeat viewing one could see two at a time, even three or four at a time.

I found that the study of four-dimensional projective geometry, especially as presented in computer graphics, was a way to enrich my spatial capabilities, and I tried to interest my colleagues in the study. None took me up on the offer, but they all remained interested in the space described by contemporary physics, and all maintained the goal of putting more than one space in the same place at the same time. I also felt that the rich multiple space we made should be celebrated with the lyric color of my Pattern Painting colleagues.

To my great satisfaction, some critics got what I, what we, were trying to do in creating a new kind of space. Carter Ratcliff gave me credit for a new aesthetic: “The irreconcilability of the spatial systems in these paintings is to be recognized as deliberate; that is Robbin has generated new intentions.” Ratcliff also praised me personally: “His dedication is intense, which accounts for two things: his openness toward the work of artists in his vicinity, whatever their styles, and the fact that the ‘look’ of his own art is so immensely rich and challenging.” *Soho Weekly News* reviewer John Perrault said that “The space in Robbin’s painting is not like the space of Alberti, not the space of Cézanne, not the space of Pollock. It warps, it moves, it swoops off in all directions. It is not like any illusionary space I have seen before.” Perrault concluded that the space was “four-dimensional,” a term also picked up by critic John Yau in *Art in America*.

What more could a young artist want than to have his work understood and written about! But I was foolishly keeping score by counting money—sometimes selling out shows, but still not satisfied because of low prices. Perhaps Bob Gray, my boss at Silvermine, was right: *am I a square or what?*

As time goes by, we see that Pattern Painting and Spatial Complexity were not so different. I was brought up in cultures that did not distinguish between the beautiful and the profound. I did not want to hobble either leg. I did not want to be half a person, to live half a life, to make half art; I wanted to have a life of the senses as well as a life of ideas and issues. It makes no sense to make a new world for yourself if you cannot also find

pleasure in it. If younger artists were to find a way to fuse complexity and sensuality, then that would be a legacy.

Tony Robbin, Chapter 2 of my memoir *Mood Swings, A Painter's Life*.

