

surface tension

Western Gallery, Western Washington University
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The exhibition *surface tension* looks at the significance of pattern as a device for communication. While highly abstract on the surface, these new works display a deep search and concern for legibility. These contemporary artists do not declare their subject matter to be the homage to a design source or multicultural politics, but rather they consider the psychological, physiological, and expressive powers of pattern.

These artists (5 from California, 4 from Washington) presently re-evaluate a breakthrough in art which actually occurred in the seventies. The earlier, so-called "pattern and decoration" artists of the seventies had questioned the dichotomy of anonymous work versus the ego of a single artist; craft versus fine arts; decorative work versus art making; utilitarian versus aesthetic function. Working against closed definitions, such as decorative as gender oriented or feminine, these artists of the seventies sought a wider cultural consciousness in regard to the definition and production of art. They were inspired to use in their work many sources ranging from American vernacular culture (such as wall paper and linoleum) and Oriental rugs to folk art and Third World textiles. They not only emphasized collaborative work as well as singular creation, but also frequently sought an integration of painting, sculpture, design and architecture.

On the surface of many of these works of the seventies, artists both magnified and repeated a decorative motif and modulated the underlying ubiquitous grid with color - sometimes garish - and texture. While their paintings tended to emphasize the flat, taut surface, their two-dimensional works hinted at an extendable order. At the same time other artists actually used the floor as a similar leveling device between object and viewer. Some of the artists also stressed the kinetic side of pattern in their performances. Yet, in the seventies, the use of pattern and decorative motifs engaged discussion oriented towards formal structure and the obvious politics of power rather than an emphasis on the deeper meanings of pattern.

Now, pattern can be illusive and involve the idea of time and memory as well as the idea of the spiritual. Since in the past decorative arrangements have been seen as vehicles of leisure and pleasure, contemporary artists ironically use this "decorative impulse" to express patterns of desire. Meditation, memory and desire are all models of thought. Pattern also becomes creative tracks, the layering or even masking of life's experiences. Finally, some artists scan scientific diagrams, study fractal and chaos theory, examine guides to behavior, and represent configurations of genetic coding, all in a search for interfaces between the individual, nature and culture.

While **Sharron Antholt's** interest in fresco partially stems from time spent looking at Italian wall and ceiling decorations, her motive is to delve into its earthy (sand and lime) process so to understand the literal molding of meaning. The fresco painting process itself is intensive with successive layers of wet plaster mingling with preliminary sketches and modified tracings. While Antholt retains the surface color of fresco- drawn into the drying plaster to become a permanent part of its aged skin, she also amplifies its texture to create a different type of object on a tableland. Thus, she reinforces both the continuous buildup of different strata as well as the slow modification of cultural status or meaning over time.

In **Jamie Brunson's** paintings, multiple panels dense with color and repetitive shapes join together. The viewer does not dwell on her sources, whether Islamic architecture or the Asian

mandala (also a type of architectural model), but rather he finds himself at a threshold where the boundaries of ordinary time and real objects have just been suspended in an omnipresent light to allow for a new model of time incorporating memory and spiritual meditation of images. **Bonnie K. Neumann** also has an interest in all-over decorative patterns, as found in Middle Eastern designs. Rather than creating Brunson's liminal space, she looks at how artists and artisans created intervals between their motifs. She heightens these ancient samples of variances and creates her own painting surface of off-registered focal points and/or blurred openings. She focuses on the virtues of impurity in her series, *Secunda Materia*, thus paralleling the alchemical process where base materials change into gold and become an elixir for longevity.

From another angle, **Francesca Pastine** examines duration through the eroticism of Narcissus. In her shimmering *Curtain Painting(s)* and highly reflective industrial surfaces - spotlights- on the floor, she extends to the viewer this mythical figure's desire for replication. The viewer moves back and forth from wall to floor, from a shower of flower petals to a landscape or pool of excessive self-absorption. **Cara Jaye** reveals another story of obsession in her fiber/digital media piece, *Unraveling*. While she directs our attention towards the story of faithful Penelope weaving and unweaving her adventuresome husband Odysseus' shroud, she really expresses the constructive and de-constructive patterns within the artistic process itself. Similar to Jaye, **Roy Tomlinson** also welcomes opportunities of escape. Through his paintings he searches for subtle shifts in repetitive conditioning and evokes "blinding structures" or gates which also seem to open up to new territories.

Reed Danziger finds delight in unexpected inflection in tightly woven units. In her paintings she fixates on successive layering where cultural shapes, as the concentric circles of the mandala, overlap, seem to mutate, or have a morphous relation with microscopic, natural shapes as protozoa. **Susan Dory** also is interested in alteration and regeneration. With ironic titles as *Model Peerless* and *Leg Looped Through*, she takes the genetic codes or patterns of human cells and puts them in a time-motion study resembling the cross between eccentric, mannered movements of the hand and the electric circuits of high tech systems.

Simply described, **Lou Cabeen's** *Groundwork* has a small gleaming green pattern which runs through a ribbon of brown jute, a seemingly endless loop (525') on the floor. If the brown jute is the background or primary surface, then it is laid with or punctuated with a rectangular shape, a green grid or window of light. Yet, its overall effect is like a primal groundswell from the surface of the earth and/or from the bottom of a body of water. Far too heavy to be a dancer's ribbon, it only allows interacting participants to make foot holes, wading pools, or burrows. Since grids form the structures and codes of numerous cultural systems - from language to science to art and architecture - and since the artist's green pattern is within a large jumbled mound, we could say that there has been a shift in one's foundations and a collapse of reliable meanings or understanding.

Without devaluing Lou Cabeen's own powerful statement in *Groundwork* or diminishing any of the other artists' works, we could say that this woven work refers to some of the elements of Brunson's durational space, Neumann's varying degrees of freedom from systems, Pastine's reflective pool, Jaye's order/disorder, Tomlinson's and Antholt's grounding in earthy pigments, and Danziger's and Dory's instabile codes. Thus, all the artists start from the surface, give and take, and partake in the continual experience of breaking ground and reinvesting in new meaning.

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Director, Western Gallery