

# Beyond Pattern Review

by Christopher Collier

Beyond Pattern

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When I stepped into Beyond Pattern at Newtown's Oriel Davies the modest and carefully arranged space made an oddly strong first impression upon me. Primarily my sense was that, ironically, it would be difficult to establish any overarching patterns across the selection of work on display here which seemed at first glance fragmentary, complex and diverse. Slowly acquiring my bearings I became aware of a sensitive balance of delicate subtly and robust exuberance that defied my immediate attempts to get a handle upon what I was being presented with. There was collage, photography, DVD, installation, drawing and textiles along with mixed-media works and beyond the gallery space itself, the off-site project of Steve Messam's site-specific installation *Clad*. Indeed initially, the exhibition appeared to be constituted as much upon this complexity as it did by any sense of pattern in itself.

As alluded to in the exhibition's introductory interpretive materials, the notion of pattern is an immensely rich and complex one once it begins to be considered more widely. Pattern has extensive and varied connotations in numerous discourses; it can be a conceptual way in to considering issues in a social, political, philosophical, linguistic or aesthetic context. It is the matrix by which we analyse these amorphous cultural phenomena and also that which permits us to conceptualise the myriad disjointed events of physics, biology, or any science for that matter, encoding them in a fashion that enables human understanding to develop. However, to explore the vast and multifarious cultural implications of a notion of pattern is the material of essays, if not books, and so I attempted to address my inquiry to the work first and foremost and attempted to keep my musings upon pattern itself as a means by which to inform my approaches to this work.

One immediate concept of pattern that I encountered in the exhibition was the notion that pattern can encapsulate both work and play. It becomes in a way a visual/physical manifestation of time and work in a similar sense to the way in which Marx saw capital as congealed labour. In this respect an intricately and laboriously worked patterns such as Andrea Stokes' labour-intensive pencil drawings almost becomes a performative encoding of the time and precision required in their creation. In an age before mechanical reproduction such a display of craftsmanship clearly held a different implication than the self-conscious rejection of technology inherent in such a complex drawing. This concentration of time and the performative aspect is drawn out by Stokes' DVD work *Hampshire*, which records the labour-intensive, precision removal by hand of a floral pattern, machine embroidered across the face of a lace curtain. Conversely pattern also suggests notions of play, the removal of the floral forms is playful and unlike work, play suggests the ephemeral. The looping of the video and the birdsong soundtrack takes that ephemerality, of time and sound and play, and re-present it in the form of a pattern for our understanding. As is the case here, pattern is often a representation, a classification, an epistemology.

An ambivalence between notions of work and play is also manifest in Doug Jones' *Non Sum Qualis Eram*. The installation is at once humorous and sinister, the ranks of faceless figures, queue like workers at a production line or soldiers marching in column, uniformed in their individuality. Patterned in cloth from camouflage to animal print, sack-cloth to satin, flags, tartan, or religious symbols these figures appear to be wearing their identity on

their sleeve so to speak, they are an army of multicultural equivalence, their identity stripped of meaning by the faceless, totalising identity that construes them diverse fragments of a unified whole. Their difference is essentially illusory, their sense of identity is lost as they are subsumed into a formless mass of interchangeable individualities, signs and imagery - hence perhaps the title: *'I am not what I used to be'*.

Leo Fitzmaurice's works seems to draw upon a more playful notion of pattern. He takes the contradiction of an archetype of the ephemeral: the throw-away flyer, itself a indistinct signification of the event it promotes (in this case the equally ephemeral artistic spheres of music and dance) and creates from it the most temporal and vulnerable of arrangements. This is pattern but it is loose and liable to break apart at any moment. It seems through the use of *Madam Butterfly* and *Swan Lake* flyers Fitzmaurice is wistfully evoking the freedom and temporality of music and dance (though problematised through the imposition of the formalising codes - patterns - of opera and ballet) along with the archetypal delicacy or vulnerable grace of the butterfly or swan.

At the risk of developing a pattern, the emperality of play is also a central component in a number of the exhibition's more relational works. Messam's off-site commission *Clad* employed a number of local craftspeople to aid in the re-presentation of a traditional timber-framed building, overcoded and overcoated with the fleeces of local livestock, referencing a the heritage and interrelation of architecture, agriculture and aesthetics in this locality. Avoid being deterred by the walk, the obviously comparisons to other aesthetically wrapped buildings or the fear of stereotypes (I will concede that I had reservations before hand, hoping this was not a case of a sheep/Wales connection, although this is a possible angle of humour and playfulness in the work that no doubt played well as an angle with various media outlets covering the installation). In fact this is actually a rather subtle and nuanced work, suggesting enclosure, shelter and the human relationship with the land, a relationship at once exploitative and yet also vulnerable. In keeping with a practice that is largely and self-consciously rural, Messam's *Clad* is both playful and endearing in the vein of his *Beached* or *Signs of the Times* whilst retaining an eloquence that draws upon previous works such as *Fleur de Sel* and *Drop*.

Catherine Bertola's work too acquires this sense of the temporal. It is relational and engaged in the sense that the embroidery was worked on by numerous local volunteers, drawing attention once more to this encoding of time, process and labour that pattern represents. Bertola's practice is characterised by its emperality, the notion of process and the moment, whether encapsulated through dust (as in her *Everything and Nothing* at the V&A or *After the Fact*) or of objects that imply a human story (as her recent piece for Artist Object Project with Brecknock museum). Here, her combination of intricate pen drawings referencing unspectacular individual characters, alongside intensively worked embroidery again echoes those concerns.

Michael Brennand-Wood takes the ephemeral in the form of kitsch and blends it with its opposite, the universal - in the form of a concept also deeply rooted in pattern, that of the archetype. The idea of an archetype, such as Plato's ideal forms, represents a pattern from which are cut all worldly, ephemeral forms. This is this tension that enchants Brennand-Wood's numerous pop-like pieces, the dichotomy between kitsch and archetype. They skirt around a Benjaminian notion of 'Dream Kitsch', through the misplacing of the banal, the kitsch, objects acquire a novelty that undoes our accumulated boredom, they are anti-historical, anti-Romantic; the world of objects advances into human relations and we are defamiliarised. It is difficult to assess in Brennand-Wood's work whether this space of unfamiliarity has the potential to be inhabited by politics, as it did for Dada and the Surrealists or if it has been utterly recuperated into the hyperreal spectacle of commodity. A sphere in which all meaning is impossible, surface pattern signifies nothing, Kitsch is no longer a commodity fetishism but simply a fragmented re-presentation of all there is.

Such a position sits diametrically opposed to the Platonist, archetypal notion of pattern, a notion suggested in the multiple works that make effective use of shadow. Angharad Pearce-Jones' piece *Beam* presents us with a potential reference to the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave, but here the archetype appears no more real than its shadowy, ephemeral re-presentation. The apparently robust and sturdy steel and zinc beam that casts its shadow upon the gallery floor is comprised of the logos of prominent construction companies, adrift upon the instability of world markets. The over complexity and apparent futility (when considered in parallel to the current uncertainty in the construction industry) can be read as a possible metaphor for the intricate and overwrought spectacle of global capital that is its own archetype and its own representation, its apparently solid foundations belong to the realm of the decorative. It is an archetypal postmodern object, re-presenting itself: its art is that of illusion and its philosophy that of disillusion.

Also hinting at Platonic undertones with its use of shadow is Pamela So's *Boudoir*. Its shadows emphasise this recurrent notion of the ephemeral and they are constituted from the reflected gleam of a suspended mirror. The mirror itself is old and plain but the intricate talc patterns upon its surfaces suggesting glamour-drugs; its glimmering, reflected light; the title 'Boudoir' all point to some ambivalence between glamour and banality: perhaps a banality of glamour. The word 'Glamour' derives from a term for an illusory enchantment and with its interplay of reflected light and shadow that is rendered null by the viewer's approach for closer inspection this work can be deconstructed along those lines.

Other works seek to deconstruct themselves or at least the signs from which they draw their imagery. So's lightboxes subtly suggest the cultural encodings that pattern consciously or unconsciously manifests. In these photographs an understated subtext hints at that globalised economy of signs glimpsed in Pearce-Jones' *Beam*. In the apparently banal, and indeed kitsch surroundings, of her photographs meet the patterned encodings of eastern and western culture in a reproduced Klimt painting, a replica traditional Chinese vase and an Indian style carved box. Both east and west meet through the culture of representation, reproduction and signs. The artist herself with her dual eastern/western heritage manifests this allusion. Only the kitsch element of these patterned commodities would suggest there is no longer any genuine meaning located in the production of their pattern, they are patterns of the postmodern condition. It is a notion that finds itself most obviously expressed in Adam King's *Ambivalent Apocalypse*, the absolute ambivalence of a world reduced to mere signs and representations of itself finds the meaningless equivalence of dinosaurs, dodos, soldiers and glitter encrusted skulls. This ostensibly playful explosion of kitsch bursts freeform from the wall in some kind of brash explosion of neon colour and interchangeable imagery. A sly snake and apple hint at the Fall, but this religious meaning is rendered equivalent and empty by the juxtaposed dinosaurs. The war machines and memento mori, the locusts and fighter jets represent to us a spectacle of the end of the world. Pattern here is the infinitely complex and shifting pattern of networks, this is no longer the epistemological pattern of classification, it resides merely in the interconnection of interchangeable, free-floating images. Despite the professed intention of the artist, the work for me gives physical form to this picture of the postmodern.

There is something else going on in this exhibition, something quite new, something intriguing. I began to perceive that it might perhaps be possible to circumscribe some semblance of unity onto this free-floating fragmentation of pattern through the act of constituting it against its other, against its absence. This idea began to form upon the work of Henna Nadeem for it is this constitution upon exclusion that the work attempts. Her collages physically deconstruct the pages of western magazines via the removal of patterns, patterns drawn from traditionally Islamic and Japanese imagery. In this act we are reminded of Agamben's concept of the *State of Exception*, that the unity of the whole is constituted in that which is excluded from it, perhaps the Orientalist other, the void, the

immigrant. It is a vaguely parallel concept to that attested to in Lacan and the lack that constitutes desire and human relations or in Badiou and Žižek and the void that constitutes the set. It is the void, the gaps in the pattern, that constitutes Stokes' *Hampshire*, the void in the form of shadow that constitutes Pearce-Jones' *Beam* or So's *Boudoir*, the white paper as much as the pencil or ink that constitutes Bertola's *Bluestockings* drawings or Stokes' pencil work. It is hinted at in the Platonic ideas that hover around the shadow, the kitsch archetype and in the event that finds itself in the relationality of Bertola and Messam's collaborations with the local populus.

Out of fragmentation a unity begins to emerge, Nisha Duggal's *Wherever you are in the world you take up the same volume of space*, suggests this constituting void in its title. Again taking the language of play and ephemerality, here hinting at computer game icons; the overlooked, kitsch and almost chintzy nature of the pigeon; she creates drawings which become images given a totality through their constituent parts. It achieves the result, in the some ways in the fashion of Lucy Skaer's *Three Possible Edges*, of a construction of a unity from myriad disparate fragments which whilst it problematises methods of conveyance does not preclude them entirely. In the fragmented objects of Brennan-Wood that form that symbolic unity of the circle, similarly in the multitudinous repeating elements that comprise Fitzmaurice's *You Don't Say, (Short Circuit)* pairing which unite to form a flowing circuit reminiscent of the symbol for infinity, again we find a unity. Here it is the infinite as much as the void that constitutes the unity of the subject. Apparently fragmented chaos assumes form when circumscribed by its other, its inversion or its absence. In this we find something quite remarkable, and quite remarkably of the moment in this exhibition.

This concept finds expression in the recurrent linking of pattern as architectural form with the notion of pattern as the preserve of folk-art. Bertola links embroidery to architecture, Messam again relates the traditionally folk medium of textiles to architecture, Pearce-Jones' work lies in an ambivalence between the two. In this conflation of folk and architecture, as in the collision between kitsch and the ideal Platonist form, we find a deconstruction of the dialectical representation of high and low art, fine art and craft. Not just this however, but also permanence and impermanence, the ephemeral and the ideal, the traditional domains of male and female, peasant and bourgeoisie, production and consumption, work and play are also deconstructed. A unity constituted not upon its dialectical other but upon its absence, the void that circumscribes it, begins to emerge. In this perhaps the fascinating complexity and initial fragmentation of the exhibition begins to take shape, begins to assume its overarching pattern.

Beyond Pattern is brilliantly constructed exhibition that leads its audience into so many intellectual possibilities throughout the wide conceptual canopy of pattern. It brings an initially disparate selection of artists and practices and with the delicacy of lace, intricately interweaves them into an enlivening, enlightening, challenging and fascinating pattern of unity. In the process it provides glimpses at an insightful and elegantly captured narrative snapshot of the present cultural moment. This is too intricate an interweaving to write about fully here, there is an amazing level of complexity beneath an initially innocuous surface that will certainly reward the thoughtful visitor with ever expanding avenues of interest and possibility. If our perceptions of pattern are that it implies only the decorative then this exhibition does not so much go beyond pattern as beyond, far beyond our expectations of what it might entail.

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