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**Review: More is more. Why the 'Pattern and Decoration' show at MOCA is pure pleasure**

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Exhibition view of Tina Girouard's Wall's Wallpaper I at MOCA

For most of the last four decades, Pattern and Decoration art seemed wonderfully outré to many observers, an eccentric violation of the standards and norms of serious painting and sculpture that was itself not to be taken too seriously.

P&D, as 1970s Pattern and Decoration was soon called, poked a well-placed finger — or three — in the eye of Minimal art's crisp reduction of austere forms, the sharp idea-orientation of Conceptual art and the fashionable but still critically iffy appeal of Pop art. All those florid fabric swatches, proliferating curlicues, Moorish arabesques, celebrations of Grandma's wallpaper and crystal doorknobs, bright colors, polka dots and plaids were all just — well, just too much.

Liking P&D was OK — but only if the fondness registered as a guilty pleasure, preferably accompanied by mild but self-conscious embarrassment. ("I know better; really, I do.") Soon enough, the movement disappeared into the sandstorm kicked up by loudly marketed Neo-Expressionist painting. By the time the 1980s had come and gone, P&D had too.

Somewhere early on in "With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art, 1972-1985," the large — and important — new historical survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, it occurred to me that something unexpected happened while we weren't paying much attention. Without fanfare or warning, P&D no longer looks like a bizarre defilement, breach or disruption of anything at all.

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Instead, P&D now just looks like art. Some of it is superlative, some is not; but to dismiss it wholesale is plainly an error in judgment.

The erudite seriousness of the endeavor, which has been there all along, has risen to the surface of the playful, imaginative, often flamboyant paintings and, occasionally, sculptures and documented performances. That the work no longer appears frivolous or out of place is certainly not an indication of the stature the movement now occupies in the history of recent art. P&D holds no such illustrious place.

In fact, MOCA's is the first full accounting of the movement undertaken by a major museum. It is something of a return to what made the place major in the first place — an institutional willingness to do the big, thematic historical surveys from which others shy away. MOCA has done it for Minimalism, feminist art, Conceptual art and performance; add P&D to the impressive list.

A few other modest shows of this material have cropped up here and there, but the uniqueness of this one, organized by MOCA curator Anna Katz and featuring 100 works by 45 artists, is indication enough of the institutional blind spot in which P&D has long languished. "With Pleasure" instead reveals that the once seemingly oddball positions these artists championed are fundamental to the art being made today.

P&D artists drew and elaborated on myriad artistic sources, appropriating aspects of global practices for their own varied purposes. Twentieth-century modernism was a distinctive cultural form that emerged in the West, but the world — and its art — is larger than that.

But if '70s P&D is in one way the unexpected offspring of a marriage between '60s Pop and Minimal art, its midwife is Conceptual art. That is spelled out in Tina Girouard's "Wall's Wallpaper I," one of the show's gems.

Four vertical strips of fussy, pastel floral wallpaper are mounted on a muslin backing 5 feet square. Clematis climbs a trellis, sprays of yellow roses cascade down a crisscross background and more. Adjacent is a framed sheet of graph paper with instructions, carefully handwritten in pencil, explaining how the wallpapers are to be selected, arranged and permanently installed on a wall.

"Wall's Wallpaper I" is a marvelous sendup of classic geometric wall drawings, complete with their own complex sets of instructions, by Sol LeWitt, a founder of Conceptual art. It raised a vexing question. If the idea (or concept) behind the work is more important than the finished art object, per Conceptual art's assertion, why not just use Granny's decorating scheme from the parlor? It's loaded with sentiment, unruly memory and wit.

Lurking within Girouard's example is a salient feature of P&D and its awkward history. Domestic materials evoke a traditionally female purview. It is worth noting that women are central to the Pattern and Decoration movement. (Of the 45 artists here, 28 are women.) The grid wasn't only a mighty structural legacy of the Industrial Revolution — of the layout of the city block and the skyscraper's steel framework, forms conventionally associated with male labor. The grid is also the foundation of needlepoint embroidery and a basket's weave.