

Jeff Perrone on Decorative Art, excerpts from several essays

from “Approaching the Decorative,” *Artforum*, December 1976

The idea that ten artists would agree to be placed together as a group and exhibit under a collective title is not a completely new one, but it is one that has been out of circulation for some time. An artist-defined sociality determined by a common concern – one might even call it a “cause” – creates a situation opposed to the large group show of the ‘60s, which usually stuck artists in erroneous categories (examples: Johns and Rauschenberg as Pop artists, or Noland and Poons as Op artists). What is most troublesome in the new show “Ten Approaches to the Decorative” is, however, *that word*: decoration. Since “decorative” is about as pejorative a description as “literary” or “theatrical,” it is something of a shock for these artists to use it deliberately to characterize their work. But the word misleads if one expects homogeneity, for the works do not resemble one another – these are *ten* approaches. Except for one thing perhaps: the artists can all be said to work in a definite anti-Minimalist style.

Many of the artists use holistic, nonrelational motific systems reminiscent of Stella. This should not distract us from the basic methodology at work: collage. As much as the formal structures used are identified as the decorative part of the work, there must be a grounding technique that will achieve that structure, and it is collage. I discriminate between two kinds of collage, which may occur simultaneously in the most dense and complex work. There is *literal collage*; that is, the actual use of pasted paper, or real objects added to what is essentially a painting or sculpture. Then one has *metaphorical collage*, where the formal characteristics of the work, whatever they are (meanings, overtones, elements), take on greater resonance because they have been decontextualized and then layered, not merely juxtaposed.

Decoration becomes decontextualized by virtue of its being borrowed. The source of the materials or motifs must stay clear, but the materials occur in a dissociated context, i.e. a painting, or sculpture. They appear out of context instead of as a design on a tile, a pattern on a quilt, or a repeated unit on a piece of fabric. Removed from its usual role, the decoration becomes both sign and design, both itself and quoted material (as in the dual situation of Johns’ *Flags*).

Usually, one would expect art to transcend such borrowing, to reinvent or perhaps confer new status on the decorative sources. On the contrary, this work refuses to prearrange emotional responses or established value systems. Also, the forms, which may strike us as neutralized, can be filled with any kind of meaning, for example, as reference to other decoration, as a feminist statement, as a diaristic accumulation of experience, as a pun or, modernist painting, or even as a diagram of the “fourth dimension.” And the metaphoric collage of reference may assume any formal pose, from static to complex....

...Joyce Kozloff’s large painting in this show openly states what she’s interested in – designs and patterns on Amerindian blankets and rugs, Islamic ornamentation, gyroscope configurations, as well as the strategies of formalism, which she dissects and then refutes.

Although this work refers to local passages from Stella (once again!), the motifs behave simultaneously as flower forms and illusionistic abstract elements. They are not isolated singly as in a Stella, but repeated systematically across a large surface zone. Kozloff's form of collage is more literal than the others in the show, except Schapiro. The overall effect of her work is like Rauschenberg of the early '50s. Instead of literally using printed, embroidered cloth, clothing, quilts, etc., Kozloff paints the patterns, uniting them on the surface, but keeping their separate identities. She decontextualizes the patterns by making them decoration alone, removed from their functional base or object. Her work is thus a homogeneous flat collage, almost a contradiction in terms.

The decorative systems of this painting, *Hidden Chambers*, are opposed in color, style, and motif, but are grounded in their common surface. For all the dry regularity and tightness of execution, Kozloff's work is irrational and playful. Her statement, "Negating the Negative (An answer to Ad Reinhardt's 'On Negation')" is also a playful disavowal of the formal and philosophical basis which led to the "pure, purist, puritanical, Minimalist, post-Minimalist, reductivist, formalist, pristine, austere, bare, blank, bland, boring," etc. art which she is attempting to undermine. Yet her paintings are not didactic or pedantic. They are humorous – and that is rare in modern art, where humor usually takes the pose of parody.

JOYCE KOZLOFF, *Artforum*, November 1979

JOYCE KOZLOFF's exhibition/installation "An Interior Decorated" employs every surface save the ceiling, so the whole overwhelms at first in a dazzling array of color and pattern. A case could be made for the importance of its overall effect, but for me, her art really comes to life close up. You have to get near to see the tiles, to see what they're made of, how they're painted, how they're different from one another, where their pattern-units come from. You have to get down in a prone or prayerlike position on the floor to savor the complex collage of cultural material. The pattern structure of star/hexagon does not form larger parts which form larger units which then coalesce into a whole. Approximately 1,000 individually painted tiles cover the platform, and the pictorial ones have different pattern-units that are not repeated. Some of the elements even eradicate the repeating star/hexagon pattern and small areas of the floor "lose" the dense allover, pointillistic effect, opening the structure up and out into breathing spaces.

Kozloff's idea of decoration and décor preserves the separate integrity of different ethnic cultures, but "Interior" insists on our understanding the individual tile and its identity. What Kozloff does not give is a "melting pot," or simple gestalts - reductions for the sake of comprehension at a glance. Different tiles and different sections of the room must be taken in at their own speed. Some of the tiles are intricately designed, others are solid colors. The wainscoting in the room, printed on paper from Mainland China, is from a series of lithographs titled, "Is It Still High Art?" Value judgments as to the respective qualities of faster or slower sections, brighter or quieter tiles, "blank" or "busy" areas are put on hold, humorously and rhetorically held up to scrutiny. An implied definition of decoration might be that which we can understand visually without having to go through elaborate cultural indoctrination.

Kozloff's borrowings are piecemeal rather than whole; the room is not a gigantic transference of a foreign visual superstructure into the art gallery (the "Interior" has been negatively compared to the Alhambra). The tiles comprise a collage, and collage structures the room – the juxtaposition of silk banners, pilasters, printed paper, alternations of fabric and clay. Her generous cross-cultural and multi-material conception takes precedence over any general organizing principle derived from another *single* architectural interior. Further, this "decoration" is not specific to its site, as Kozloff writes; it would work anywhere there was enough room for it.

If there is a more general principle which organizes "An Interior Decorated," it is not strictly visual. Kozloff's use of foreign cultural material and craft traditions is exemplarily nonexploitative of its sources. This may have had its practical side: Kozloff must be aware that she cannot compete in technical facility or expertise with the artisans she borrows from – but she can dream about it, admire it, make her own fiction with its possibility (part of the room is titled "Tut's Wallpaper"). Such competition, where the Western artist "outdoes" the source material, exploiting it, is anathema to Kozloff's implicit political position.

Kozloff only refers to and mimics these other traditions, as a desire for understanding and companionship, for a diverse community of decorative artists. She can use a material like clay or "decorative" motifs, debased in Western High Art, for their underdog social status, as a reflection of both her own status in the (art) world as a woman, and as an artist in a society where art supposedly does not touch everyday life.

Closer to home, Kozloff's example defines some of the strategies of the new decoration. Her motives, whether severely geometrical or peacock feather curlicue trellises, punctuate space locally and do not just fill it up. Her use of detail opposes the dominant pictorial mode of structuring abstract shapes for the last 20 years – that is, deductive structure and its hierarchical control. Close up, Kozloff's art refuses the modernist allover saturation, and gives us instead a variety of intervals, densities, balances and imbalances, weights, and lots of color. Her ideology and practice mediates between the informal, customary rules and values of the craft workplace and the formal authority structure of High Art, producing a new Decorative Art in the human space where they meet.

from "Every Criticism is Self-Abuse," *arts*, June 1980

Joyce Kozloff's newest tile wainscoting is in three parts. The two outer sections have inner rows, on one side, flowers, on the other, fruit. They are so beautifully painted I have the feeling that this is what she's been trying to accomplish all along – the representational expressiveness of her models *and* their outstanding technical finesse. Technique has been devalued in modern art like the decorative has, and for no good reason. It used to be that the *idea* counted for everything, but we have seen how outright dumb art got when it was just "idea."

In a good art joke, an *hommage* and act of delightful play, Kozloff chose to paint one of

the tiles with the three pears collage cut-out from the famous Picasso drawing. Of course, he didn't paint them, although one knows he was perfectly capable of doing so, and their mechanical repetition went right to the point – illusion without illusion, the cheap, common image deployed as the image *and* idea of still life. And to turn around and make them painting again, in a miming of collage, of mechanical reproduction, and then to layer that with suggestions of Spanish tiles – it all adds up to an invention of new space where the low and the high no longer battle it out: we're at peace and breathing again.

from “Sign and Design,” *arts*, February 1982

There is a design of objects which we cannot be so very sure about, because this design's possession within the design of Art, under its proper sign, is not at all clear, settled, decidable, constant. With these designs, the name of Art, its sign or design, is not so easily attributed. Art is not proper to these designed objects, and these designs always deviate from the proper of this nomination “Art.” This other field of design has nothing to do, and everything to do, with a deviation from the proper of Art, with a category mistake, with an improper lexical nomination, with substitution, function, disfunction, or copy. “Is it Art?”, a question asked before these objects, continues to be an open question, because this design inhabits two designs at once, and invents meaning through a metaphorical process of the interaction between two designs, and thus redescribing the design of design.

“Is It still Art?” if it functions? What function? (A calculus, a hard stone, a tile, used in counting; a calculus, differential, infinitesimal, integral.) In a certain sense, it is improper to ask the question. In a certain sense, it is proper to ask, for instance, of the *Brillo Box*, Is It Art? because that object situates itself in the design of Art. If the question is asked before a dress, a vase, a fireplace mantle, wallpaper, it becomes, in a certain sense, *improper*. How to calculate its Art component, its decorative component? For its *proper* is a metaphorical expression, an interaction between two overlapping but not isomorphic designs.

The “mistake” of dominant Art discourse – and secondary decorative description – is to reduce decoration to Art or vice versa; or to divorce them absolutely. We would neither identify them nor divorce them beforehand, out-of-hand. We would keep them different in order that a space be opened up for the processes of metaphor to play within. And we would disallow any definition that would identify them completely, or subordinate one to the other (Art before decoration after Art). The *difference* would be metaphorical, not simply literal (according to “function”). This difference would not be one between a “proper” system of design and a “deviate” design, a “debased” design of decoration. Decoration cannot be deduced from Art. Because the two designs, Art and decoration, are different, we say that Decorative Art is what *invents the similarity in metaphor* between the two differing designs, not that there exists some similarity beforehand, out-of-hand, that the similarity between them is already present, given, proper. Decorative Art redescribes both fields of design by inventing this new similarity, leaving neither design unaltered.

Decorative Art is the liaison that yields while resisting within an interaction between the proper of Art and the proper of decoration; the metaphoric acceptance and refusal, the is/is not that succumbs while opposing any proper nomination or identification. Because “decoration” has never, will never, become “proper”-ty to/of Art, its design is never saturated by it.