from PATTERN & PRINT by Amy Goldin
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In the Great Art Sweepstakes, printmakers and pattern artists share a common liability. Everyone knows that in both cases repetitive, half mechanical processes separate the artist's conception and the final product. In an electronic age, devoting a long time to the actual labor of production seems highly questionable: is all this antlike activity really necessary? Can any freshness or daring survive so much drudgery? When simply making a thing takes so long, compulsiveness or commercialism seems a more likely impetus than the subtle ebb and flow of artistic impulse.

People still believe that the transformation of ordinary stuff into a unique work of art depends on the intuitive actions of the artist. A nearly hysterical insistence on that point was a distinguishing mark of Abstract Expressionism. Along with it went other ideas – contempt for "mere" craft and a charismatic version of the artistic personality. That was 35 years ago. Styles and artistic fashions have gone through a lot of changes since then, but craft continues to be déclassé. Intellectualism bypasses rationality and artists have dropped charisma only to concentrate on autobiography and self-examination.

Recently, a group of artists interested in the possibilities of pattern staked out a position they polemically define as antisexist, antiracist, and antielitist. As alternative values they offer respect for craft, rationality, and tradition. Many of them accept decoration as a valid artistic task. Most of them reject the identification of creativity with individualism, the idea that the unique, idiosyncratic work of art is most likely to be noteworthy or satisfying. One of the earliest and most sophisticated of these pattern painters is Joyce Kozloff, who directly challenges many contemporary conventions by taking her motifs from Islamic patterns. Last year, working with master printer Judith Solodkin, she produced a series of three prints, *Pictures and Borders*, that highlights the issues involved in making patterns into prints.

Two independent problems arise from Kozloff's procedures. The first involves the place of the matrix pattern in relation to the finished work: to what extent is the final image borrowed or "traditional"? The second less easily answered, questions the adequacy of the print – any print – as a decorative form.

The design components of *Pictures and Borders I* were drawn from David Wade's *Pattern in Islamic Art*, where they appear on pages 85 and 107 as simple black and white line drawings. Changes in the proportions of the design were involuntary – the effort was to reproduce the basic patterns accurately. If we disregard color and compare the source drawings with the finished print it is immediately obvious that an almost infinite number of decisions could have been made. By varying the scale, spacing, and placement of edges, the same two patterns could be combined to yield many different images. Kozloff chose a format that stresses the verticality of the field design, then reinforced it by setting her center field slightly above the midpoint of the page, emphasizing the buoyancy of the interlace. In contrast, the borders, with their different

visual weights and slightly varied placement within the colored stripe, press downward and out. Floating in space, the central pattern is free from any architectural reference.

Pictures and Borders III, with its more regularized density of pattern, refuses to give open space an active role. Here the viewer is pressed into a much closer relationship to a flatter, more wall-like pictorial surface. It's the difference between a view and a confrontation. The most ambiguous image of the set is *Pictures and Borders II*, where the spacing, the border's asymmetry along its horizontal axis, and the open texture of its pattern combine to give an unexpected solidity to the field. This print was developed in the opposite direction of *Pictures and Borders I* – that is, the dark colors were worked before the light ones were set down and the density of the images decreases centrifugally. In planning the series, Kozloff was trying for the most varied field/border relationships she could get.

Even this brief description shows that the character of each print is surprisingly independent of the specific patterns it uses. It also suggests that the common belief that patterns necessarily produce flat and open-ended images is utterly mistaken. Whenever a surface presents more than one pattern, none can be unequivocally identified with that surface. Moreover, each area of juxtaposed pattern is identifiable primarily as a shape, and pattern is usually subordinate to that shape. Here pattern acts as the equivalent of local color, and juxtaposed patterns do things to each other, just as adjacent colors do.

Kozloff uses her Islamic patterns in a very Western way. Her images are frequently centralized and may contain suggestions of deep space, especially in her large, compartmentalized paintings. Anyone familiar with Islamic pattern will also notice something else. Her designs are drawn from tile-work and woodwork (combining traditions from eastern and western Islam), but the richest element in her work is color, the prime resource of painters and weavers. Her color is used in a free and non-schematic manner, whereas Islamic pattern is always executed in a restricted palette. Its apparent diversity arises from changes of color relationship instead of hue. Consequently, Islamic color maintains a generally even density, while (as even black and white photographs suggest) Kozloff likes a more atmospheric, fluctuating surface. Texture and color vary independently; finely dotted and striped surfaces alternate with unbroken color. As we shall see, these richly varied surfaces have been painstakingly recreated in the printing process.

The novelty of today's pattern artists lies in their adoption of pattern and decorative principles for the purposes of picture-making – a procedure that engenders some of the sociological complexity of Pop and entails some of the aesthetic revisions of color-field painting. Theoretically, the pattern artist's procedures are easily legitimized, but in practical terms pattern is not all that easy to work with. It easily becomes inert, fussy, or (for people easily bored by repetition) simply mechanical.

Traditionally, pattern designers knew how their patterns would be used. They knew the materials in which the pattern would be executed and the use to which the final product would be put, along with the conventions and fashions of that product. All these

pieces of social and technical information played a part in the patternmaker's decisions about scale, motif, color, elaboration, etc. The test of a pattern ultimately lay in being accepted as appropriate to its purpose as fabric design, architectural detail, book illumination, etc. Moreover, the patternmaker could count on the function of the patterned object to provide the physical and social context that would underscore its meaning. The general social context provided a measure of pattern's reinforcement or expansion of the traditional "values" of clothes, architecture, etc. When patterns are incorporated into conventional painting – Pearlstein's nudes say, or the curtains of a Matisse still life – they depend on associational rather than denotative meaning, and convey overtones of such things as luxury, barbarism, or exoticism. Such areas serve as representations of pattern rather than as pattern itself. But the artist who chooses to make pattern his or her topic, the exclusive focus of artistic interest, cannot simply repeat the qualities of a patterned *thing.* That is the real cop out.

Pictures of patterned tiles or textiles are likely to be boring because the original patterns have not been freshly conceived. We are unlikely to be shown anything that has not already been understood and expressed in another medium. Today the pattern artist's problem is to give a pattern in *this* size, medium and form a force proper to its new embodiment. Here a new difficulty arises, for pattern has traditionally been used to embellish a given form; rarely, if ever, has it been expected to provide an experience of form in itself.

A picture or a piece of sculpture needs to be attended to individually. As Matisse said, a picture is like a book. We must approach it, take it from its shelf, and open it before it speaks to us. On the other hand, decorative objects are like flowers. We feel their presence as a perfume, even before we become aware of them. Today, prints are expected to function as art. Can they serve decorative purposes equally well?

While anything placed on a wall inevitably has some decorative quality, the smaller, darker, and more intricate the image, the less effective it is likely to be as decoration. Prints are limited in their decorative potential by their size and by the subtlety and intimacy of their sensuous appeal. That paper does have an attraction of its own is apparent in the number of artists who have recently taken to making it. Nevertheless, printed papers usually absorb light. They lack the mobility and textural variety of fabric, the gleam of metal, the glitter of glazed tile. The delights of printed paper are mostly intimate, interiorized pleasures that escape the public responsibilities of decoration. They demand the same kind of focused attention that paintings do, and for the same reason. Their internal structure is what engages us.

This is essentially true of Kozloff's prints, which yield their decorative richness only to close and intense scrutiny. Their coloristic and textural variety were made possible by the unusual number of plates used, approximately 15 for each of the three images of the suite. Technically, the series became possible as a consequence of Solodkin's development of a method for the flawless transfer of the drawn image to a large number of plates. Kozloff began making the drawings for the plates in July of 1976 and spent the summer working out the color separations. Her materials included four

different lithographic pencils, litho crayons (for the broadest, most solid passages of color), crow-quill pens, inks, and washes. Among the 15 different colors for each plate were metallic links – gold and silver in *I*, silver in *II*.

The long process of proofing these elaborate images required unusually close and protracted contact between the artist and the printer. For both of them the expenditure of time and effort would have been impossible without a CAPS grant in printmaking for $5,000 that Kozloff had been awarded in the spring of '76. And anyone who has ever tried to work in a two-person collaboration will recognize that participants need certain moral virtues – steadiness of character, mutual respect, and an almost abnormal attachment to courtesy. In addition, large projects tend to outgrow the resources allocated to them, and the *Pictures and Borders* series was no exception. The economic outcome of the project cannot yet be evaluated. An edition of 50 was printed, the artist receiving 40. Artist and printer each took half the artist's proofs. As for the abundant supply of rejected trial proofs, Kozloff promptly put them to good use in some marvelously wrought collages.

Although she has worked with lithography before (at Tamarind in 1972), Kozloff is mainly a painter. She has always enjoyed the slow painstaking work involved in developing texture and detail, but the long-deferred security of actually seeing the finished product was admittedly a strain. She spoke of the emotional distance required by the process, so different from the immediate feedback of painting. Nevertheless, thanks to the ingenuity and patience of her printer, Kozloff was able to develop her lithographs in fundamentally the same way that she works out her paintings: a step-by-step elaboration of color and surface that slowly fills in a linear skeleton…..

…Most of us – artists, critics, and audiences alike – are novices in the area of pattern, for two centuries ago the traditions of the Academy divorced the minor arts from artistic seriousness. Pattern itself is an excitingly fresh idea in today's art world, and most critical discourse is still directed at defining and defending it in principle. Moreover, ever since Minimalism we have all seen so much boring art that insensitive and mechanical treatments of pattern can seem reassuringly familiar instead of dead. A recent exhibition of pattern painting at P.S. #1 in Long Island City suggested that discriminating between banal and intelligent versions of pattern is still difficult. For these reasons, the artistic sophistication of pattern in the work of Kozloff and Zakanitch may go unnoticed. The real novelty of pattern lies far deeper than fashion. It involves a new tuning of our senses to rhythm and a new intellectual acceptance of the importance of the surfaces of things. In the process of transposing their patterns from painted to printed images, Kozloff and Zakanitch have clarified the requirements and possibilities of a still-unexplored land.