

## Joyce Kozloff: Visionary Ornament/ Pornament

### 1. "Otto Wagner on Union Square (after the Vienna Stadtbahn)"

Since these new architectural visions were not intended for actual spaces or execution, Kozloff could roam freely through the history of art, combining decorative motifs as she chose. The result of this experimentation was a series of complex, cross-cultural watercolors executed between commissions, moving beyond surface embellishment toward a full program of architectural renovation. In this fantasy, Kozloff has imagined herself coming out of the 14th Street station, looking across the square, and seeing the Austrian architect's streamlined but richly patterned pavilion. The space between the exit and the pavilion is collapsed and ambiguous; the building seems to hover above the station. Wagner's stadtbahn has miraculously appeared in New York.

### 2. "Palazzo Ducale, Urbino, as a Subway Station"

The doorways of the classical palace replace the sunny entrance and pitch-dark exit of a station on New York's subway system. Kozloff humorously mixes the historical Italian ornament with an airline's advertising slogan frequently seen on subway entrances: "A bargain like this only comes along twenty times a day." At first glance, the design strikes the viewer as an elegant Renaissance structure. Only upon reading the signs does its potential transportation function become clear.

### 4. "Matisse at the Green Mosque, Bursa"

In a series of "deconsecrated mosques," Kozloff contrasts specific Western decorative motifs with Middle Eastern structures. One such watercolor, "Matisse at the Green Mosque, Bursa," combines the flat, green honeycombed façade of the mosque with the deep space of a courtyard from Matisse's Fauve period. The plant-shaped ornament painted directly on the walls above the mosque's wings pays homage to Matisse's late "wallpaper" cutouts. As in her mosaics at Suburban Station in Philadelphia, the assertive flatness of the facades and the flatness of the colorful, decorative plant forms contrast sharply with the cutaway illusionism of the courtyard.

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12. In "Revolutionary Textiles", a Soviet fabric pattern, up-to-date in the extreme, provides the decorative foil, sandwiched between human figures drawn from Greek vase painting and Japanese prints. The erotic elements in

both cases are stylized and conventionalized in very different ways, as indeed are the representational elements – airplanes and factories – in the Soviet textile. How does the viewer react to this unexpected conjunction of the sexual and the decorative? Does she or he have to eradicate one reading in order to experience the other? Or does the kind of perceptual oscillation, a psycho-visual vibration in which response to shape, color, and contour, on the one hand, and to sexual arousal, on the other, displace each other in rapid succession? And how would one go about distinguishing between the decorative intentions of the Soviet fabric designer and those of the ancient Greek vase painters, who, after all, were also practicing decorative artists as well as being skilled, and inventive, pornographers? Issues of abstraction versus representation; high art versus low, or mass-produced, art; and cultural ownership and appropriation all are addressed here but without resort to the sensory – and sensual – deprivation characterizing more theoretical expositions.

15. In one of Joyce Kozloff's exuberant decorative inventions, frolicking putti from black Pompeian frescos are interspersed with scenes derived from a medieval bath-and-bordello miniature (cleanliness was definitely not associated with godliness back then), an image borrowed from a present-day gay pornographer, an 18th-century Indian lovemaking scene, and a Reginald Marsh lithograph of Parisian prostitutes dancing more or less naked in a brothel...By recasting pornography as a form of decorative art, Kozloff has been transgressive on several counts: first of all, in the realm of subject matter, a realm in which outspoken representation of the sexual act has always, in Western art at any rate, served to signify the presence of the transgressive. Secondly, she has been subversive on the level of formal practice, treating the copulating bodies that punctuate the aggressively patterned fields of the picture planes as simply another decorative element, no more significant than the stylized borders or highly ornamental backgrounds against which their provocative forms languish, twist, or nestle.

Should a Kozloff watercolor be taken as "pornography" in the strict sense of the term, or is the artist using erotic images appropriated from a variety of national traditions to create a quite different genre, in which the sexual charge must of necessity fizzle, discharge, or misfire because of its inappropriate or contradictory new context? This aspect of Kozloff's work seems aimed particularly at the woman viewer, traditionally excluded from or ambiguously positioned in relation to conventional erotic imagery, which is designed with the male heterosexual in mind...It is the female viewer who takes most pleasure

in the transgressive possibilities these works offer in both their demystification of the sacrosanct wickedness of the pornographic image, and, at the same time, their free play with the sacred texts of all cultures, their disrespectful but often affectionate playing around with the cultural patrimony – patrimony to be taken in the literal sense of “that which is inherited from the father.”

16. The Patterns of Desire series is, on some level, always about pleasure, that most desirable and elusive of experiences. In these images, three kinds of pleasure are at issue, perpetually figuring and refiguring themselves in a variety of ways: the pleasure of the artist, the viewer, and the figures represented in the images. The pleasure of those figures is a given of the pornographic imagination, despite, or perhaps because of, the generally deadpan expressions of the enactors of the pornographic scenario in almost all kinds of visual porn. In a way, this lack of specific expression is a token of the intensity of the experience itself, which is represented as engaging the body in isolation without self-consciousness or ambivalence. The expressionlessness of most of the participants in these erotic games indicates unequivocally to the viewer that what we are looking at and being aroused by are fleshly, not spiritual, exercises...This seems to be the case in “Xtatic Night Blooms – or Rosebud”, in which there are an incredible number of erotic objects and a dazzlingly intricate setting enmeshing them, and the 18th-century English chintz field of action is as sensuous and charged with energy as the tumbling, straddling, clutching figures that adorn it.

Kozloff’s watercolors tend to unsettle any previous notions that the viewer may have entertained, especially about the inevitable seriousness of the erotic experience. Sex, in many of its manifestations, is bizarre or seems so when looked at from outside; at times it is outright funny. It is especially funny when it takes place in the wrong setting – and almost all of Kozloff’s settings are “wrong” from the point of view of spatial, temporal, and visual logic. It is, in a way, just this wrongness that makes them so right...This is a *déréglement des sens*, perhaps, a liberation of the erotic fantasy from the bonds of time and place, a free flight into a crazy, untrammelled garden of earthly delights. Yet at the same time, the Patterns of Desire series draws our attention to the logic, the persistent mechanics, as it were, of erotic production, and by doing so, reveals the limitations of the genre with its endless repetitions, its all too systematic repleteness. By tearing the erotic out of its expected contexts and providing other, less expected and more visually competitive sites for the representation of the explicitly sexual, Kozloff foregrounds both the achievements and the inevitable lacks of the pornographic imagination.

Excerpted from *Patterns of Desire*, "Pornography as a Decorative Art: Joyce Kozloff's *Patterns of Desire*" by Linda Nochlin. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990.