

THE JOY IS IN THE PATTERN

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts (Painting and Drawing)

University of Washington

2015

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Art

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A B S T R A C T

The Joy is in the Pattern

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My thesis project explores the use of carefully orchestrated, patterned paintings depicting domestic interiors with bold, flat, layered planes of color, repeated motifs, and a shallow sense of space. Pattern is everywhere I look - in nature, decorative home furnishings, on clothing, animals, etc. I love pattern and my paintings reflect the joyful contemplation of their orderly repetition. I find inspiration in decorative organic form. From wind-swept leaves dancing on an afternoon run and a beautiful bouquet of flowers at the local market stand to the clothes in my closet and cherished domestic objects, pattern adorns every corner of my life. I have incorporated precious items from my own home, memories of places and things, as well as imagery gleaned from photographs and online content of interiors I can only dream of. The patterns adorning the surface of my work are born from the desire for order and predictability. A sense of balance, repetition, joyful color, and a little bit of friendly confusion guide my decision-making process. My painting represents an artful meditation on everyday, domestic life.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, I have reinvented myself as an artist. I have had the luxury of time, facilities, and critical support to cultivate a deep commitment to an exploration of the questions guiding my art practice. Each day has been spent in genuine pursuit of my interests and sensibilities.

Graduate school has been an exercise in vulnerability - peeling away layers of perceived passions and ingrained creative methods to reveal the central core driving my art practice. This “truth” then became available as a specimen for study. Once known, it was cared for, adorned, and filled with life.

I am grateful for the facilitation of this process by insightful peers, brilliant faculty, and the boundless resources of an academic environment.

The following is an account of my artistic journey over the past two years including the evolution of my methodology, conceptual framework, and influences. This is the research and insight guiding my body of thesis work as I exit the Master of Fine Art program at the University of Washington - Seattle.

METHODOLOGY

My work and working methods have evolved a great deal over the past two years. I have developed a greater awareness of my own deeply rooted tendencies and begun to weave art practice with life. The two have become so entwined that I have no fear of their future separation.

Photocollage

When I arrived at the University of Washington, my work consisted of densely layered oil paint mixed with photographic fragments (Fig. 1 and 2). I thought that I was interested in conceptions



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

of memory and its construction. Immediately after setting up my studio one month before the first academic quarter began, I started churning out work faster than I could process what was happening. It felt like every idea and impulse that had built up over the previous three years was pouring out of me. The pace was overwhelming at worst and cathartic at best. However, it kept me moving forward which is quite desirable in any art practice.

Disordered Repetition

During this time of early experimentation, I continued to work with photographic fragments and painted collage. I also began a large scale drawing pinned to the studio wall. The roll of paper measured six feet long and three feet wide. I would stand and work, repeating a tiny teardrop-like shape over and over again until the marks were sprawled across the surface (Fig. 3). In my mind, the drawing was just a break from the painting I was doing. It didn't even register as a legitimate part of my day in the studio. It was akin to taking a few minutes to eat lunch or go for a walk.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Soon however, the drawing became the primary project in my studio. This transition marked a pivotal moment in the development of my most recent work.

Through the large drawing, I started to understand my interest in meditative, repetitive action. I made watercolor paintings and drawings exploring this approach (Fig. 4). I tried my hand at embroidery, enjoying the way a new material mimicked the drawing tools I was already accustomed to. I was happy to follow the work in a new direction. Where I had been having great difficulty finding a meaningful connection to the photo collage work, dissecting this seeming need for repeated mark became an enjoyable task. Digging through personal history, I found a history of my relationship to a process-based practice:

From a very young age, I was instilled with an appreciation for the fruits of labor by my Father, a blue collar machinist accustomed to working long, hard hours to support his family. Looking back, I remember rewriting entire homework assignments after messing up one little letter or number. The work was done in pencil and could be easily erased, but it was an excuse to copy my writing. I loved the physical process (and I still do). Thinking much later about my very first paintings - which were portraits - my love for the repetitive tasks became further solidified.

Rather than simply gridding out a portrait to copy with squares or triangles, I would use my own strange and inefficient transposition system of tick marks, ratios, and mathematics to identify the location of various features. There would be hundreds of little dashes, carefully measured and placed before the drawing could even begin.

More generally, I have become a creature of ritual routines. My days are an ode to repetition - wake up early, drink a glass of lemon water, write in my journal, roll out the yoga mat, eat breakfast, shower, go to the studio, put my bag in it's usual place, and so on.

It was an epiphany when I finally realized the reason I had been using the collaged photo fragments was my love of spending the time repeatedly mixing paint to match the hues found in the photographs.

These examples became answers to the question "Why?" Finding ties between life and work made it feel less arbitrary. Studio time began to feel like an extremely meaningful exercise in self-reflection, although the search for a more universal and general meaning was still in its infancy.

Ordered Repetition

Most of the aforementioned experimentation occurred during the first year of graduate school. Although I had found some solid ground to stand on, the pace and singular focus on repeated mark left me uneasy. The work was growing organically, on its own accord. Marks floated across the surface of the paper and canvas with little direction or understanding of their containment (Fig. 5). The second pivotal moment that I experienced was the embrace of order.



Fig. 5

The grid as an organizational tool had come up many times in critiques during the third quarter of my first year. It surfaced in artists work that I was looking at (I.e. Agnes Martin). It floated around in my mind for quite a while until I finally decided to utilize its structure. Instead of repeating a single unit organically and intuitively across a surface, I began to organize them into grids. During the summer between my first and second year, I went on a road trip from Seattle to San Francisco. On this trip, I began making small, gridded patterns with watercolor on paper inspired by my surroundings (Fig. 6, 7, and 8). There was a sense of joy - not only because it was summer and sunny and I was on the road with my husband - but that I found in the work itself. The anxiety that always seemed to be lingering in my studio evaporated. This quote from



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Archibald H. Christie's *Pattern Design: An Introduction to the Study of Formal Ornament* summarizes the feeling of freedom that I experienced in these new pieces. He writes:

In exploring the unknown possibilities of a definite proposition it will be found that ideas flow, one from another, with a readiness that unguided effort could never attain; for, it cannot be repeated too insistently, that definite restrictions in no wise trammel

composition, but are actually an incentive to more intense concentration. The faculty of seeing through a design to the basic method which lies behind it, and the habit of speculating as to what new forms it may present - a cultivation of creative imagination - are stimulated by studies of this kind (Christie 61).

This discovery of a love of creating and looking at pattern became a springboard for the work at the beginning of my second academic year. The endless variation of gridded repetition satisfied my innate craving for order, provided a meaningful experience of time in their making, and embodied a sense of accessible sincerity.

Once the school year started, I began using acrylic paint to depict large, repeated patterned paintings. Acrylic paint allowed me to work quickly and in layers. I began with relaxed and intimate sketches studying the form, color, and texture of my chosen subject (Fig. 9). Drawing aided in the development of a relationship with the subject, imbuing it with personal meaning. I created small studies of carefully organized repetition involving a unit derived from compelling elements in the sketches (Fig. 10). Finally, I chose one unit and mode of repetition which became an object of mindful meditation through painting (Fig. 11). I challenged myself to be fully aware of each painted stroke and bodily movement across the canvas.

Formally, the work was of human proportions and made of a grid of identical squares. I employed bold, contrasting colors which created subtle shifts in space. I worked slowly from top to bottom, left to right, one element and unit at a time.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Interiors - A Metaphor

The format of the large patterned paintings was a consistent 2.5x5 feet. Once complete, the canvases were framed with painted wood and called to mind architectural elements - a door frame, window, etc (Fig. 12, 13). It was in this association that I became interested in tying the work - whose visual phenomena had started evoking internal processes and emotions - to interior spaces.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

In my most recent shift of working methods, I made the decision to layer patterned domestic objects on top of my meditative pattern paintings (Fig. 14, 15, 16). The current work has been built and influenced - layer by layer - by the interests and epiphanies I have made over the past year and a half. It has come in to being as a result of an accumulation of experiences - visual, sensual, and psychological. I have incorporated precious objects from my own home, memories of places and objects, as well as imagery gleaned from photographs and online content of

interiors I can only dream of. The patterns adorning the surface of my work are born from the same need for order and predictability that drove me to make my first repeated wall drawing. Each one represents a meditation on domestic, everyday life. Currently, a sense of balance, repetition, joyful color, and a little bit of friendly confusion guide my decision-making process.



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

C O N T E N T

The subject of my thesis work is pattern. I paint everyday domestic interiors with bold, flat, layered planes of color, repeated motifs, and a shallow sense of space (Fig. 17-21). Pattern is everywhere I look - in nature, decorative home furnishings, clothes, animals, etc. I love pattern and my paintings reflect the joyful contemplation of their orderly repetition. I find inspiration in decorative organic form and the spaces we call home. From wind-swept leaves dancing on an afternoon run and a beautiful bouquet of flowers at the local market stand to the clothes in my closet and cherished domestic objects, pattern adorns every corner of my life. Beneath the conglomeration of patterned interiors is a commentary on contemporary domestic life, introversion, and the desire for control over one's self and surroundings.

Domestic Identity

The literal layers of pattern suggest more metaphorical layers of personal identity tied to the repetition of daily life - domestic work (for example, cooking, washing, etc.), the adornment of one's home, and the joyfulness that can be found there beneath the illusion of a bored routine.

The shallow space and emphasis on flatness depicts a whimsical space between reality, memory, and daydream.

According to Emily Matchar, American journalist and writer, "...our current collective nostalgia and domesticity-mania speak to deep cultural longings and a profound shift in the way

Americans view life” (Matchar 4). She gives this home-centric phenomena a name: New Domesticity. As someone who has always preferred a night in rather than an evening out in crowded city streets, I am interested in some of the questions Matchar raises, For example, is this return to a handmade, homemaker mentality sexist, liberating, or somewhere in between? Through my work which is visually inviting, there also lingers an uncomfortable confinement of space. The visual field becomes confusing, complex, and difficult to decipher at times. These effects mirror the intricate notions of domestic identity Machar explores. She defines New Domesticity further as “...the embrace of the domestic in the service of environmentalism, DIY culture, and personal fulfillment” and notes that “though it may resemble your grandmother’s homemaking - this is something new, different, perhaps even revolutionary” (Matchar 12-13). My paintings embrace interior spaces as places of radical, personal identity - bold and leaning towards optimism.

Contemplation

For me, painting is the hand-made expression of a life of introverted contemplation. I think that this strong urge to communicate regarding such a personal space that we all occupy in one way or another stems from my time spent in solitude. I have always had a tendency to pour myself into solitary activities. I am an introvert to the core, gaining energy and inspiration from time spent alone. These activities have changed and grown throughout my life - from figure skating as a young girl, to writing and playing music every day after school as a teenager, to the discovery

of art making, yoga, and running. The majority of my days are spent on activities such as these and if I am unable to have this time, I become flustered, tired, and stressed.

The experience of painting feels akin to writing in a journal, recording personal thoughts which could not be expressed through words or sound. The repeated unit becomes a vessel for mindful meditation on the miracle of life and the relationship between my own personal microcosm and the rest of the universe. Although created in solitude, I enjoy the universality of pattern - that the qualities of decoration can be appreciated by all.

Control

I find a joy in repetition, in control, and predictability as it allows a sense of momentary freedom from the anxiety-ridden world. My process arises from a human impulse to compartmentalize and categorize everything. An abstract yet illustrative depiction of the home is fitting, considering home is where I am most comfortable and exert the most overt control over my surroundings. This comfort allows me to feel at ease partaking in creative activities. Painting these spaces has become a search for meaning in the sum of life's many experiences which is vast beyond my small, human comprehension. In other words, as noted by art historian Ernst Gombrich, "The force of habit may be said to spring from the sense of order. It results from our resistance to change and our search for continuity. Where everything is in flux and nothing could ever be predicted, habit establishes a frame of reference against which we can plot the variety of experience" (Gombrich 171).



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

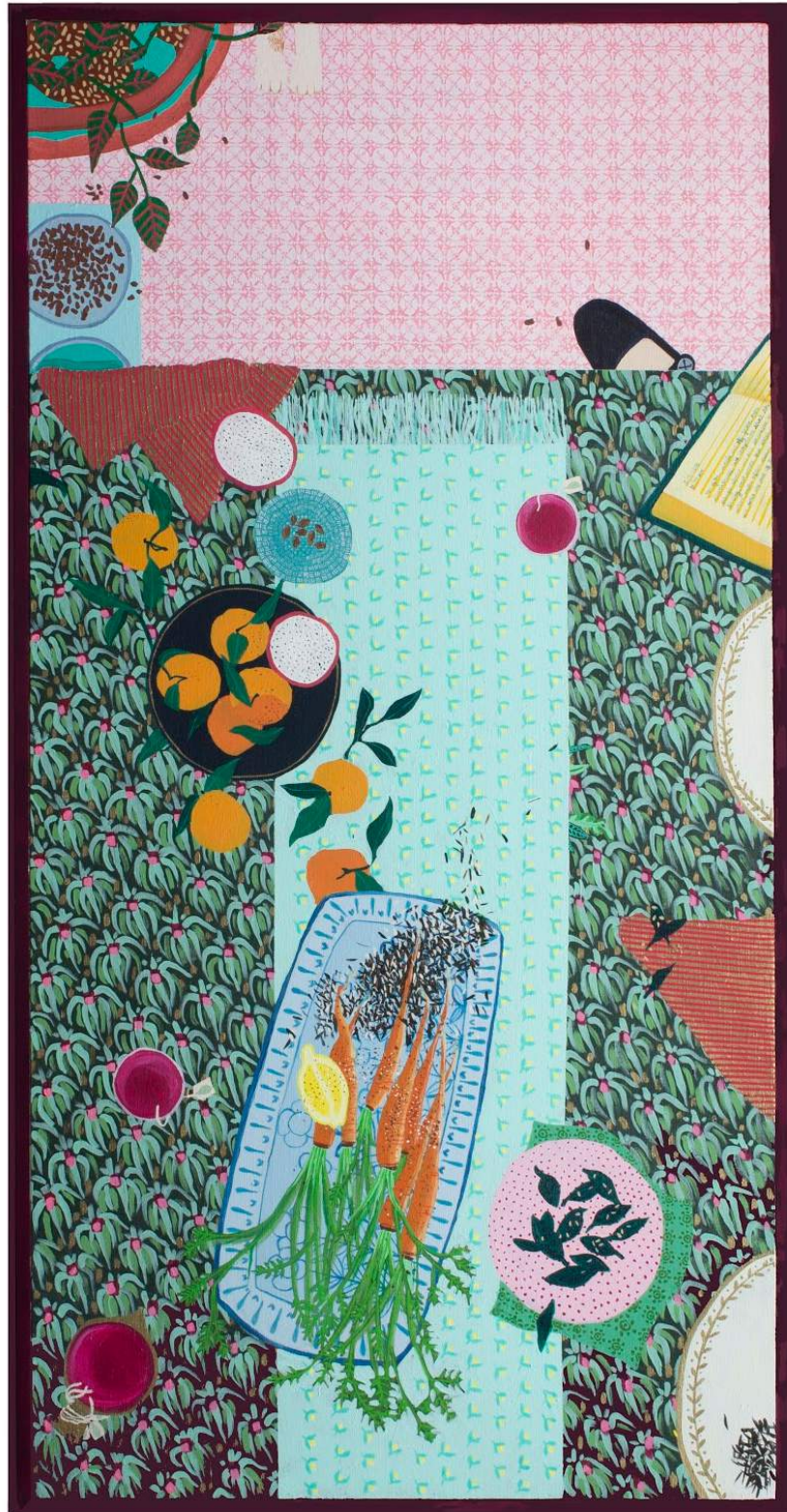


Fig. 20



Fig. 21

INFLUENCES

My work draws upon an array of artists throughout time who celebrate brightly colored, flat, repetitive and/or decorative motifs. Asking deep questions about my process and work led me to also decipher my attraction to various artists and visual phenomena. I found that just as certain vegetables taste better over time because I know they are good for me, artists whose work I would have walked right by previously now pave the way to new ways of understanding.

Yayoi Kusama

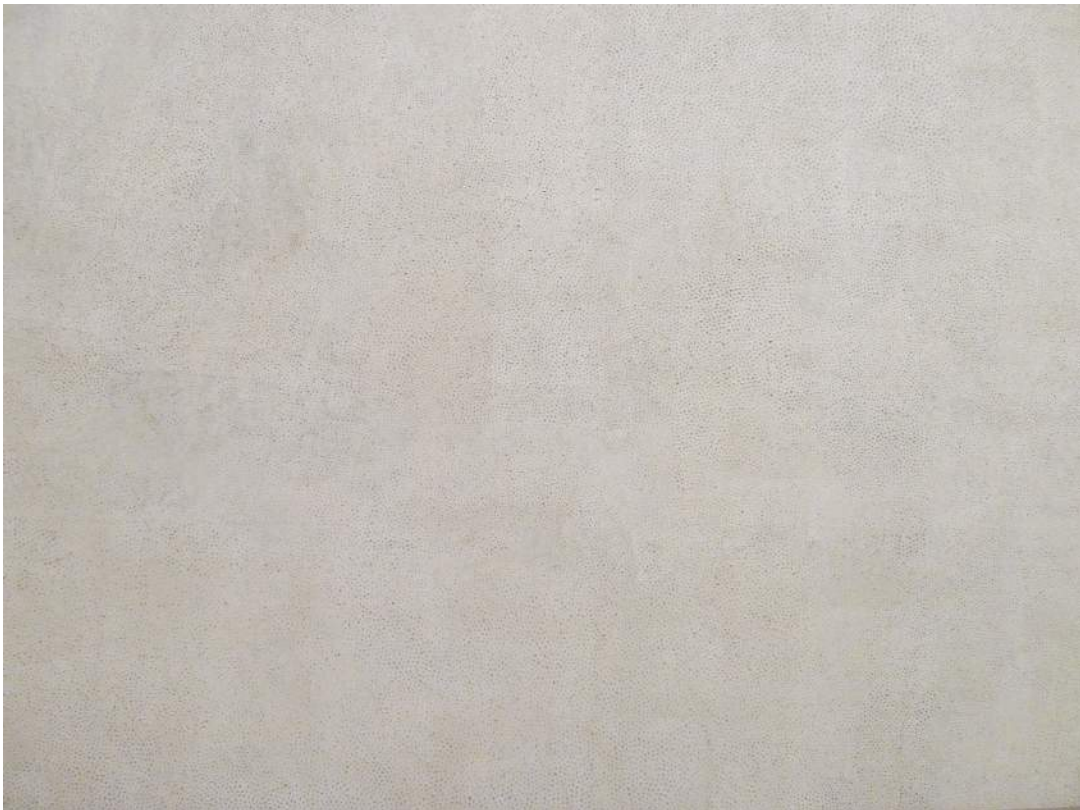


Fig. 22

Yayoi Kusama was one of the first artists that I looked at upon arriving at the University of Washington. Given my new interest in the nuance of the repeated mark, her infinity net series (Fig. 18) was captivating. Following her 1960 show at *Gres Gallery* in Washington DC, Leslie Ahlander of the *Washington Post* wrote: “[Kusama] has gone so far in making each single thread of paint count in an overall composition, which must rely for its interest on infinite variety within a single unity” (Kusama 30). The miniscule variation as a result of the human hand has become of great interest to me. It is of supreme importance that my work is not made by a computer or other machine. This sense of human-ness found in work by Kusama is one that I aspire to convey.

Zak Smith



Fig. 23

Zak Smith is a contemporary artist and 2001 graduate of Yale University living in Los Angeles. He makes acrylic and ink-based works that I have been interested in since my time as an undergraduate student. My work has embraced some sense of his illustrative, bold, contrasting color palette (Fig. 19). Smith's images have a complex, compact nature which invite the viewer in and then push you away, only to have the process repeat endlessly. His self-proclaimed maximalism is overwhelming in the best way possible. My thesis work draws upon this sense of friendly confusion of space.

Agnes Martin



Fig. 24

Agnes Martin was a very important artist at the crucial halfway point in my studies. Her work struck me as I was better understanding my connection to the repeated mark and exploring its potential significance. I found resonance with the contemplative nature of her paintings such as *I Love the Whole World* (Fig. 20). Art historian Ned Rifkin (professor at the UT Austin) in his essay “Agnes Martin- The Music of the Spheres” writes:

Geometry is an abstract system of order concerned with the relation between shapes. It is also an ideal. It refers to a perfection of form that does not actually exist within the natural world. In contrast, the rectangles Martin describes within the square format of her canvases are irregular and imperfect. ‘I hope I have made it clear that the work is about perfection as we are aware of it in our minds,’ the artist said in 1973, “but that the paintings are very far from being perfect - completely removed in fact - even as we ourselves are” (Rifkin 26).

Martin’s sense of imperfection in the handmade gesture, similar to Kusama’s, spoke to me. I am not interested in referencing the world of pixelated order, but in our human realm of striving and everyday living which is never ideal and always messy.

In addition to her painting, I found myself feeling a strong resonance with Martin’s writing. In fact, it was in the following lines that I identified my own new desires for the first time. Martin writes, “My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed for me in artwork which is also wordless and silent.” (Martin 89). In

such a simple few words, an unfathomably deep ambition is set forth. Like Martin, I am interested in accessing my own internal act of contemplation through the making of paintings. I aim for others to connect to this process through the viewing of the work.

Martin also touches upon a sense of joy that is important to my thesis work. She writes, "Happiness is unattached. Always the same. It does not appear and disappear. It is not sometimes more and sometimes less. It is our awareness of happiness that goes up and down. Happiness is our real condition. It is reality. It is life." I appreciate this positive outlook on the world. It is a similar optimism that I would like to impart through joyful color and form.

The Pattern and Decoration Movement

The Pattern and Decoration Movement in the United States from 1975-85 was one of the first places that I turned for inspiration upon realizing my affinity for the grid and repetition. In her essay *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art* in conjunction with an exhibition at the Hudson River Museum (Yonkers, NY - north of NYC) by the same name art historian Anne Swartz notes:

Visual energy in the form of all the new surface designs in fashion and all the color and activity in the home was a compliment to [the varied age of the nineteen seventies]. It was a frenetic period in many ways, yet the Pattern & Decoration artists found ways to meet its challenges by looking outward and embracing what had previously been

overlooked. Robert Zakanitch commented that it was evolutionary work, not revolutionary work, aimed at mending the firmament that is constantly being torn. He continued, “Art can plant seeds of optimism deep into the human psyche.” (Swartz 23).

This group of artists, like Martin, were not afraid of optimism. Robert Zakanitch, whose brightly colored paintings resonate deeply with me (Fig. 21) was concerned mainly with the fundamental issues of form, color, line, and scale. This prompted Zakanitch to find new outlets for painting. Even as his peers rejected the work’s embodiment of this kind of visual pleasure, he wished to create splendid and elaborate surfaces and considered pattern to be a third alternative painting style, after realism and abstraction. His paintings recall garden architecture, feathered cloth, and complex textiles, with displays of rich color.



Fig. 25

The Garden and Cosmos

A group of boldly colored 17th-19th century Indian paintings filled with delicate patterns were crucial in empowering me to embrace decoration as the P+D artists had. These particular works were a part of the *Garden & Cosmos* exhibition which traveled to various international museums from 2008-10. I encountered the paintings while flipping through the exhibition catalogue. I was captivated by their ability to suggest the beauty and vastness of the universe through an intense focus on decorative earthly details. The paintings popped up again months later in an elective seminar on the history and politics of yoga, as though the works were trying to tell me to *listen up!*

In the painting *Krishna Frolics with the Gopi Girls* (Fig. 22, 23) you can see the rich layers of patterning depicted in the scene's foliage. Jodhpur-Marwar used to be the third largest Indian state. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Mughal court introduced Jodhpur artists to sophisticated ideas about portraiture and composition - they became combined with bright, lively local styles. In the late 18th century, joyful paintings about Krishna, Rama, Nath philosophy, cosmic origins, and mandalas came to be of which this is one. In her essay *Mahajara Vijai Singh and the Epic Landscape, 1752-93*, Debra Diamond curator of South and Southeast Asian art at The Smithsonian's Museum of Asian Art wrote:

Representations of transcendent being and matter crystallize the period's tendency through planarity through large fields of shimmering color or abstract patterns.

Paintings that depict an immeasurable universe dense with celestial landmarks juxtapose, to dizzying effect, multiple perspectives and scales. Pictorial sequences with hundreds of shrines led artists to employ grids to organize the surface of paintings (Diamond 37).



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

I like to imagine how these talented court artists would depict my own life and environment after careful observation. In some ways, my work aims to help the viewer transcend the perceived boredom of the everyday to a joyful exuberance of bright color and pattern.

Henri Matisse

Matisse, an unquestionably influential artist to many, has become impossible to ignore given my most recent work. With a rich ancestral connection to weavers, “the decorative motifs on textiles provided Matisse with a dynamic and effective means of suggesting energy and growth, and of

making the space of his painting seem to expand beyond its physical bounds” (Spurling 35). His vast collection of textiles, a domestic good, provided rich inspiration for the work. I have been inspired by Matisse’s use of color and depiction of domestic environments. It is hard to believe I am only coming to study his work now. Famed art critic John Berger said of Matisse: “He clashed his colors together like cymbals and the effect was like a lullaby”. My thesis work does not rely on muted color or a simple emphasis on one color relationship. It is at times a bright cacophony, loud and pulling attention in all directions.



Fig. 28

Edouard Vuillard

For Vuillard, “domestic life was envisioned as ritual, a silent drama” (Brown 9). The artist’s intimate depictions of life inside the home are formally riveting.

The sewing paintings are icons of the inwardness that informed Vuillard’s personal approach to Symbolism. Objects do not stand for specific otherworldly concepts in these paintings, but through tightly woven space dominated by busy patterns, they evoke feelings of intimacy. Pattern is the unifying visual characteristic of these compositions...It is the ensemble of the composition rather than its parts that constitutes it as decorative, harmonious and intimate.” (Easton 55)

The subtle shifts of space and jumps between abstraction and figuration leave the viewer engaged and searching for more.



Fig. 29

Et al.

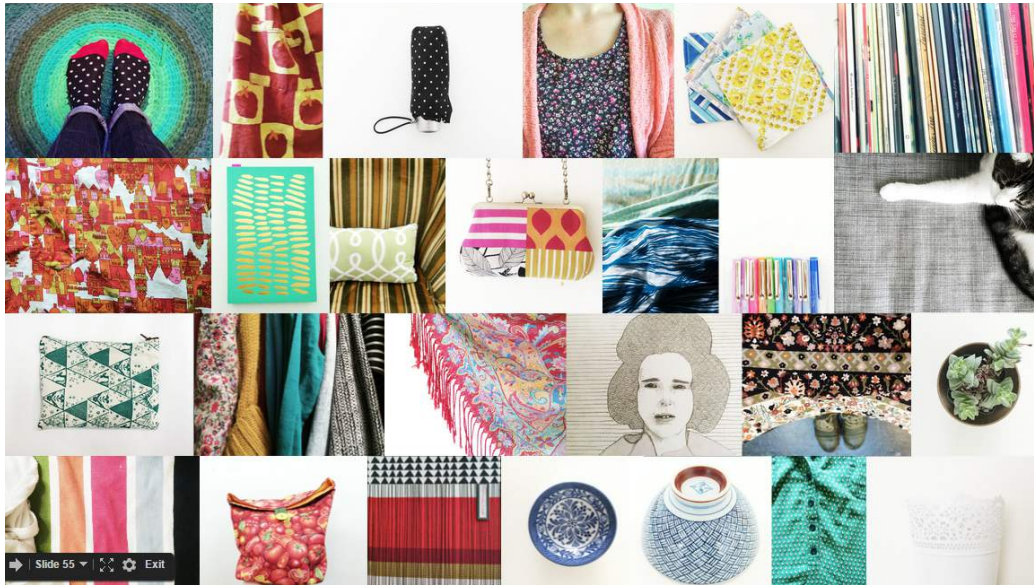


Fig. 30

My pool of inspiration spills far beyond Edouard Vuillard's description of space and Henri Matisse's bold and decorative work. From Polly Apfelbaum's playful sculpture and William Morris' organic wallpaper designs to the work of contemporary painters Laura Jones, Jonas Wood, and Anna Valdez, illustrators KT Smail and Becca Stadlander, and design powerhouse Marimekko, endless inspiration abounds.

Outside of the art history books and gallery walls, my own domestic environment and imagined spaces have been increasingly important source material. Pattern abounds in every nook and cranny of my 430 square foot apartment (Fig. 25). I have spent a great deal of time daydreaming about the day when I will own a house to call my own - what it will look like, the yard, spaces

for creating, playing, sleeping, and reading (Fig. 26).

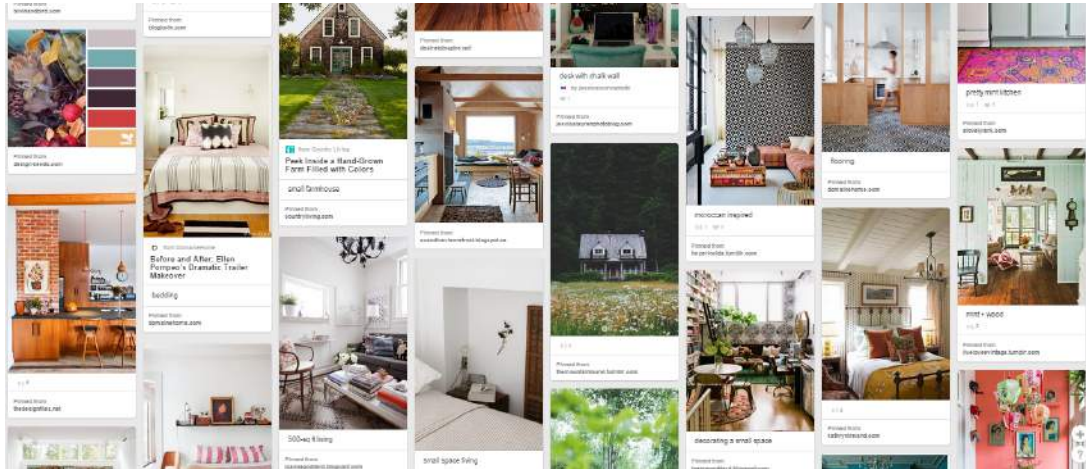


Fig. 31

IMAGE LIST

Fig. 1 - Adams, Maria, *Untitled*, oil paint on panel, 36x36 inches, 2013.

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Fig. 17 - Adams, Maria, *Three Good Things (Yesterday) II*, acrylic on linen, 30x60 inches, 2014-15.

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Fig. 26 - Unknown, *Krishna Frolics with the Gopi Girls*, folio 2 from the *Krishna Lila*, Jodhpur, India, 25x54 inches, ca. 1765.

Fig. 27 - Unknown, *Krishna Frolics with the Gopi Girls*, folio 2 from the *Krishna Lila* - detail, Jodhpur, India, 25x54 inches, ca. 1765.

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Fig. 29 - Edouard Vuillard, *The Flowered Dress*, oil on canvas, 15 x 18 ⅛ inches, 1891

Fig. 30 - Adams, Maria, *Patterned Objects from Around my Apartment*, 2014.

Fig. 31 - Adams, Maria, *Home is Where the Whimsy Is* - Pinterest Screenshot, 2015.

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