BLOOM
by avery wells

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1. statement

I create expressive, colorful vessels and botanical sculptures that complicate the relationship between surface and form. Beginning with historic wallpaper patterns that evoke feminine domestic spaces, I repetitively rework motifs from these sources into illustrations and ceramic objects. I imagine these patterns being squeezed out into space through my hands, peeling themselves off the walls they originated from and taking three-dimensional form. As my work confronts the viewer in the round, I imagine it taking on a life of its own, developing a personality and vibrant agency. I feel that I am able to collaborate with my sculptures, seeking an escape from the historic standards that have been applied to women and their creative work. However, I am also seeking the joy and comfort that can be found by embracing the decorative and elements of my own femininity.
2. NY/NC

In the 1970s, in the heart of New York City, a group of artists convened to discuss the growing centrality of pattern in their works. In a conscious rejection of Minimalism, the prevailing aesthetic of academic art at the time, this group embraced imagery and techniques typically associated with decorative arts. Much of their work was still being made with the traditional tools of paint and canvas, but a majority of their sources came from far outside of the traditional art-world canon: quilts, embroidery samplers, appliqué, ceramic tile, and basket-weaving were just some of the notably diverse reference points. Large-scale paintings and textile works embraced repetitive, non-hierarchical compositions of floral motifs and geometric shapes (Katz, 18-20). Pattern and Decoration (or P&D), as this group’s style came to be known, pushed decorative modes of making into the eye
line of popular critics, forcing an understanding of modern abstraction as comparable to ornament.

In the rural mountains of North Carolina, at the same time that P&D artists were filling the pages of Artforum and ARTnews, my mother was embracing similar artistic sensibilities with no awareness at all that P&D existed. In the house I grew up in, we had an extensive collection of the projects she embarked on growing up - she sewed colorful piecemeal gowns for special occasions, decoupaged found frames and tabletops, macramé jewelry and wall hangings, and more. Like her mother before her (and her mother’s mother, and her mother’s mother’s mother...), she used the materials and skills she had available to create objects that brought joy to her and the people around her. If you had plopped her down in New York City in 1977, she would have thrived as a radical feminist artist. Instead, she moved an hour east to Winston-Salem, where she had me, and continued to pass down her craft knowledge.
My work seeks to balance these spheres of influence, bringing the totally unselfconscious artistic freedom of my mother’s world to the very historically-aware and radical embrace of the decorative of P&D. In my vessels and sculptures, I revel in the pure pleasure of process, choosing not to erase the tracks of my mark-making. I am consciously channeling the women who did the same before me, honoring my mother and grandmothers as well as the countless other women before them who found joy and escape through creation. It is also vital to me that my work acts for others in the same way that the act of creating worked for me as a child - a way to maintain closeness to myself and those I love, a source of alternative methods of knowing and deep curiosity, and most importantly a place of play and joyous escape.

3. aesthetics of optimism

"Bloom" is heavily influenced by the aesthetics of optimism, a contemporary trend perhaps best described by critic and curator Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy. In her article for Cultured Mag, “Seriously Cute: Six Artists Harnessing the Power Dichotomy of Cuteness,” Vizcarrondo-Laboy investigates the recent popularity of “cute” aesthetics - e.g. cartoonishly large eyes, soft pastel colors, the personification of inanimate objects. She is particularly interested in parsing out why the popularity of
cuteness seems to have increased concurrently with a rise in political and cultural tensions and strife. Vizcarrondo-Laboy posits that, when used subversively, cuteness can be a powerful tool through which to convey complex narratives. Diana Yesenia Alvarado’s ceramic creatures are brought up as an example of cuteness’s “inherent dichotomy, in which something usually perceived as submissive possesses the power to influence others.” Alvarado’s pinched figures have large, delicate eyelashes, round “O” shaped mouths, and overlarge feet. They are often airbrushed with pastel glazes and adorned with wings, halos, and hats - imagery reminiscent of early 2000’s dolls. Alvarado’s intent is to provoke empathy through these markers of cuteness, but then to meet that empathy with inherent strength through “punk-rock” additions of chains and studs. These characters are understood to be aware of their cuteness and meet the gaze of the viewer with a challenge, not with diminutive meekness.

I understand the aesthetics of optimism as a continuation of the Pattern and Decoration movement. Both choose to value aesthetics traditionally associated with
femininity, reclaiming descriptors such as “decorative” and “cute” and reorienting these phrases from their diminishing and ambivalent roots towards celebration. My work follows along this path and has served as a channel through which I can negotiate my own femininity within both a larger societal context and my familial domestic context. I see my work as an act of cherry-picking through the assumptions placed upon me within both of these confines; it is an act of choosing what I want to embrace and exaggerate (nurturing, softness, sensuality) and what I want to leave behind (perfection, demureness, traditional beauty).

4. with pleasure

In October of this past year I drove to the Bard Campus to see “With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972-1985.” Prior to this, I wasn’t familiar with the Pattern and Decoration movement, but I knew that there were Betty Woodman pieces in the show and I wanted to see more of her work in person. The exhibit was hugely influential in how I conceptualize my work and approach my making process. “With Pleasure” gave me an intense sense of belonging, as I realized there were people who had, decades earlier, put words towards what I had felt unable to explain for so long.
In curator Anna Katz’s catalogue essay, “Lessons in Promiscuity: Patterning and the New Decorativeness in Art of the 1970s and 1980s,” she challenges modernism’s perception of decoration as “superficial,” and thus nonessential and without lasting value. Artists who embraced the decorative as part of P&D reveled in this superficiality, understanding pattern as a “promiscuous” thing that is “loyal to no medium or material” and can thus be proliferated infinitely across anything, infecting every surface it touches (32). Critic Amy Goldin connected this to the historic conditions of women’s work in Anne Swartz’s essay, “Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art,” stating that the understood “job” of women is to “face the requirements of your own environment...[and] clarify and heighten the impact of objects and occasions that already exist, that already have meaning (33).”

At first, I understood this as a painful confinement – reduced in my femininity to decorate what surrounds me, never more. However, as I continued to investigate what drew me so intensely to the P&D works, I realized the artists of the movement were inverting this confinement into a source of power. Cynthia Carlson’s wallpaper installation addressed this domestic confinement in an especially potent way. *Tough Shift for M.I.T.* was initially installed in the Hayden Art Gallery on the MIT campus in 1981, and was reworked for “With Pleasure” in 2019. In it, Carlson has transformed the walls of gallery spaces into dimensional botanical patterns made with piped paint. This work references the history of domestic spaces that served as literal enclosures for
women, but warps these physical spaces into something new: places of reverence, humor, play, and wit. From floor to ceiling, Carlson piped vibrant acrylic floral sprigs through pastry bags, creating dimensional wallpaper. These sprigs have flat painted shadows echoed behind them, creating the impression that the sprigs have started to emerge from their original wallpaper source. Katz notes that Carlson’s installation “keeps with the P&D interest in moving peripheral art forms to center stage... [bringing] normally overlooked [wallpaper]
to the subject of art (190)."

The overwhelming use of color and pattern reminded me of the business of my mother’s house, where every surface is coated in ornament: she coated the floor of our hallway in pennies, grouted hundreds of bottle-caps to a large dresser, and has filled in almost all available wall space with prints, hand-painted designs, or textile wall-hangings. Her macramé hangs next to a Matisse print over our mantle, which is covered in my childhood ceramic experiments interspersed amongst Ikea candlestick holders. There is no sense of hierarchy in these arrangements; rather, my mother gains a sense of comfort and control from organizing her house just so and sharing her space with others. For her, the domestic is a site of exuberant empowerment – she has “faced the requirements of her environment,” as Goldin defined, but pushed beyond this as a limitation and instead reveled in it.

5. BLOOM : pattern ---> form

The work in “Bloom” is a personal exploration of how I too can face my environment and find moments of joyous escape. The methodologies I have used to arrive at this work are the result of many hours of experimentation and reflection amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and various other personal struggles. My understanding of the domestic as a place of simultaneous confinement and comfort has at times resulted in mental whiplash, and I have cycled through endless expressions of my own femininity
both as I create it and as it is placed upon me. “Bloom” has represented an outlet of control for me, and also has served as a constant reminder to search for and spread small moments of joy. I owe so much to my mother and all the feminine figures before her who, through radical acts of care, created a space today for me to make my goofy art. I hope that my work radiates back through time and makes my great-great-great grandmas smile. With all that said, this is how I arrived here:

For the past year, I have been incorporating drawing into my practice with intentionality. In the early stages of the pandemic, while I was quarantining at home but continuing to do research for my thesis, I became increasingly frustrated by the experience of trying to understand ceramic objects through the two-dimensional conduits of screen and page. I began creating blind contour drawings of forms I encountered through these flat resources; it was my hope that by pulling the image through me and onto paper, in a way that allowed me to focus solely on the object and my hand and not the accuracy of my representation, I would be able to understand the object in an intimate way even without experiencing it in the round. The playfulness
and looseness of these drawings intrigued me, and upon returning to school I began translating these sketches back into ceramic objects.

During this time, I also read George Kubler’s 1962 book “The Shape of Time,” in which he applies the structure of mathematical sequencing to the production of art. In this, he challenges our understanding of shifts in style as temporally distinct, and instead posits that all instances of perceived innovation are instead mutations stemming from a “Prime Object (63).” Replications are copies of this prime object, and it is the existence of these replications that prove the value of the original. When applied to ceramics, a prime object would be understood as the first iteration of a form - the first time someone made an amphora, for instance. Practically, this moment is impossible to pinpoint, but the massive number of replicas and riffs on the amphora form over thousands of years prove its lasting value. Our contemporary understanding of the amphora is far removed from its original context, but we have mutated it into an iconic symbol of ceramics in the broadest sense of the field.
As I created more blind contour drawings and subsequent vessels, I began to realize how this process was complementary to the “sloppy craft” style of work often championed by artists working within the aesthetics of optimism. I have been drawn to the sloppy craft aesthetic for a few years now because of how it challenges traditional ideas of craft as needing to be visually tight and precise. My loose profile drawings translated into loose vessel forms, and I chose to lean in to the childlike, playful aesthetic that this method encouraged. Working this way allows me to circumvent subconscious ideas of how a ceramic form needs to look, ideas that I have picked up from years of working within the field and being pressured to create work that will sell. I yearn now to create work with the freedom I felt as a child working alongside my mother, making for no reason other than the pure joy of working with my hands beside someone I love. My drawing practice has been a meaningful foray into unlearning the limits subconsciously placed upon me, and a generative source of forms.

This process of translating my drawings into three-dimensional forms also connected immediately to the issues being explored by P&D artists, specifically those of pattern proliferation and value. If I brought flat
patterns into three-dimensional space, would they suddenly gain power in their mass? Would they leave the decorative behind or carry it into a new context? I went through multiple methods of expanding a flat surface into space before I found a way of working that satisfied me aesthetically and meaningfully. One of my earliest attempts involved sculpting individual elements of botanical patterns – leaves, stems, flower petals, etc. – and then attaching those elements together to suggest the shape of a vessel. I called these explorations “patternforms,” as I was literally taking the pattern that would have covered the surface of a vessel like this and turning it into the form. These vessels were clearly without function in the traditional sense, but still felt confined by the suggestion of such.

My next experiment simplified this idea of pushing a pattern into space – instead of mushing together multiple pattern motifs into one form, I created a loose outline of a botanical shape and gave it enough of a base that it could stand on its own. The flat canvas of the slabs gave me plenty of room for illustration, so I could reference the original flat context of the patterns I was drawing from, while the pinched wall that

*Tulip 3 (side 1), 2022*
connected the slabs added a tactile, grounded nature to the entire object. I made a series of three of these tulip forms, scaling each one up until I felt the size properly confronted the viewer.

The next version of this idea turned into the final pieces for my show. I was decorating both sides of the tulips with loose, abstracted wallpaper patterns, but these pattern choices felt disconnected from the form itself, and the tulip outline felt lost amongst the chaos of the surface. I made three more flowers using the core method I had developed with the tulips – two flat slabs dried until they were very stiff, then connected with pinched walls – except that this time, I chose to highlight the construction method and linear dimensionality of the form. Instead of connecting the two slabs with a wall that responded

Process shot from Tulip 1, 2022
to the outline of the shape, I connected them with perpendicular slabs that responded to the general shape of the form, i.e. each petal of the daisy had its own slab radiating out from the center. On one side of the form, I illustrated a wallpaper pattern that contained the shape I had created. On the other I treated the slab as an entire form unto itself, adding thin slabs to the surface to develop the form further and glazing the surface with flat, slightly runny fields of color.
The other half of my show explores the vessel as a source of botanical patterning and feminine power. The two vessels I exhibited represent forms that have been repeated over thousands of years – the amphora and the goblet – and reference femininity in their form and function. Both are shapely forms, evocative of the human body in their curved profiles. They are also traditionally used as vessels for transporting nourishment, intended to serve and nurture others. My interpretations of both exaggerate some of these bodily associations while downplaying the functional aspects, resulting in vessels that exist more as symbolic ideas than usable objects. By divorcing them from function, I imagine that my vessels are then divorced from responsibility, from the mundane chores of domestic life, and are instead free to express themselves as they see fit. Both the goblet and the amphora also
celebrate the botanical designs of their inspirations that were initially intended only as decorative elements.

In each vessel I am still pulling at the idea of patterns expanding into form, but these are at a different point in that process than the flowers. In the vessel on the left, the illustrations are just beginning to peel themselves off of the surface and develop tactile qualities. I sliced the outlines of the flowers and pulled the edges away from the form to indicate this growth, and smeared wet clay on parts of the surface to create dimensionality beneath illustrated leaves. The surface of the pot is glazed with a tinted pink majolica, and the flowers are painted on top with underglaze, a process that imitates traditional majolica and china painting. However, my interpretation of this historic glaze technique is much looser and more vibrant – like a Sèvres porcelain vase that has let itself go and identifies now more with small-town kitsch and whiskey jugs.
The goblet also taps into this identification with kitsch and knick-knacks. I pulled botanical references from Staffordshire figurines – the original grandma tchotchke – and expanded them into a vessel form. Staffordshire figurines often indicate a natural context for their human or animal subjects through flattened leafy backdrops and green rounded pedestals. My goblet turns these background botanical elements into the subject, focusing only on the decorative floral additions of the originals.

The installation was designed to suggest a domestic interior, but only the outlines. This allows for the border between the actual space and the installation space to blur, and suggest that my objects can continue to morph and slide outside of their original confines. To provide a backdrop for the vessels, I designed a repeating pattern in Adobe Illustrator and printed it on a roll.
of translucent Mylar paper. The paper hangs from the ceiling in two long scrolls, expanding past its original role as “wallpaper” and expanding into the viewer’s space. The translucent quality of the paper and the central way in which it is hung also allows the viewer to walk behind and through the paper, further blurring the confines of the implied domestic space. To refer back to my drawing practice that spawned these forms, I illustrated flowers and highlighted parts of the digital pattern using oil pastels. These illustrations saturate some areas of the wallpaper and fade away in others, giving the impression of parts of the pattern beginning to develop movement and life.
For the furniture, I was mainly inspired by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s 1984 collection of furniture made with Knoll. The collection is a mishmash of historic furniture styles boiled down to flattened outlines that simply suggest the original. In an interview, Venturi clarified that their collection was not meant to “reproduce historical styles, but represent them” (“The Venturi Collection”). I felt a kinship in this approach, which was strengthened by Venturi and Brown’s excessive application of pattern. However, the Knoll collection emphasizes the flatness of pattern in the way it is applied to the forms, an aspect that I wished to diverge from in my work. I decided to leave my furniture bare, to not take away from the excess of patterning already happening in other areas of my installation, and to continue the feeling of implied over permanent space that I started with my wallpaper. The tables and plant stand were drawn first in Illustrator and then cut using a CNC router. This process felt like the most direct way for me to translate my sketches for the installation into space, and the most practical way for me to ensure that the flat elements of the furniture would slot together correctly.
Scattered amongst the larger pieces in “Bloom” are small shapes that tie the separate parts of the installation together. These shapes are a continuation of my efforts to pull flattened patterns into three-dimensional space, except that these are intensely zoomed in results of that effort. The shapes are representative of small changes in my line weight, single flower petals, and blade of grass - to name just a few. The placement of these shapes feels as though they are crawling off of the larger objects, and in some cases leaving the installation behind. A swirl of red has jumped off
of the plant stand, and a clump of grass is breaking the confine of the wallpaper edge. Hiding behind the wallpaper on the left are a small arc and a squiggle, signaling to the viewer that the experience of the installation continues outside of the initially understood boundary. These shapes are perhaps my favorite element of the installation, because of their saturated colors and simplicity of form. Their movement also suggests the most personality, the most potential for action.

6. conclusion

My mom was able to come up from North Carolina for the opening reception of the show, even though she had sprained her ankle the previous morning. She crawled around on the floor of the museum taking photographs of everything so she could send images to my grandma, who wasn’t able to come. The next day, we all talked on the phone together about my exhibit, and they told me repeatedly how proud they both were of me. They said my work made them both feel happy, which made me feel happy. I could not ask for a better interpretation of everything I have worked on.
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Works Cited

Note: Many of these resources are not directly quoted in my paper, but have still helped me to develop the content of my work.


