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Fabricating Thresholds: Floral Femininity

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Abstract

Paintings of women portrayed with flowers have long held an important place in the world of art, appearing throughout many great classical and contemporary artistic movements. It is the goal of this research to explore the often-unmentioned "floral-female-genre" of painting that commonly exists within the cannon of art history. This body of work aims to look back and reclaim the floral-feminine aesthetic by revamping bold floral patterns in which delicate female models emerge from the overwhelming abundance of botanic imagery. Gaining inspiration from the artwork of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Eric Fischl, Mary Cassatt and the Pattern & Decoration movement, this idea is being investigated by implementing richly patterned floral fabrics into large-scale oil paintings that reference the history of the painted nude female and domestic space as it relates to women's roles. As a result the patterned fabrics allow for the construction of a painted figure to exist above and below the textile design, creating a space that transcends time and looks to answer philosophical questions about how we perceive time and what it means to pass in and out of life and where we fit into those impossible questions.

1. The Floral Female

This "botanical language" of floral analogies that the artist is evoking dates back to the Middle Ages and to Western painting where it most often took the form of individual flowers used as symbols for specific feminine virtues. For example, references to the Virgin Mary commonly included a white lily as a symbol of spirituality and sexual purity. From the Renaissance onward, portraits of women often included a single bloom or a bouquet of flowers to convey a more general suggestion of fertility and beauty. As the 19th century advanced into the Industrial Revolution, many American painters continued to employ flowers as standard props in portraits of women.[i] Paintings and drawings of American interiors began to be more common than they had been in the 18th century. These often depicted the use of textiles in decorating the parlors, sitting rooms and, occasionally, the bedchambers of middle-class and wealthy Americans.[ii]

Figure 1.
Lotus Lilies, Charles Courtney Curran, 1888, 32" x 18", Oil on canvas

Wallpaper and textiles literally dress interior spaces and function as a public form of communication, speaking of their owners' sensibilities, private fantasies, economic social status, and psychological state.[iii] The theme of garden infiltrated the domestic space with wild abandon and was favored because it is generally unpopulated with people. The rich cultural symbolism of the garden-as-refuge resonates with biblical and classical associations of sensory enjoyment, sensuality, lushness, and control. Domestic interiors are a place for the perfect illusion where nature coalesces with human desires to re-create the world in our own vision. The botanical and topographical devices of the garden conspire to form a miniature synopsis of the world, a summary of our knowledge, and a repository of sensory experiences and memories.[iv]

In the postwar building boom of the 1950s, vast expanses of farmland were bulldozed to make room for regional housing and expansive suburbs, and so designers brought the outdoors indoors. This explosion of horticultural exuberance in American taste came, in part, as a manifestation of what social psychologists call "nesting behavior" in response to the trauma of war. After the conclusion of hostilities on the Western Fronts, demobilized GIs by the thousands set up households with their young brides determined to transform their bedrooms, kitchens, and dens into veritable conjugal "Gardens of Eden" through the wizardry of interior decoration.[v]

The rage for floral motifs seemingly knew no bounds. Keeping pace with prevailing decorating tastes for chintzes, heavy damasks, and prodigious furnishings with elaborately carved vegetal motifs, interior wall coverings erupted with large luxurious blooms, peonies, brightly colored roses, and abundant grapevines, often with brilliant plumed birds perched on their branches or taking wing. Guided by contemporary theories of garden design, wallpapers have consistently replicated whatever happened to be the cultural ideal of the garden as a particular historical moment. In America between World War I and II, traditional garden wallpapers continued to dominate the residential market. The more urban the setting, the more botanically escapist the wallpaper designs became.[vi] By and large, Americans tended to be interested in traditional, naturalist designs that depicted an idealized, unpeopled, and hospitable landscape. After the war, their commitment to bringing the outdoors indoors grew even stronger.[vii]

The role of interior decorator fell to that of the domesticated female. During the 1820s appeared the first of the domestic advice books; the forerunners provided detailed information on American material culture and social behavior in the late 19th and the 20th centuries. Among the earliest of these handbooks was *Domestic Duties*, or *Instructions to Young Married Ladies*, by Mrs. William Parkes whom offered specific guidelines on the appropriateness of specific fabrics for specific rooms: Light-colored chintz or silk drapery with muslin under-curtains was approved for parlors; in contrast, the more severe wool moreen curtains in crimson or scarlet were deemed appropriate for dining rooms.[viii]

Popular magazines and domestic advise books made it possible for those who did not or could not employ professional interior decorators. Sarah Josepha Hale, in *Godey's Lady's Book*, and Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, in *The American Woman's Home* (1869), stressed the importance of women's personal involvement in home decorating. Rooms embellished with the products of women's hands were considered symbols of successful attraction to domestic duty. All three authors urged women not to lament their situation but to use their innate talent to create an attractive and welcoming domestic atmosphere at little expense to their husbands. [ix]

By the end of the nineteenth century the flower/woman metaphor grew into what Annette Scott refers to as the "floral-female genre," where the artist placed one woman or more in a flower garden setting and manipulated composition, color, texture, and form to make the women look as much like flowers as possible. These images were usually intended as figurative pieces for a general audience and only rarely intended as portraits for specific patrons. Although scholars are well aware of the floral-female genre, they have not analyzed its peculiar definition of femininity. Consequently, its role in turn-of-the-century American art and society has gone unrecognized.[x]

Dependence and passivity are concepts expressed through flowers, whose principal function is decorative, reasserting that women and the activities of women belong properly in the world of flowers.[xi] Transforming women into flowers or floral art provided a means of defusing their growing power by rendering them both passive and consumable. This idea regarding the role of women in their respective era leads to a conversation about how visual language reflects culture and class structure. Women most often portrayed in these floral-female paintings were that of the white leisure class. Wealthy white women had time and money to spend cultivating their fragile, "floral" beauty. They could presumably spend all afternoon day dreaming in the garden. On the other hand, working class women of all nationalities were automatically excluded from the floral-female metaphor in art, just as society excluded them from the idea of femininity. Floral-female paintings accepted and promoted this specific definition of femininity.[xii]

Figure 1
Emmie and Her Child, Mary Cassatt, 1889, Oil on canvas

The painting and etchings by Independent-Impressionist Mary Cassatt serve as an excellent example to the floral-female genre. Mary Cassatt became liberated at this time when many people believed, or pretended to believe, that a liberated woman was the same as a loose woman. Her views on women's liberation translated clearly to the feminism in her work.[xiii] Her sensitivity enabled her to paint psychological states as well as the state that allowed her to paint mothers and children in such uniquely penetrating way. These women are shown being themselves, they do not exist, as so many women in art and literature do, for the sake of the male artist, or the male hero, or the male buyer.[xiv]

Influentially, a special strength of Mary Cassatt was her un-canny ability to differentiate in paint between a fabric-draped human being, a fabric-covered piece of furniture, and the flowers, which might well be imitated in both fabrics.[xv] The wallpaper backgrounds and the floral decorations she employed often seem to have an independent existence of their own, an effect Cassatt chose quite regularly.[xvi] Her emphasis on surface pattern reveals the influence of Japanese woodblock prints. She was keen to reinterpret a number of aspects of Japanese art: decorative pattern, asymmetrical composition, lack of traditional Western perspective, strong contours, flattened shapes, and bold orientation.[xvii] The Japanese prints contributed to Cassatt's visual language she was developing to create direct, fresh, and appealing images of domestic life.

2. Fertile Flowers

Figure 2.
Larkspur (Pimpernel Weaves Collection), William Morris, 1883, Textile

Figure 4.
It is easy to be brave from a distance, Isabelle Klauder, 2014, 43" x 38", Oil on fabric

In order to convey the botanical language of floral femininity with oil paintings, I begin by creating each piece based on textile designs that are reminiscent of William Morris wallpaper designs of floral imagery. Morris greatly expanded the repertoire of botanical species considered suitably ornamental for formal use. His designs were distinguished by their atmospheric lightness achieved by floating intertwining floral motifs on a strongly contrasting ground. This device invited the eye beneath and beyond the surface of the pattern, creating a see-through effect that gave the illusion of expanding a room's dimensions.[xviii]

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein is an excellent example of an extraordinary self-proclaimed artist who embraced the illusion of botanical language throughout his artistic career. In 1939 Von Bruenchenhein met Eveline Kalke, or "Marie" as he affectionately renamed her, at a state fair in Wisconsin, and they were married in 1943. Marie was his muse, and they collaborated in staging hundreds of passionate and provocative, playful and loving, pinup-esque photographs and slides of Marie. Von Bruenchenhein's resourcefulness played a central part in both the assembling and the effect: a luxurious setting fashioned from five-and-dime supplies. Their relationship found a sort of sideshow glamour in his carefully considered, and often erotic photographs.[xix] These intimate vignettes exemplify a subject/object dynamic, where Marie is immortalized while he occupies the part of voyeur. When seen together as a series, her response to his approach becomes a visual narrative (*fig 1-2*). Acting as a model, and taking on the roles of goddess, queen, star, seductress and ingénue, she explores her own place in this work, often defining the look of an image through a glance or a smile. Some of his photographs are tinted blue or mauve where Marie gazes heavenward wearing a glittering crown recalling the innocent carnality of Alberto Vargas's pin-up girls from the 1940s.[xx]

Figure 5

Figure 6

Untitled Images, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein
35mm Color Slide Image of the Artist's Wife Marie, 1940s

Specific to Von Bruenchenhein's photographic compositions involving his wife, floral patterns consistently dominate the visual fields, recurring in wallpaper, backdrops, drapes and upholstery, hairpins, and sarongs. To nineteenth-century viewers, floral settings suggested purity but also reinforced the iconography of woman with Mother Nature as a reference to fertility. Blossoms, fruit, and seedpods were a natural symbol to represent women's potential to bear children.[xxi] Not only does Marie's body become an extension of the flora in the foreground, but also she seems to grow out of these fertile flowered repetitive landscapes surrounding her. This flower fetish extended beyond floral dress patterns and spilled into the Von Bruenchenhein's domestic space.

Gardening and floral arranging helped fuel a vivid reimagining of mass-cultural imagery in the thousands of photographs Von Bruenchenhein took of his wife and muse, Marie, from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s, developing them in a makeshift darkroom he devised in his bathroom. Like Seydou Keïta, another self-taught photographer, he used patterned backdrops, but to more extravagant ends. Rococo wallpaper and drapery, exotic costumes and strings of beads combine to make his beloved subject resemble a blossom emerging from lush vegetation.[xxii] The identities she awkwardly assumes seem to anticipate the work of Cindy Sherman, whose photographs reiterate the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of femininity.

Figure 7
Empty vessels make the most sound
Isabelle Klauder, 2014, 35" x 37", Oil on fabric

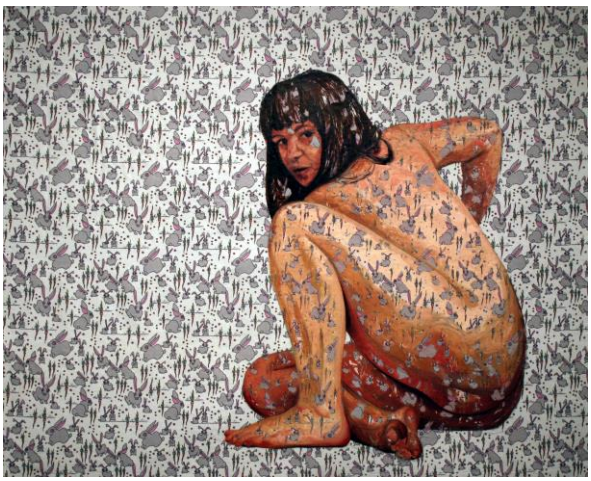

Figure 8
Wild animals have far too much free time
Isabelle Klauder, 2014, 44" x 35", Oil on fabric

Drawing attention to the pairing of a fine nude with a lovely bouquet of flowers may be old news, but this work aims to reclaim the aesthetic by cloaking the floral-female genre in the very fabrics that created it. The claustrophobic feeling produced by intense patterning[xxiii] lends itself to the vulnerability of the female nude, tensions of pose and position, become absorbed in her inwardness. Crouching, looking away, half-hidden, half-exposed. Posing questions: Is she real? Are the patterns real? Is this a figment of her imagination? Is she sleeping, dreaming, dead? Is she coming or going out of consciousness? Is she a victim? We as the viewer have caught her in a moment of exposed, vulnerable aloneness, existing in a place once explored by Mary Cassatt and the Impressionists': the boundary between reality and illusion and between the physiological and psychological components of vision.[xxiv]

American figure painter Eric Fischl began as an abstract artist in the 1980s but later moved to representational art to gain a broader audience and explore narratives sourced from personal experience, admirably, he is notorious for forcing his viewer to fill in the blanks, to answer the question "What exactly is going on here?" [xxv] His style as a painter is compulsively honest, he exposes the very parts of ourselves we work so hard to keep hidden- A quality that I strive to achieve in my own work. In an interview for BOMB magazine, A.M. Homes raves that "Eric Fischl has produced perhaps the most terrifying body of work to date: a series of nudes where we see that even the nude, the stripped figure, wears a kind of psychological clothing that goes beyond the skin. What's hidden is in the thoughts; and this time the figure, the gesture comes closest to the disconnection of madness."[xxvi] When dealing with figures in painting there is a strive to understand the infinite and relentless dimensions of our capacity, Fischl imparts "The body is all about needs and desired and union and oneness and aloneness. It's all about the edges of boundaries of the flesh, the needs of the flesh. I'm trying to find out what my relationship to the body is, the comfort and discomfort, the appropriate and the inappropriate."[xxvii]

Figure 9
Bad Boy, Eric Fischl, 1981
66" x 96", Oil on canvas

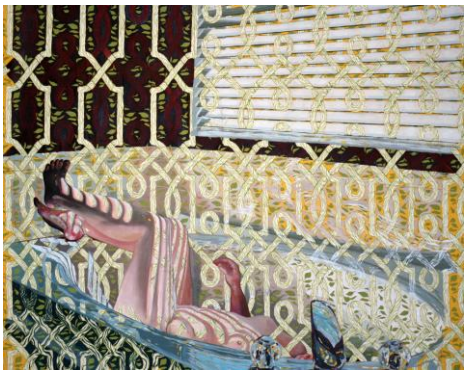

Figure 10
Wherever you go, you cannot escape yourself
Isabelle Klauder, 2014, 44" x 35", Oil on fabric

3. Patterns & Mirrors

The idea is to depart from traditional methods of oil painting by abandoning white linen canvas and implementing patterned fabrics that showcase the beauty and delicacy of floral femininity while also addressing the hidden hardships strongly reputed in women's role inside the domestic sphere. It is in this duality that there is room to think about psychological relationships we create between the repetitive distortion of our memories and the physical breakdown of barriers that occurs to the body under psychological stress.

The patterned fabrics allow me to construct a painted scene that exists above and below the printed design; this also challenges the arrangement of the painted imagery to break boundaries by ignoring the printed fabric design and existing above the surface of the canvas. Creating suggested space with patterns allows me to explore the deterioration of time and memory. Placing the figures in surreal situations allows for an experience that should seem out of place. The figures convey a jarring sense of vulnerability that visually anchors the unusual narrative. The figure/ground exchange allows for areas of transparency that hide and reveal previous painted layers, this alludes to the history of the mark making process. Exploring personal space as a place to make connections and investigate disconnections that occur in the framing and reframing of a figure submerged in an enclosed claustrophobic environment represents hindsight, and a re-visitation to past memories.

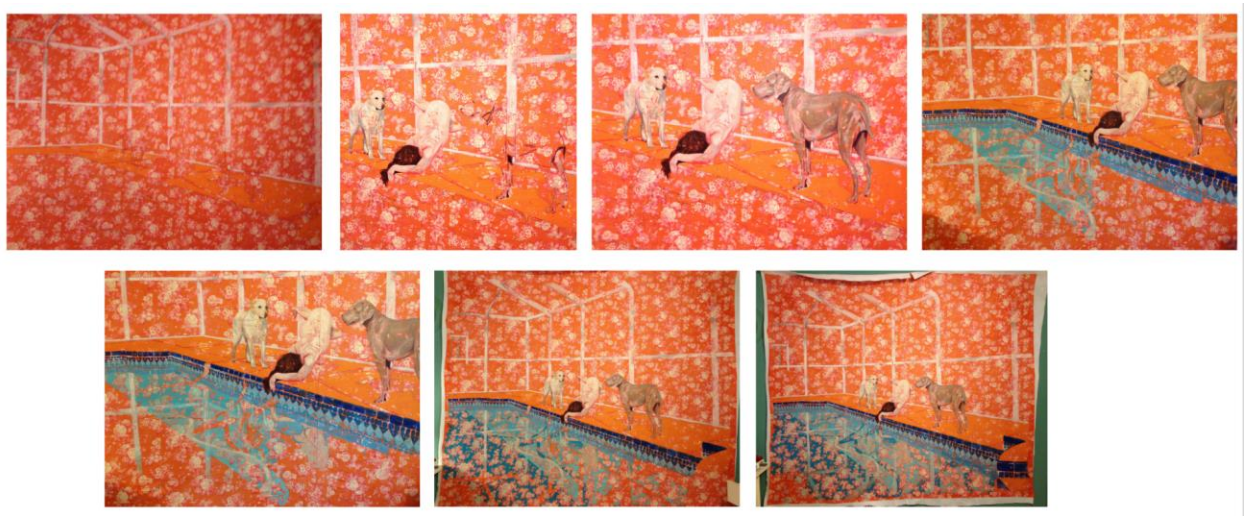

Figure 11
Progress from One should learn to sail in all waters
Isabelle Klauder, 2014, 87" x 73", Oil on fabric

I often employ the use of mirrors throughout my work, similarly Mary Cassatt used mirrors in images to takes us behind the scenes of a woman's life and to play upon double-figure compositional device often used by fashion-magazine illustrators to present the front and back view of a dress, hat, or coiffure. The floral patterns of the carpet, the wallpaper, and the boudoir chair function twice: both as surfaces themselves and as elements in the flat surface of the print itself. In the mirror those patterns of the chair and the wallpaper float freely to suggest the magic that children see in mirrors.[xxviii]

Cassatt's motives in incorporating mirrored images where more complex and sophisticated: Her mirrors function to expand the pictorial space, emphasize her female subjects, create a sense of movement, and even to investigate coexistent systems of perception. Typically mirrors serve to remove a painted scene one step further from reality and to remind us that the image and space within it are two-dimensional. [xxix]

My tenderness for patterned fabrics falls right in line with the 1970s trend for incorporating decorative motifs such as lace, fabric and wallpaper as an approach for artists with feminist and multiethnic concerns to express themselves. Miriam Schapiro led the Pattern and Decoration movement in New York during the 1970s; a group of artists which consisted of men and women who merged aesthetics and abstraction with ornamental motifs that derive from women's craft. She became interested in forms and practices commonly identified as feminine or "women's work"[xxx] and began to incorporate pieces of fabric into her acrylic paintings, which she called "Femmage" or "Female Collage" as a means to celebrate women's craft. In 1972 Schapiro collaborated with artist Sherry Brody on

a mixed-media piece called *Dollhouse.* Here Schapiro and Brody constructed a dollhouse that deals with different aspects of women's experiences. Miniature rooms are adorned with richly patterned fabrics. These "rooms within rooms" challenge the conflicting roles that domestic women play in a home. Pattern & Decoration can be understood as part of a bridge that connects decorative, figurative, symbolic and appropriative impulses across decades and generations.[xxxi]

Figure 12
From the exhibition Fabricating Thresholds: Floral Femininity
Isabelle Klauder, 2014

4. Conclusion

Art speaks for itself; it doesn't need the author to explain it away to justify its existence. It is up to the reader, the viewer, or the listener to respond to an artwork and give it meaning. Each of us approaches art in a different way, bringing our own interpretation, making sense of it. Art is in some sense autobiographical, however inaccessible the surface may seem. Art begins with a life; it is created from a history built from a personal experience. It never follows a neat sequence of progression from A to Z, and it is full of all kinds of unexpected events and dramas that inform us. Research in the floral-feminine genre of painting has revealed that connections throughout art history are visually stronger depicted than written or spoken about. By integrating feminine images in feminine textile patterns the paintings convey the passage of time by referencing the history of women's roles and the domestic spaces in which they inhabit. These devices combined serve to move the conversation forward about how we perceive time and what it means to pass in and out of life and where we fit into those impossible questions.[xxxii]

5. Acknowlegements

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6. Endnotes

i Scott, Floral Femininity, 61.
ii Nylander, Fabrics for Historic Buildings, 72
iii Lenček, Lena, and Gideon Bosker. Off the Wall:10
iv Lenček, Lena, and Gideon Bosker. Off the Wall:90-93
v Lenček, Lena, and Gideon Bosker. Off the Wall:19
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xix Lisa Stone. "Thoughts on the Art of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein," Folk Art.
xx Carol Squires. "King of Hearts," American Photography, May-June 2000: 28 and 111.
xxi Scott, Floral Femininity, 61.
xxii Kristin M. Jones, "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein," American Folk Art Museum, New York, USA. Issue 139, May 2011
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xxviii Getlein, Frank. Mary Cassatt: Paintings and Prints. 94
xxix Barter, and Cassatt 48-49
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8. Images

Figure 1: *Lotus Lilies*, Charles Courtney Curran, 1888, 32" x 18", Oil on canvas. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_Courtney_Curran_-_Lotus_Lilies.jpg

Figure 2: Emmie and Her Child, Mary Cassatt, 1889, Oil on canvas. http://www.wikiart.org/en/mary-cassatt/lydia-seated-in-the-garden-with-a-dog-in-her-lap#supersized-artistPaintings-190176

Figure 3: *Larkspur (Pimpernel Weaves Collection), William Morris, 1883, Textile*. *http://www.william-morris.co.uk/shop/fabric/pimpernel/larkspur/?code=DKELLA304*

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Figure 10: *Wherever you go, you cannot escape yourself, Isabelle Klauder, 2014, 44" x 35", Oil on fabric. Personal Collection.*

Figure 11: *Progress from One should learn to sail in all waters, Isabelle Klauder, 2014, 87" x 73", Oil on fabric. Personal Collection.*

Figure 12: *From the exhibition Fabricating Thresholds: Floral Femininity, Isabelle Klauder, 2014. Personal Collection.*