

EXPLORING ORGANIC PATTERN THROUGH SURFACE DESIGN

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Art.

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ABSTRACT

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My work in the MFA program has explored the use of organic, abstract images that are taken from nature and recreated and repeated in two-dimensional, mixed media work. My thesis will further explain this process.

My process involves photographing various patterns in nature such as roots, tree branches, and animal patterns. The images are then enlarged or reduced to make them more abstract. I also use organic patterns in marbled papers or fabric textures. The man-made patterns mesh well with the natural images, creating more visual interest. The images are then prepared to be screen printed. These “invented” images are then printed in various layers on various papers and/or fabric surfaces. The visual texture of the piece is built up through this process. The visual texture of organic imagery is explored through the formal elements of screen printing and painting.

I use screen printing in my work for the instant, repetitive results that it gives. However, I use screen printing in a painterly way, rather than the more traditional, graphic style for which it is known. My process involves building layers of screen print, paint, and papers in an improvisational manner, so the end result has visual depth and

interest. My background is in surface design, so the use of surface texture, layering, and color is apparent in my current works on paper and canvas.

INTRODUCTION

I view the world in terms of minutia. I look at texture and color, and I focus on pattern more than an overall view. I apply this sensibility in my work. When I look at a landscape, I tend to look at the textures and how they work alongside each other. I focus in on small areas and imagine them as their own environment.

This sensibility finds expression in my painting. I notice a texture or pattern, usually from nature, and photograph it and enlarge it. The pattern, not the object, becomes the subject of my work. This idea of isolating nature is similar to the approach of Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986). O’Keeffe was an American artist who was primarily known for her magnified paintings of flowers.

O’Keeffe would concentrate on a detail of a flower or landscape and enlarge it so it became abstracted and its original source was not easily discernable. Her compositions became more about shape and color than specific subject matter. I approach my painting in a similar way.

My creative research in the MFA program has explored the use of organic, abstract images that are taken from nature and recreated and repeated in two-dimensional, mixed media work. I focus on small areas of nature and imagine them as their own environment. I create my own interpretations of these environments. I work with visual texture and repeated pattern in a painterly way primarily on paper and stretched canvas. My artwork responds to the formal art elements of color, shape, line, texture, pattern, and transparency, but also evokes an emotional response from the viewer. By layering

transparent paint and papers, I create an atmospheric composition that plays with the idea of the nature of space in a two-dimensional format which inspires a feeling that may or may not be directly related to the source imagery.



Fig. 1 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Seaweed*, Oil on canvas, 9 x 7 in., 1927

CONCEPT

The natural patterns I use in my art work are derived from leaves, roots, bark, and animal skins as well as other natural sources. These are all things that appeal to me. I also use patterns and images that do not come from nature but nevertheless have an organic quality. I like all the patterns I choose to have a sense of organic flow. For instance, I have used marbled designs in my work. There is fluidity in the visual pattern and physical process of creating a marbled image.

I like using images from predominantly natural sources because the textures intrigue me. There is a tactile quality in my chosen imagery to which I am drawn. Organic imagery has evident growth and movement, and I aspire to capture that characteristic in my work. For instance I often use images of roots and tree branches. Branches tangle and stretch to the sky creating beautiful, linear compositions that inspire compositions for my own work.

Octopus imagery is a favorite of mine as well. Because they are invertebrates, octopus bodies are very transmutable. There is a sensuous quality to their movement, and they are able to change their skin color and texture so they become unrecognizable. This idea relates to my concept of abstracting natural images. I am also drawn to the octopus because of its behavior. There is certain sensitivity to the octopus. They are not the monsters that legend makes them out to be. "...the octopus neither looks nor behaves like a monster. It is small and shy. It flees like a frightened bird, and it comes to rest gently on the ocean floor." (Cousteau, Diolé,26) In Fig. 2, *Octoprint II: Algae*, I layered abstracted patterns of the Blue Ring Octopus. The composition emerged as an

atmospheric environment that conveys depth which could include depth of the visual sense as well as watery depth of the octopus.



Fig. 2 Dawn Behling, *Octoprint II: Algae*, mixed-media on panel, 24 x 24 in., 2009

However, there is an element of irony to the sense of fluidity that I strive for in my work. Although I do choose imagery from sources that have a fluid sensibility, any actual fluid movement or growth from this source is necessarily halted by the capturing of that image, much like the formation of a fossil. My artwork could be compared to ancient fossils that have been unearthed on an archaeological dig. However, it is through the process of building up and layering paint and collage on the surface by which the

image gets “discovered”. Although my created “fossilized” images are no longer “living”. The viewer is always aware of the life that once was. My goal is to imbue my work with that living sense of energy and movement.

PROCESS

The basis for my formal artistic vocabulary was primarily shaped by my education in textile design. Within my study of textile design, surface design is paramount. Surface design includes any treatment of a two dimensional surface that involves printing, painting, stenciling, dyeing, collage, as well as other techniques. I translate these techniques from fabric to paper and stretched canvas.

Textile design does not merely concern pattern in terms of decorative art. Although I use pattern in a way that could be considered decorative, my intention is to transcend decoration. I work with visual texture and repeated pattern in a painterly way. I screen print images on the surface, and supplement them with paint and collage to soften the graphic quality of the screen print and to add visual texture. Superimposing imagery creates a sense of visual depth.

My process involves photographing various patterns in nature or the human environment. The images are then enlarged or reduced to make them more abstract. The ambiguity of the modified imagery is intriguing which I hope piques viewer curiosity and evokes a unique personal response from each viewer. I like when a viewer uses their imagination and sees their own interpretation of the images. The viewers' interpretations can range from animal forms to landscape environments to pure emotion. All of these elements are inspirational in my creation process, so the fact that they are translated to the viewer in their own way is very appealing to me.

It is important to me the finished piece embodies the energy it took to create it. It is important to me to work intuitively and not have a preconceived idea of what the final work of art should look like. For each piece, I choose one set of images that are related. This imagery suggests a color and surface to me. I start printing and painting until a unique composition emerges. The process is almost meditative for me as I “feel out” a painting. I mainly use water-based media and let them drip and flow on my surface, creating improvisational visual texture that combines with the printed imagery. The visual texture of the piece is built up through this process.

I use screen printing for the instant, repetitive results that it gives. However, I use screen printing to contribute to the overall painterly effect of my work, rather than in the more traditional, graphic style for which it is known. This means that I layer the screen print, paint, and papers in an improvisational manner, so the end result has greater depth and arouses curiosity. The color variation in my work also assists in making the screen printed images look less hard-edged. Through the use of many layers of subtle colors, the works of art develop an increased painterly style.

In the marbling process, which is also sometimes referred to as hydro-printing, you have control of the colors you use and where you place them initially, but the medium is so fluid that it spreads and migrates into itself. Ultimately you have to surrender to the material. It is going to flow where it wants to on the surface. Each pigment reacts to one another and hundreds of variables of the marbling media causes the colors to mysteriously move. The flow of the inks is finally stopped when paper is placed on the surface and the pattern’s final moment is captured in print form. Such acts

of automatism can also occur in painting. There is a sense of letting the painting become what it wants to be, not what it is forced to be.

The creation becomes a dialog similar to that of an expressionistic painter. Each brush stroke in an expressionistic painting is a response to the previous one. The difference is that I am also applying line, texture, color, and shape through serigraphy and collage. The finished piece is a representation of the dynamic creative process. Using this consistent work habit, I remove expectation and surrender to process. The finished work is often a revelation to me.

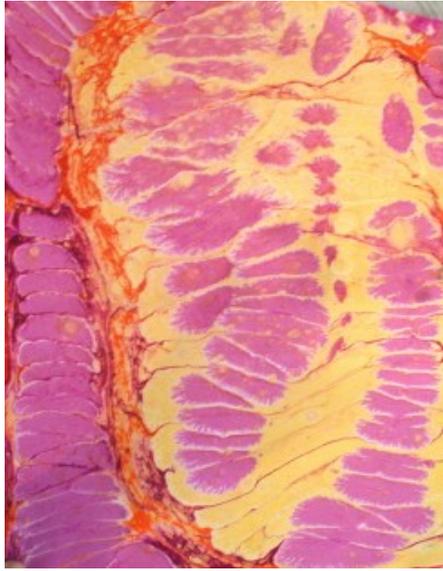


Fig. 3 Dawn Behling, example of marbling on fabric, 9 x 12 in., 2008



Fig. 4 Dawn Behling, *Marbled Earth*, Mixed-media on canvas, 34 ½ x 36 ½ in., 2009

COLOR & FORMAT

I am a lover of color and make it an important component of my work. Colors tend to evoke different feelings and movement. I generally do not choose realistic color for the patterns I use, but select color intuitively. When I start a new piece I decide on an overall palette for the piece, which depends on whether or not I want the piece to be bold or quiet. The movement could flow quietly or be a burst of energy. The shapes I am working with also influence my choice of colors. I generally start out a painting with an analogous color scheme. When several layers of transparent, analogous colors are built up, there is an increase in the visual depth of the piece. The subtle color differences along with the juxtaposition of warm and cool tones contribute to the piece's vibrancy. I play with light and dark values and subtle contrasts. Value contrast is an area with which I like to experiment. A number of my paintings utilize a middle gray tonality. Sometimes I begin a painting with neutral tones and then gradually mix in color to make the neutrals lean towards warm or cool tones. When I find a color combination that I like, that becomes the painting's overall color palette. This intuitive way of working with color is in keeping with my overall improvisational approach to creating.

I prefer to work in the square format for the sake of clarity of composition and the continuity of my body of work. I believe that a square format is a neutral composition orientation as opposed to a "portrait" or "landscape" format. The square allows the focus to be on the image rather than the vertical or horizontal layout itself.

The square format contains the energy of the irregular shapes I depict, much like an artist's viewfinder or the viewfinder of a camera hones in on a portion of a larger

scene. The square format also makes it easier to envision the image extending off all sides equally. My observations and interpretations of organic forms become their own organic “worlds.” They are their own separate snap shots but also have continuity as a whole. It is as if I am defining a place through “frames”. This gives each work a sense of intimacy, and draws the viewer in. Each piece is its own experience, as if it was a view seen through a focused microscope. You can never see the totality of anything at once. Altogether, these multiple frames make one large “organism”. Every organism has a systematic structure that holds it together, no matter how seemingly irregular. The multiple square compositions represent this underlying structure.

Different sizes of the square create a different impact. The perspective of the viewer changes whether one is looking at one large piece or several smaller pieces that are placed next to one another. Along with the larger pieces, I have created several smaller works on paper that I’ve chosen to display together. Although each individual piece within these groupings of work can stand on its own, these pieces can be read as one cohesive unit, such as a landscape. I am drawing attention to individual elements such as leaves, rocks, and plants that make up an entire landscape. As Josef Albers stated in *Homage to the Square* (Stiles, Selz, 107),

Seeing several of these paintings next to each other
makes it obvious that each painting
is an instrumentation on its own.

Although I choose to work with the square format for the majority of my works, there are a few exceptions. In a few instances I experimented with different dimensions. In these pieces, I notice the orientation is the dominating factor of interest. While the rectangular format adds an interesting dynamic to the piece, the focus is no longer on the

image and pattern itself. I feel that if the image and texture of the piece itself is what I want to spotlight in my work, then the square format accomplishes this goal more successfully.



Fig. 5 Dawn Behling, Palm, Mixed-media on canvas

ARTIST INFLUENCES

A contemporary artist that that has influenced me is Judy Pfaff (1946-). Pfaff is predominantly known for her large-scale, sculptural installations which are typically bold and brightly colored. However, Pfaff has also worked with photo and collage. These two-dimensional works of hers are what I find fascinating. They have an organic sensibility and are representative of what I relate to in terms of my own work.

Judy Pfaff's *Untitled* (Fig. 6), has a quality that is similar to my work because her subject matter includes patterns from the natural world. The contrast between my work and hers is that she uses the actual organic material or a photograph in the piece whereas I would screen print the detail of the subject in my piece. The color palettes Pfaff uses in these pieces are very earthy which correlates with my palette choices. While I would repeat an image many times with many layers in my work, she juxtaposes different imagery in a single layer in her work.

In Judy Pfaff's piece, *Charhar Bagh* (Fig. 7), she uses fern leaves, and in the background of the piece there is a subtle underlying structure that represents the overall square/rectangular motif that I use in my work. She uses this motif within the piece, not as the piece as I do.

Although some of her installations have a very nature inspired organic quality, I prefer her collage works on paper and photo prints. Her two-dimensional work clearly echoes what I'm trying to do.

In an interview with Richard Whittaker, Pfaff comments on predominantly living in a city environment and how it feels when she takes the time to absorb nature. "If I ever do get into nature, there are these moments, and I get knocked over by it....I was just

sitting there, and all of the sudden it dawned on me that literally everything was moving...I was looking at these surfaces and they were covered with things that were alive.” (Whittaker 156-157).

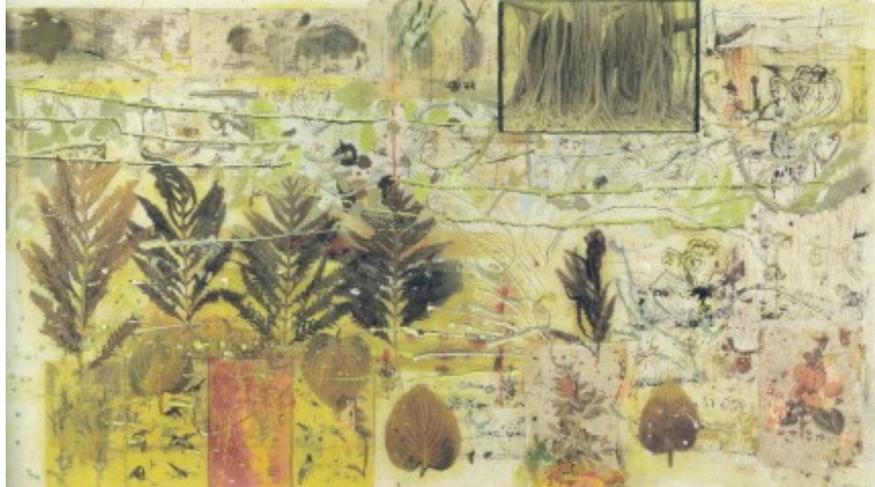


Fig. 6 Judy Pfaff, *Untitled*, Oilstick, encaustic, organic matter, photograph, approx. 48 x 80 in. (framed), 1998



Fig. 7 Judy Pfaff, *Charhar Bagh*, Encaustic, ferns, burns, magazine pages, appliqués, ink, pencil, 53½ x 97½ in.(framed),1999

Patrick Dougherty is an American artist known for his site-specific installations made out of twisted tree saplings. I admire Dougherty's work for the organic materials used. There is a feeling of controlled flow in his artwork. While his work is three dimensional, his materials and concepts are drawn from nature and relate to my work. The vines he uses in his sculptural compositions are representative of the nest forms that I am drawn to. I had the privilege of seeing two of Dougherty's sculptures, one at Penland School of Crafts, and the other at the North Carolina Museum of Art. The overall compositions of the sculptures were striking, but what actually drew me in were the textures of the material and their tactile quality when seen up close.



Fig. 8 Patrick Dougherty, *Trailheads*, 2005



Fig. 9 Dawn Behling, *Layered Branches*, Mixed-media on paper, 28 ½ x 28 ½ in. 2009

Minor White (1908-1976) was a noteworthy American photographer who took photos of the landscape from a unique perspective. He is known for his black and white “textural photography”.



Fig. 10 Minor White, *Moencopi Strata*, Photograph, 1962

In his photos, Minor White captures “textural landscapes” within the natural landscape. His compositions have a dynamic flow of energy. He is capturing a real environment in his camera viewfinder, while I am creating an environment as if I were looking through a camera viewfinder. White’s use of black and white photography really

accentuates the value contrast in his images and draws attention to form. My approach of abstracting images so they are textural compositions rather than objects is very similar to White's approach to photography.

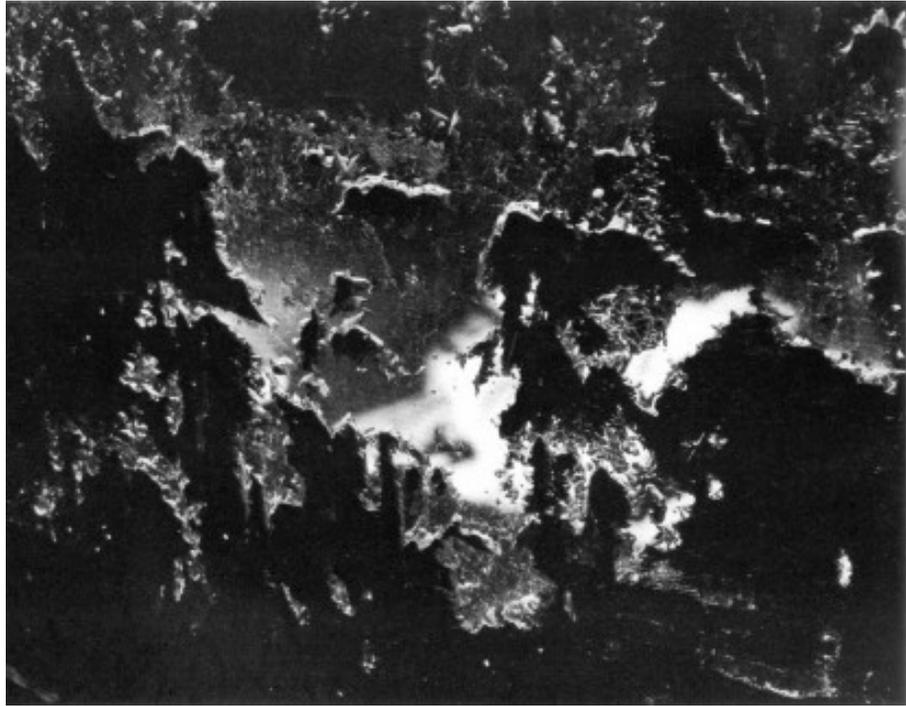


Fig. 11 Minor White, *Peeled Paint on Store Window*, Photograph, 1951

CONCLUSION

Nature is very accessible to most people and its themes are universal. The appeal of looking closely at pattern from nature as an expressive format has been the theme for my current body of work. As aforementioned, keeping my process as natural as possible is key in yielding the results I want. I am always aware of the relationship between structure of process and spontaneity of expression, and how I can continue to explore that in my work.

My theme of exploring natural images in mixed-media has generated an interesting body of work and I consider it only the beginning of my creative research within this theme. I foresee the continued use of screen printed images along with paint and dye. However, the more I grow this body of work, the more I anticipate the opportunity to explore such mediums as fabrics and transparent materials in order to emphasize the tactile and layered qualities that are important to me. Color and texture will always be primary points of interest in my art work.

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APPENDIX: IMAGES OF WORKS IN THESIS EXHIBIT



Layered Branches, Mixed-media on paper, 28 ½ x 28 ½ in., 2009



Octoprint II: Algae, Mixed-media on panel, 24 x 24 in. 2009



Wintery Texture, Mixed-media on canvas, 28 ½ x 28 ½ in., 2008



Palm, Mixed –media on canvas, 42 x 42 in., 2009



Octoprint IV: Ice and Air, Mixed-media on canvas, 60 x 50 in., 2009



Octoprint III: Cave, Mixed-media on paper, 44 x 42 in., 2009



Space Flower, Mixed-media on canvas, 34 ½ x 34 ½ in., 2009



Tree Trunk Mountain, Mixed-media on canvas, 44 x 44 in., 2009



Transformation, Mixed-media on canvas, 44 x 50 ½ in., 2009



Marbled Earth, Mixed-media on canvas, 34 ½ x 36 ½ in., 2009



Octoprint I, Mixed-media on paper, 42 x 53 ½ in., 2009



Large Elemental Landscape, Screen print and dye on various papers, 136 x 70 ½ in.,
2008-2009