

The New Intimists

Curated by Samantha Friedman

In the last decade of the 19th century, the group of painters known as the Nabis blurred the distinction between high art and interior decoration with a new style of painting. Taking cues from Gauguin, Sérusier, and Puvis de Chavannes (and succeeded soon after by Matisse) artists like Vuillard, Bonnard, Denis and Roussel incorporated the all-over patterns of voguish Oriental carpets and Art Deco wallpaper into their compositions. The result was a rejection of the perspectival illusionism that had reigned since the Renaissance, and a new embrace of flatness, an enthusiastic admission that “a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.”¹ The interior became both inspiration and subject, as “the arabesques and repeated floral patterns contained in textiles and wallcoverings provided [artists] with an especially rich repertory of forms.”²

Though pejorative associations with the term “decorative” have persisted since that turn-of-the-century moment, the influence of ornament in fact helped push painting, radically, toward abstraction. Now, as then, artists look to decoration as a path to subjective color, a way to assert flatness, or a pretext for including abstract visual elements within the realm of representation. The intimism of the interior is also important to many of these contemporary artists. Just as the Nabis turned to the refuge of the decorated drawing room as an antidote to the public glare of industrial modernism, the artists in this show seek pleasure in private spaces that constitute havens from 21st century urban life. And while they are the inheritors of this tradition, they are far from limited by it; each of these artists opens up the idea of decoration or the subject of the interior through the materials and concerns of contemporary practice.

In her paintings of interior spaces and domestic objects, Brooklyn-based artist Amy Lincoln (cover) revels in the graphic quality of plaid bedspreads, tiled bathrooms, and patterned kitchenware. Empty rooms and common surfaces become conduits for design elements, questioning the order of things: in a painting, the elephants on a dish are no less real than the dish itself, and the same parallel lines that stand for floorboards denote the striped print of a pillow.

Viennese artist Günter Puller has long been inspired by the idyllic atmosphere of his parents’ summer garden. In one oil pastel drawing, the garden becomes an arresting arrangement of flat swaths of color, its wire gate transformed into a decorative mosaic. In another, the floral print of a 1960s garden couch allegorizes the nature around it.

Janell Olah finds source material in her Philadelphia home, which was covered in wallpaper when she moved in. Her mixed-media drawings flatten real living space against the gallery wall, exposing the systems that underlie a household, and revealing how memory is embedded in décor.

Korean-born, Brooklyn-based artist Heejung Cho similarly investigates how memories can be mapped by certain interiors. Her paintings on panel condense the clutter of rooms in which she or her friends have lived onto one-dimensional surfaces, which are then expanded into installations. Cho pays special attention to the rhythmic qualities of her floors, as if experience itself might be rooted in the boldly emphasized boards.

Mark Epstein, also based in Brooklyn, makes work which he says “swings between the poles of representation and abstraction.” In a series of watercolors from 2008, Epstein engages the Thorne miniature rooms of the Art Institute of Chicago, “invading” these period interiors with “an inorganic ivy” of forms drawn from architectural history. These interventions superimpose a new layer of visual information onto existing arrangements, generating a stimulating tension between geometry and the baroque.

Tamara Thomsen, another Brooklyn painter, also explores the interior's special relationship to the past. In a series of large watercolors, *Chambers*, based on an 18th century colonial mansion in Philadelphia, Thomsen invigorates spaces of neutral gray and white with impossibly bright, imagined color. Georgian mouldings and banisters become grounds for graphic play, almost as if Thomsen had become this historic house's most unlikely interior decorator.

Finally, the Montreal-based artist Karen Tam addresses the exoticism that has persisted within the decorative interior from Post-Impressionist Japonisme to the contemporary rage for bedside Buddhas. Photographs documenting Tam's *Zen in Ten Bathroom* installation attest to the artist's incisive blend of kitsch and critique, problematics and pleasure.

In a contemporary art world where figuration and abstraction are often seen as mutually exclusive, these artists show how decoration can serve as a nexus where narrative content meets pure form. And in a cultural landscape where domestic pursuits like DIY and pie-baking have out-hipped consumerism and cocktails, I am excited about what this work can tell us about our collective look inward.

-Samantha Friedman

1. Maurice Denis, "Définition du néo-traditionnisme," *Art et critique* (August 1890).

2. Jack Flam, "Matisse and the Metaphysics of Decoration," *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles: The Fabric of Dreams*. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2004, p. 34.

1. **Günter Puller**, *Couch Car - The Forerunner*, 1997-2003, oil pastel on paper, 40" x 28"
2. **Heejung Cho**, *Old Home in Brooklyn*, 2008, acrylic and photograph on canvas, 15" x 28"
3. **Janell Olah**, *1 left, 1 right 1 left .5 right*, mixed media, 2007, 34" x 110" (detail)
4. **Mark Epstein**, *Invaded Thorne Room #1*, 2008, mixed media, 28" x 40"
5. **Tamara Thomsen**, *Winter Kitchen*, 2008, watercolor on paper, 40" x 60"
6. **Karen Tam**, *Zen in Ten Bathroom*, 2007, photograph of installation : 24" x 16"
installation : 5'7" x 7'10" x 7'6"