

## PATTERNING

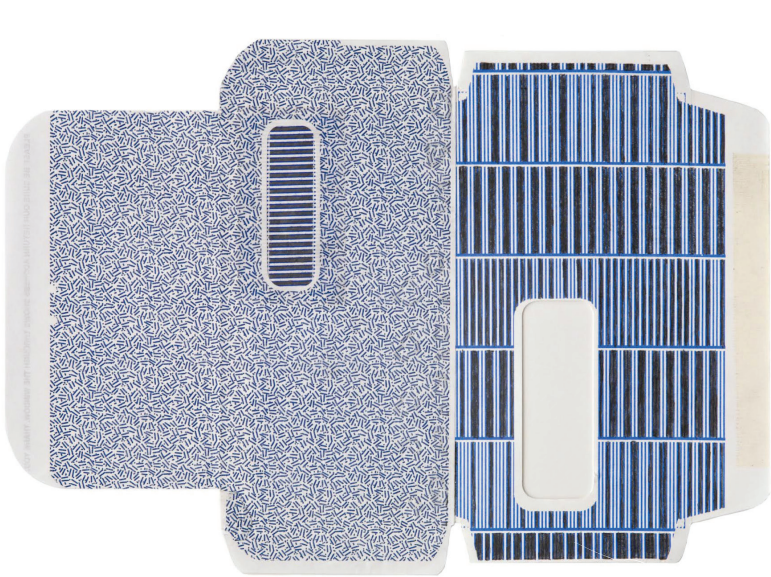
Pattern persists. Despite recurrent accusations across eras that art engaged with ornament is merely decorative, stereotypically feminine, or perilously foreign, the impulse of artists to conjure patterns has remained as rhythmically regular as the motifs of a Persian carpet. And as sure as the tendency has its detractors, it has also had its defenders. In a 1980 *Arts Magazine* article called “Patterning,” Neil Marshall asserted: “The once all-important distinction between abstract and representational art is rendered meaningless by the inherent structuralism of patterns.”<sup>1</sup> Several years after the Pattern and Decoration movement peaked, and Matisse’s cut-outs (once derided as decorations) enjoyed a three-venue U.S. retrospective, Marshall declared, “as Modernism continues to peter out and its fascination with change appears ever more self-destructive, the traditional and conservative impulse toward pattern is creating fresh possibilities for art.”<sup>2</sup>

The possibilities remain just as generative today, as this selection of work by eight artists from the Kentler International Drawing Space’s Flatfiles attests. Several of these artists rely on resolutely mundane materials to weave their patterns, as if spinning dross into gold. Others employ more explicitly ornate materials—shimmering metallics or brilliant hues—and take cues from arrangements intrinsic to

nature or mathematics. All of them embed meaning within their grids and tessellations, proving that art that is formally resplendent need not be devoid of significance.

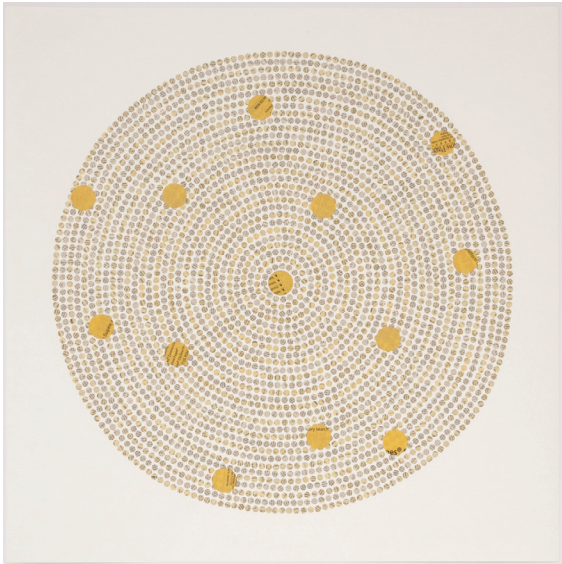
Inspired by the rhythms of architecture and weaving, **Marietta Hoferer** “like(s) to work with a humble material...and create an expansive experience out of very little.” Her gridded formations are built up from hand-cut pieces of transparent packing tape, in compositions that range from the reductive to the baroque. The surface of this ordinary material is unexpectedly luminous, and over time it yellows, deepening rather than marring its visual appeal. As some of their titles suggest, these drawings resemble and behave like crystals—accumulated structures that reflect the light.

In the same way that packing tape holds infinite possibilities for Hoferer, security envelopes—with their clear windows and privacy-protecting patterns—endlessly compel **Elizabeth Duffy**. Unfolding them into flat fields, she exploits and enhances the overlooked ornament within, heightening their floral or geometric fields with graphite elaborations. Duffy upends the envelopes’ intended function—preventing a viewer from seeing enclosed confidential information—to reveal, rather than obscure. The envelopes “speak eloquently of the human impulse to aestheticize every aspect of life,”



she has said, while at the same time noting the “impending obsolescence” of these bureaucratic staples in the face of electronic administration.

A sense of the outmoded is equally present in the works of **Viviane Rombaldi Seppey**, which incorporate pages of telephone books—an increasingly antiquated resource—from various places she has lived. The compositions of these collages reflect cultural references of the country in question: snippets from an Italian phone book accumulate into round

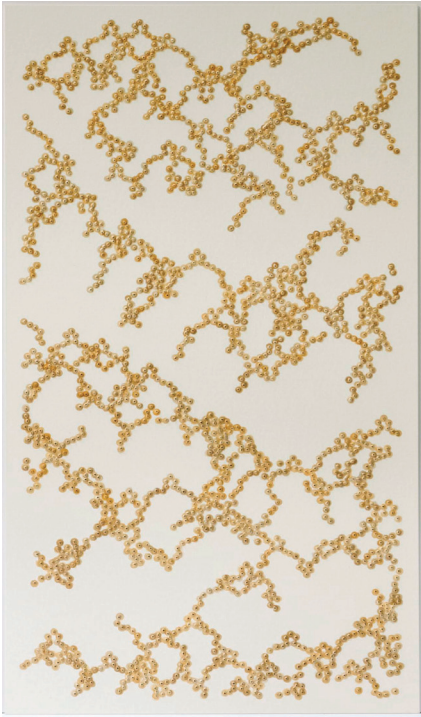


forms that evoke the turrets of a *castello*, an American phone book is cut up and reassembled into a traditional quilt design; bits of phone books from Singapore are reworked into an indigenous dot pattern. In this way, ornamentation becomes an index of migratory experience, in which the artist’s works become “traces of [her] own transplantation.”

Brought up in the Jewish faith, in which representation is not permitted in religious texts, **Donna Ruff** explores “the geometry of decoration” in her work. She started burning paper—a process that speaks simultaneously to destruction and construction—after witnessing the events of 9/11 from her waterfront Brooklyn loft. Starting in 2010, she began adding gold leaf to the burned drawings, lending them a rich opulence belied by the simple, ephemeral paper that forms their support. Deterioration, fraying, aging, and imperfection are all qualities that Ruff courts; one of her models is the Japanese practice of *kintsugi*, in which broken pottery is mended with gold, literally illuminating the act of repair.

Similarly destructive in her method of construction, **Taney Roniger** expresses pattern through puncturing, in a process she refers to as “marking-by-voiding.” She looks equally to nature (tree and root growth, molecular and cellular organisms) and to technology (the structures of computer chips) for the branching or bifurcating forms that motivate her compositions. Gilded with metallic paint, the piercings, with their raised ridges, conjure a multitude of associations: from celestial networks, to ceremonial scarification, to pulsating motherboards.

Nature and mathematics also converge in the practice of **Grace DeGennaro**, whose works, in the artist’s words, “are



rooted in the tradition of geometric abstraction but reference non-Western traditions such as Byzantine mosaics, Indian tantra drawings, and Navajo weavings.” Subtle washes of watercolor yield symmetrical compositions of circles and triangles, which are then heightened with small beads of colored pigment. These patterns accumulate according to the Fibonacci sequence (in which each subsequent number is the sum of the previous two numbers) or the principle of gnomonic growth (in which the final form reflects the shape of the original “seed” form), to create a visible record of time.

A self-described “pattern farmer,” **Alexander Gorlizki** engages with the tradition of Indian miniature painting, adopting its brilliant palette and reliance on ornament, even as he aims to interrogate, complicate, and ultimately expand its conventions. For over two decades, he has collaborated with a miniature painter named Riyaz Uddin, with whom he established a studio in the Muslim quarter of Jaipur’s old city. Gorlizki devises the compositions—tessellated decorations in which foreground and background become indistinguishable—and in an ongoing exchange, Uddin and the studio’s other artists realize their minutia, applying the technical prowess of a centuries-old practice to Gorlizki’s contemporary perspective.

In her drawings, **Sepideh Salehi** harnesses the dual nature of Persian calligraphy—what she calls “the immediacy of line and the direct and literal communicative properties of writing”—to create dense patterns that recall Iranian tiles and textiles, and resemble the whorls of fingerprints. Individual words—the name of a family member or friend, the Farsi word for “peace”—are repeated in a meditative process that has served the artist as a salve against separation, or an expression of longing. In her rubbings of Muslim prayer stones, she similarly transfigures language into visual rhythm, revealing that pattern often has a purpose.

— Samantha Friedman

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1. Neil Marshall, “Patterning,” *Arts Magazine*, vol. 55 (September 1980), p. 121.
2. Ibid.