Divide and Consider

In 1908 Viennese architect Adolf Loose declared ornament to be dead. From his modernist perspective cultural development proceeded through gradual shedding of what he considered to be unnecessary and distracting decorative elements. The stripping down of form to its essential components was synonymous with progress. It signaled the emergence of the superior visual language of modernity.

For better or for worse, we have lost that sense of certainty and no longer seem to believe in the redemptive value of purity. Formal austerity, transparency, and functionalism have become code words that ultimately point to modernism, rather than any quality of an object or visual experience. Perhaps that is one reason why visual excess, ornament and decorative pattern have reemerged with vengeance as key visual strategies of contemporary art.

Dana Hargrove's works fit comfortably within this broadly international tendency, though her intelligent use of richly decorative forms does not stem from an impulse to follow the prevalent fashion. She does not use ornament for ornament's sake. The evocative sensuality of color, details, and patterns that appear in the pieces such as "The Empire's New Clothes," "Broekie," or "Spikes" is deceptive. The visual playfulness of these works has a definite edge. It evokes the specter of the colonial and apartheid past that haunts South Africa's present. It also allows the artist, whose family lives in South Africa and who has recently returned from a prolonged stay there, to resist the temptation of succumbing to the darkness. The lushness of color and marks are a defense mechanism and a strategy for resistance, survival, and commentary that are highly personal yet address the collective experience.

In the "Terminal" series, the patterns of ornament play a very different role. The visceral intensity of the South African pieces is transformed here into cool diagnostic detachment. Quite literally, the blues take place of the reds, precision that of painterly approach. Familiar and not so familiar symbols and diagrams suggest urgent current issues: terrorism, militarism, globalism. Yet, the visual presentation betrays none of the anxiety that those issues produce. It is clinically precise and it is precisely this impassive attitude that frightens. The controlled visual patterns and symbols speak to a reality that is anything but.

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