The Committee on Taste and Leisure

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THE COMMITTEE ON TASTE AND LEISURE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

THE COMMITTEE ON TASTE AND LEISURE

By Katherine Elizabeth Barrie, Master of Fine Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019.
Major Director: Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

Within my studio practice I have been examining the aesthetics of leisure spaces, the implications of good and bad taste, and what it means to live one’s best life. Considering the history of design motifs and the influence of color upon the human psyche, my thesis exhibition of abstract paintings contains references to patterns, design movements, and modes of artifice that have historically been seen as brazen and tacky. These include nods to the Memphis Design group, faux marble, terrazzo, stucco, and artificial sand. Each has held an important place in the history of designed spaces, and at one time or another they were deeply celebrated before being criticized. I am drawn to the parallels between the surface treatment of furniture and architectural spaces, and the surface of a canvas. My use of materials includes a mixture of high- and lowbrow to reinterpret media such as highly pigmented acrylic paint, natural and artificial sand, volcanic pumice, and hardware store products for DIY home improvement. I use a formal, modernist painting language to elevate the artificial and superficial to the hierarchy associated with the moral underpinnings of modernism. By being entirely serious about the unserious, this work aims to question the value we assign to play and why tastefulness rarely aligns with fun.
Color and Abstraction

Adoration of Color

I am not religious, but if it existed, I would be a devout disciple of the Church of Color. Reveling in the visual experience of color is one of my greatest indulgences. I’m inspired by color combinations I come across in both the physical and digital worlds, and keep an archive of these visual pleasures. Some I utilize in the scheme of a painting; most sit on deck as annotations of my observations. The color palette of each painting is the most important aspect of my work, and the first thing I consider when starting a new piece. I am drawn to the precarious power that color has in influencing human psychology and lean into the ability for it to uplift and excite. My approach is threefold: I use color as a device for pointing towards particular references, for emulating emotion, and for optical effects that are achieved by an adherence to color theory. The exercises found in Josef Albers’ The Interaction of Color are integral lessons that I have applied to my work for the sheer enjoyment of playing with the instability of color. For the past few years I have been using a custom acrylic paint called Highload, which is made by Golden Artist Colors. It is a highly pigmented material that dries to a velvety, matte finish, allowing more direct access to the color upon the surface than the plastic sheen traditionally found in acrylics. It reacts to light in a way that is not too dissimilar from Color Aid—a silk-screened paper material often used in Albers’ color studies.

In The Interaction of Color and the Homage to the Square series, Albers investigated the properties of color through a formal game that doubled as perceptual meditation. As critic Holland Cotter observes, “Color, for Albers, was a psychological and spiritual phenomenon as
much as an optical one, a mood-changer and a projection device.”¹ I feel similarly, having noted how the entire mood of a painting can shift with the simplest alteration of color, to say nothing of how each color influences the appearance of those adjacent. At times, I deviate from what I originally settled on if another hue would be more effective. I believe that color reigns as the most considered element of any work, as, in Cotter’s words, “colors gain visual and emotional value from other colors around them. They develop metaphorical meaning the same way.”² Color rides on historical connotations, some of which I utilize in my practice—especially in the realm of pink as it is tied to femininity and frivolousness. I gravitate more, however, towards Albers’ practice, in which the meaning behind each color is exemplified by the context in which it is placed. My painting As Boring As They Are Interesting takes cues from Albers’ color studies by taking on the concentric square format of his Homage to the Square series. Albers also influenced the process of painting; rather than planning this composition out, as I have done in all my other large-scale works, I continually painted over and reworked this painting as I considered various color relationships. In working through the prompts presented in Interaction of Color using Color Aid, one is able to immediately see how each hue influences the perception of those around it. In As Boring As They Are Interesting, I wanted to replicate this trial and error process on a larger scale, with the addition of patterns and three-dimensional textures alongside flat planes of color. Sitting near the center of the composition is a one-inch band of color painted with a pink paint, which immediately took on the properties of lilac when placed in a new context. A sponge texture covers the perimeter of the canvas, created using a handmade tool I purchased from an art store in Italy. I have no idea what it is called, and is has no labeling. It was in a section of the store full of tools for painting frescos, and I regret not purchasing more of these tools because they are able to create a far

² Ibid.
greater range of effects than the sea sponges I had been using for marbling effects. Separating this space from a terrazzo pattern that mimics a style popular in the 1970s is a band of artificial sand that maintains the wonderful illusion of being the real thing. Depending on the distance the viewer has from this piece, each square appears at a different depth on the picture plane, greatly influenced by the colors and textures presented. The title of this piece is lifted from a 1980s design book, but I feel that it also speaks to the sophistication of Albers’ work that is often overlooked due to its simplicity.

As Boring As They Are Interesting
2019, Highload acrylic, artificial sand, and molding paste on canvas, 48” x 48”
Image courtesy of Steven Casanova
In my studio practice, stripes have been used to organize specific color references, create visual optics, and act as a signifier for playfulness within a precisely executed composition. What I find so compelling about stripes is how incredibly versatile they are and how drastically different the pattern can be based on the width, color, rhythm, orientation, and texture of the stripes. A simple adjustment of only one of those elements can result in an entirely different pattern, just like one would observe when altering a song. Michel Pastoureau makes the connection between music and stripes, noting that “as with musica, the stripe is tones, sequences, movements, rhythms, harmonies, proportions, all at once. Like musica, it is method, flow, duration, emotion, joy. Both share a common vocabulary: scale, range, tone, degree, line, gradation, gap, interval, etc.” While spacing and proportion are key elements for how one reads a pattern, I believe color has the largest impact. The entire mood of a design can shift with the simplest of alteration. Bridget Riley emphasized the optics and mechanisms found in the relationships between lines. When discussing her 1965 painting Ecclesia, Riley stated that “each band has a clear identity. Step back and the colours begin to interact, further away still a field of closely modulated harmonies cut by strong contrasts opens up.” Stripes provide a structure with endless variants to explore rhythm, tone, orientation, repetition, and texture.

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Bridget Riley, *Ecclesia*, 1985, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 44 inches

Image courtesy of Karsten Schubert, London
My work is rooted in hard edge abstraction and each color has a specific domain of existence in the composition. Every color I mix and lay upon a canvas exists as a saturated hue sitting in its own private form, influenced by those surrounding it, much like the work of Holly Coulis. While her work centers on flattening still lifes into playful geometric images that compress the pictorial plane, the execution of saturated color within a constricted, graphic form remains quite similar. Her work is further heightened by the vibration of lines painted between shapes, allowing each shape to pulsate between foreground and background. It is this sophisticated play of color and form mixed with a consideration of the geometry found in everyday life that I am seeking to evoke in my own work.

Holly Coulis, 2 Tables with Still Lifes, 2017, oil on linen, 40 x 50 inches
Image courtesy of Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery
I spent my thirty-first birthday alone in Mexico City and gave myself the gift of private
tours in two of Luis Barragán’s architectural masterpieces. One was his private home that now
operates as a museum, everything arranged more or less just how he left it. The other, Casa
Gilardi, was his last project. As the story goes, Barragán came out of retirement to build this
bachelor pad for two friends because he was so awestruck by the jacaranda tree at the center
of the property. In turn, Barragán designed the house around the tree, which influenced both
the spirit of color choices and the physical structure. The trademarks of Barragán’s oeuvre
include the clean lines of Modernism, a preference for raw building materials found in Mexico,
an incorporation of water to connect the built space to the natural world, a clever use of natural
and artificial light, and specific color choices painted upon surfaces. In defiance of Le
Corbusier’s theory that a home is a machine for living, Barragán defined his work as emotional
architecture. He believed that built spaces should contain elements of serenity, magic, and a
bit of mystery. And color is key in achieving those goals. Barragán utilized Mexican Pink—a
vivid, saturated, purplish hot pink, similar to the bracts of a bougainvillea—in the majority of his
projects to celebrate a hue that is emblematic of Mexican heritage (and today is the official
color of Mexico City). This pink, along with a selection of other vibrant colors (but never
greens—he left those to nature), were painted upon textured adobe walls, which were a nod to
traditional haciendas. At Casa Gilardi, the colors utilized are based on the paintings of Chucho
Reyes Ferreira, one of Mexico’s most celebrated artists. The paint is refreshed every few years
in order to maintain the intended shade. The result is a courtyard that is bursting with large
panes of color, yet somehow manages to not overwhelm. On the first floor of the house is a
corridor leading to a dining room, which also includes an indoor pool that is disguised as a

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5 Who knew cities could have official colors?!
three-dimensional abstract painting. The hallway is painted entirely white, but one wall holds a series of thin, vertical windows that have been painted yellow, illuminating the entire space with a golden glow. In all of these spaces, limestone tiles rest below your feet. You are at once entirely grounded to the earth and its elements while also transported to another realm where color and serenity reign. It’s an incredibly effective visual device that manages to be both playful and serious at the same time.

Luis Barragán, Casa Gilardi, hallway and pool, 1976, Mexico City, Mexico
Images courtesy of the author
Luis Barragán, Casa Gilardi, courtyard, 1976, Mexico City, Mexico

Image courtesy of the author
While considering the installation of my thesis exhibition at the Anderson Gallery, I had several ideas for how to manipulate the architecture of the space, but ultimately decided to paint the smallest wall in the gallery a pale shade of pink that is found in most of my work. The wall was thirteen and a half feet tall and just short of seven feet wide. When entering gallery F of the Anderson, one is confronted with a large room divided into four quadrants. My work was hung in the far left corner of the gallery, so the viewer was able to see As Boring As They Are Interesting from afar and observe how the work shifts based upon one’s location in the room. It was important for me to have an area that would be a surprise, that a visitor could only see once they were truly in my exhibition space and not across the room. That was where I painted the pink wall. A small (albeit still thirteen and a half feet tall) six-inch-wide stripe of pink wrapped around the wall where paintings were hung onto the wall that faced out into the gallery. As a viewer entered the space, they were given a hint of what was around the corner. The pink stripe of paint created a satisfying sense of volume for the wall. It became a solid mass of color: five hundred sixty-seven cubic inches of pale pink. It was a subtle architectural interference that referenced Barragán’s walls of color while providing an effective strategy to hang Let Us Not Forget Stucco - It Is Beautiful Provided It Does Not Imitate Marble. The perimeter of Let Us Not Forget... features a hue nearly identical to the wall, with small dots of pale yellow, creamy white, and burnt sienna forming a loose terrazzo motif. Hanging it upon the pink wall allowed the border to melt into the next surface, creating a soft transition amongst a body of work full of hard edges. Also hanging on the pink wall was a twelve-inch square piece, Timelessly Chic or Permanently Tragic, which behaves as a lone terrazzo tile. It extracts a detail from a larger work, A Surface Application of Decoration Using the Slippery Feminine Arts of Disguise, which is hung as part of a diptych on the adjacent wall. Because much of The
Committee on Taste and Leisure is comprised of sampling architectural details, it felt appropriate to include something that was far more direct.

![Installation detail of The Committee on Taste and Leisure](image)

Installation detail of The Committee on Taste and Leisure

Anderson Gallery, 2019

Image courtesy of the author

Artists of Influence

I feel absurdly grateful that I live in a time when there is a plethora of women making extraordinary abstract paintings. There are three in particular who I look to for their approaches towards a medium applied to a surface, their sensitivity to color, and their continued investment in painting and abstraction.
Rebecca Morris

While I am making abstract works at a time when such a choice is not questioned, Rebecca Morris’ 2004 “Manifesto: For Abstractionists and Friends of the Non Objective” remains an important piece of art writing for my practice. Morris wrote this short manifesto as a means to defend abstract painting at a time when the style was not taken seriously. The line “Perverse formalism is your god”⁶ is one I hold in my back pocket, as the formal qualities of each painting I make are just as important as the content behind them. I am drawn to Morris’ canvases full of shapes that are each rendered in different techniques, many of them filled with patterns evoking a wide range of sources. She maintains a fixed format throughout most of her work, negotiating modes of abstraction within a particular framework. Her paintings are deliberate and imprecise at the same time, sophisticatedly casual. She thinks a lot about placement and formalism, and gives in to what makes her uncomfortable.

I arrived at VCU with a strict means of working in the studio, and it took until March of my first year for me to break out of a habit of obsessively planning every last aspect of each painting. I was urged to let go, to explore the materiality of paint, and make some work without a blueprint. This was one of the most important moments for my practice. The adherence to color, form, and hard edge abstraction remained, but I finally allowed mistakes, odd combinations, and unpredictable outcomes. I introduced various textures achieved with mediums, gels, and pastes to the flat, unreflective surfaces I had created with acrylic paint. I relinquished what I was unsure of and it made my work far more more interesting. In an interview with Hyperallergic, Morris stated, “Every time you do something new and weird, the

gut reaction can be to decide it’s not good. It is the ‘shock of the new’ element. So, instead, if it’s really weird, I will try to leave it. I leave a lot of stuff that makes me uncomfortable.” I am trying to more sincerely surrender to the painting decisions that make me second-guess my choices. Sitting with them, and leaving the weird.

Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#02-12)*, 2012, oil on canvas, 106 x 80 1/2 inches

Image courtesy of Hyperallergic

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Charline von Heyl

Charline von Heyl is a painter I deeply admire for her ability to be undefinable for so many years. She takes “decorative forms, symbols and signs without direct references, to the extreme in her works. Her art focuses on improvisation, risk, discovery, as well as on special tricks, surprising twists, and feelings of elation.” An element of bliss always manages to occur when I get to see von Heyl’s work in person. Her show at Petzel Gallery in New York in the fall of 2018 was a real sensational art viewing moment for me. I felt sorrowful to leave her painting Corrido, which was hung in the first room just to the left upon entering the gallery. Von Heyl’s work contains a high level of sophistication mixed with play and Corrido is an exceptional example. It is a nine-foot tall mammoth painting. The viewer becomes fully consumed by von Heyl’s swaths of radioactive yellow, stripes of muted taupes and salmon pinks that at times form a plaid pattern, flat balls of bright orange, lyrical swirls of white fire or leaf motifs, and a central black checkerboard abstract shape that resembles a branch and functions as a figure. At once there is depth and flatness, abstraction and representation, darkness and light. There were moments I could not stop investigating because they were both pleasurable for the eye, but also a mystery to solve in how the artist went about executing such a piece. I align with von Heyl’s belief in “painting’s ability to elicit transformative aesthetic experience” by forcing viewers to slow down and “trap their gaze.” As von Heyl says, “it’s not about mystifying anything; it’s about lengthening the time of pleasure.” As I have considered modes of play, I think of work like von Heyl’s for the way it wholeheartedly celebrates the act of applying paint

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10 Ibid.
to a canvas. Each work is unique, and yet, with repeated and altered uses of certain motifs and references, they become a united collective.

Charline von Heyl, *Corrido*, 2018, oil, acrylic, and charcoal on linen, 108 x 90 inches

Image courtesy of Petzel Gallery
Laura Owens

For the past several years I have thought regularly about a body of work by Laura Owens: *Pavement Karaoke*, first shown at Sadie Coles HQ in London in 2012. The paintings in *Pavement Karaoke* function both as independent pieces and a collective whole, which is what I am striving for with my thesis work. Despite being maximalist paintings, they are somehow not visually overwhelming. Owens’ reoccurring grid motif is found in each of the seven paintings that make up *Pavement Karaoke*, overlaid with red and white gingham fabric, large fields of translucent hot pinks, the occasional marking of Caribbean Sea aqua or a muted green mix, scatterings of pumice, and huge gestures of a deep blue that read as if they were scribbled in Microsoft Paint.11 Those blue gestures are my favorite. As you get closer to the paintings, you see that they are actually comprised of hundreds of marks of a multitude of colors laid down in extreme impasto. These areas become sculptural in relation to the flat surfaces immediately adjacent. Fake shadows are painted below the shapes to emphasize depth in a way that complicates what is real and what is artificial while giving a humorous salute towards the very act of painting itself. There are moments where stars are carved into the thick impasto: the most quintessential Laura Owens’ Easter eggs. The edges between foreground and background are sharp. More than anything, I am drawn to her continued investigation in the possibilities of paint and her embrace of middlebrow kitsch aesthetics. As stated in the wall texts for Owens’ mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, “For Owens, this heterogeneity serves as a feminist challenge to ingrained art historical hierarchies and traditional notions of good taste. Why can’t an ambitious painting, she asks, be

11 In actuality, they were created in Photoshop, projected onto the canvas, and outlined in tape to be filled in with paint. Not too dissimilar from my own practice.
sentimental, pink, or funny, or full of a mother’s experiences, animals, and googly eyes? Her work draws us in to throw us off, awakening our minds to the act of perception.”  

Laura Owens, *Untitled*, from *Pavement Karaoke*, 2012, oil, acrylic, acrylic resin, fabric, and pumice on canvas, 108 x 84 inches

Image courtesy of owenslaura.com

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Laura Owens, detail of *Untitled*, from *Pavement Karaoke*, 2012, oil, acrylic, acrylic resin, fabric, and pumice on canvas, 108 x 84 inches

Image courtesy of owenslaura.com

Laura Owens, *Pavement Karaoke*, 2012, oil, acrylic, acrylic resin, fabric, and pumice on canvas

Image courtesy of Sadie Coles HQ, London
Good vs Bad Taste

My mother is an interior designer and I spent a great deal of my childhood in design showrooms wistfully paging through sample books of wallpapers and fabrics, roaming the fabricated rooms deciding which pieces I would take home if I could, and hearing my mother’s opinions on taste. The collection of imitation rooms at the design firm was a second home to me. It is only now that I realize this was my first introduction to the practice of designing something artificial to appear as if it is something real, something to aspire to.

The idea of taste rests firmly at the center of my work. Taste is something that “communicates complex messages about our values, our aspirations, our beliefs, and our identities.” For the majority of my time in graduate school, I have been making paintings that take design elements that I have been taught are tacky or lacking tasteful aesthetics, and using them to create tasteful compositions. It becomes an embrace of ornamentation, eclecticism, and the objecthood of a canvas. Much of my early understanding of taste comes from my mother, who several clients referred to as “the arbiter of taste.” Between her profession as an interior designer and her role on an architectural board, I have witnessed countless conversations over what is deemed the appropriate way to address a space. The most concentrated time I spent in design showrooms where my mother and other designers debated matters of taste was as a young child in the late 1980s and early 90s. English and French country decor were all the rage and were employed in house after house. The aesthetics found in the TV shows I adored (Pee Wee’s Playhouse, Saved by the Bell, Clarissa Explains It All) most certainly were not. The wallpaper samples on which I was putting Post-It notes were never

chosen. Most of the houses I grew up spending time in had formal living rooms with rules for how children should behave in them, whereas the basements with no design consideration were free reign for children to play and do as they pleased. Lesson learned: fun is rarely tasteful.

The House in Good Taste

I am interested in two particular outcomes of the Industrial Revolution due to how they radically shifted the structure of society and how we think about design. The first was the introduction of a middle-class with leisure time and money to spend, who were using those two things to achieve lives they aspired to. The second involves the first generation of tastemakers publishing advice on how one should live their best life. In each of these publications, the theme was that one could achieve social mobility and a greater sense of individuality through the means of tasteful decoration. In 1913, upper-class socialite and self-proclaimed decorator Elsie de Wolfe published The House in Good Taste. It was the first print material that distinguished the ideas of “good taste” and “bad taste.” Prior to this, taste was just taste, and it was something only aristocrats possessed. Now, it was something all classes could cultivate by the simple means of following the directions of a woman of taste. It was an idealistic text, providing a framework for how one could construct a means of identity through the proper decoration of one’s home. “In moral terms, it meant embracing the concept of ‘sincerity’ while, in aesthetic terms, it involved a consideration of color, form, line, harmony, contrast and proportion, and, above all, implementing the notions of ‘suitability and simplicity.’”¹⁵ (Not unlike the principles one considers when constructing a painting). In other words, what is right or

¹⁴ Which I do understand - no one wants an eight-year-old designing their living room.
appropriate for a space can only be achieved by following specific rules outlined by someone else.

Every title I have used for my paintings in the past year is directly lifted from an interior design advice book, published article, or text recounting design history. I have a notebook in which I write down any line that holds a particular attitude and save it to be applied to the right composition in order to promote a certain droll air. This harkens to the sentiment behind John Baldessari’s 1968 painting *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell*. All of the text painted upon the canvas was taken from an art trade magazine dictating what art should be. The wry humor Baldessari evoked in this work is one I hope to insert into my own work.

The title of my thesis exhibition is one of the few times in which I altered a phrase to speak more directly to what I am after. *The Committee on Taste and Leisure* refers to the Committee on Home Furnishing and Decoration, a council formed under President Herbert Hoover in 1931. Its aim was to research and then educate the public on appropriate ways to furnish one’s home, thus promoting the idea that individual autonomy could be achieved through the act of tasteful home decoration. The notion of a presidentially-appointed committee devoted to home decorating seems absurd today, but the aspiration for a better life made possible by surrounding oneself with beautiful things is vastly more prevalent in modern society. As was the case then and now, consumers are educated on taste that can “be bought in the marketplace and brought home.”\(^\text{16}\) In analyzing ideas of good and bad taste, philosopher J.M. Bernstein noted that,

Judgements of taste claim objectivity, they aim to speak with a ‘universal voice,’

for everyone, and therefore demand that others see things in the same way.

Because there are no ultimate grounds for judgement, then retreat is possible;

because retreat is possible, the judgements themselves may appear somehow systematically vulnerable; and because they are vulnerable then they are not really objective but merely psychological.\textsuperscript{17}

I am drawn to those who heeded this sentiment and rebelled against the rules of what is surmised as appropriate design. Perhaps this comes from my own personal history of growing up as a decorator’s daughter in a house that was beautifully outfitted, though one with too many perfectly placed items. As a child, my favorite house to spend time in was one up the street where the Puffenberger family had an air hockey table in the dining room instead of an actual table to eat upon. I had heard my mother lament about this travesty many times—but I marveled at the fact that such a notion was even possible. I cannot help but make a connection to Masanori Umeda’s Tawaraya boxing ring bed designed for Memphis in 1981: taking a time-honored utilitarian object and replacing it with something meant for play. It is a perfect example of Memphis Design’s success at destabilizing apparent truths regarding matters of taste. It is where Memphis aligns with Camp.

The original Memphis group members lounging in Masanori Umeda’s Tawaraya boxing ring bed in 1981
Image courtesy of The Cut

Memphis and Camp

The 1980s are the go-to example of bad taste. The Memphis Design group is largely credited with creating the essential aesthetics of the 1980s with their explosive collection of postmodern furniture and other objects produced in the first few years of the decade. Geometric motifs were used throughout all designs, plastic laminate was placed next to leather, squiggles and asymmetrical patterns covered a variety of surfaces. They were loud, humorous, and unlike anything designed before. Their celebration of riotous colors, bold patterns, and disjointed designs bled into all areas of pop culture, from fashion to television.
The set of *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* is a wondrous example of Memphis’ influence and the proliferation of Camp. Dennis Zanone owns the largest collection of Memphis Design, decorating his entire home in their creations. Images of his living room are some of the most circulated pictures of the original Memphis designs placed within a domestic interior space. What we are presented with is a color assault on the interior that is unabashedly distasteful.

The living room of Dennis Zanone, one of the biggest collectors of Memphis Design  
Image courtesy of Memphis Milano

Memphis was a joyous rebellion against good taste through the means of design choices that were playful, gauche, and subversive. Modernism had been king for decades, and Memphis quickly became a widely embraced critique of Modernism’s austerity. Ettore Sottsass, the founder of the Memphis design group, “deliberately set out to put a bomb under
what he called the ‘uniform panorama of good taste.’”¹⁸ Their approach to design was “a provocative mix of high culture and popular culture. It was a critique of Modernist archetypes, but it was also a celebration of anonymous and unselfconscious design. The names that the group gave the pieces produced for that first collection—Carlton, Plaza, Splendid and the rest—were, as Casciani has noted, names associated with both grand hotels and humble guesthouses around the world, implying a crossover between the ordinary and the exceptional.”¹⁹ Memphis was about creating faux chic objects and furniture that elevated cheap materials and uncouth patterns and colors to a more respectable status. Their designs perfectly negated the nauseating elitism of Adolf Loos’s brief but disparaging manifesto Ornament and Crime. Loos wrote, “The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects.”²⁰ Believing that “freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength,” Loos advocated that anyone who wished to design a modern object should rid it of any ornamentation.²¹ In his eyes, those who dabbled in the dark art of ornamentation were uncivilized and inferior. I can only assume he would have been completely beside himself at the sight of anything from the Memphis designers.

In her brilliant essay “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag wrote, “the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.”²² I am entirely serious about the unserious. And I stand by Sontag’s declaration that within the realm of Camp, “there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste.”²³ Memphis exemplified a Camp sensibility when they built expensive furniture using cheap materials like

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¹⁹ Ibid., 177.
²¹ Ibid., 24.
²³ Ibid., 291.
patterned plastic laminate. One associates such a surface with the counters of fast food restaurants, not limited run designer goods with steep price tags. Design historian Penny Sparke observed that postmodernism “served to help validate the ‘other,’ which in the world of material culture was represented by all those areas of design that had been marginalized within modernism - luxury, feminine taste, the decorative arts and craft among them.” Artifice and exaggeration are key components to both Camp and Memphis: each revel in aspects of escapism and fantasy through design. While a bit of a vendetta against Modernism and the contemporary design world drove the Memphis group, Sontag maintains that, “Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation - not judgement. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy.”

Examples of Camp can be traced back to the French court at Versailles under Louis XIV, the Sun King. Transforming Versailles from a hunting lodge to an expansive, extravagant palace, one of the hallmarks of the French king’s reign was overt opulence within the palace through court ritual and the arts. The most iconic of Louis XIV’s architectural projects was the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles: a two hundred forty-foot corridor of marble, mirrors, crystal chandeliers, allegorical paintings, and gilded bronze. Sontag noted that Camp could be found in “the period’s extraordinary feeling for artifice, for surface, for symmetry; its taste for the picturesque and the thrilling, its elegant conventions for representing instant feeling and the total presence of character.” The decadence of Versailles became the defining factor of Louis XIV’s power and influence in Europe, a decadence that continued through the age of Marie Antoinette. The legacy of the last queen of France before the French Revolution is enshrined by her over indulgence in a life of luxury and leisure through decorating, fashion, and food. She

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26 Ibid., 291.
was too deeply ingrained in the excesses of Versailles to know what was happening outside of her gilded oasis. Sofia Coppola’s 2006 film Marie Antoinette is an exquisitely stylized means of visualizing how Antoinette relished in the hedonistic leisure of Versailles. Antoinette and her posse laze away in sugary satins amongst pastel and gold Rococo interiors, while champagne and sculptural cakes are given copious screen time. The pastries quickly become emblems of indulgence. As such, I have incorporated a few different icing techniques into my repertoire of painted surface treatments. It is a means of referencing the ways in which decorative frosting can function as “the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience” that is prevalent in Camp.27

Film still from Marie Antoinette, 2006, directed by Sofia Coppola
Image courtesy of The New York Times

27 Ibid., 287.
In breaking down Camp to its most basic definition, Sontag explained that “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.” Many of the patterns that Memphis created were graphic abstractions of fashionable surfaces like cabana wicker, pebbled leather, and galvanized steel. They become cartoonish at times, upstaging dimensionality itself, flattening the surfaces they adorn. My Sense of Purpose Was Derailed by an Unfortunate Bedspread includes references to a myriad of sources: hand painted faux marble, Bacterio and Argilla prints from Memphis, and the duvet cover in my bedroom at my parents’ home in northern Michigan. The cherries hint at indulgence and leisure, with a tinge of sexuality due to unavoidable societal associations. By using specific tones of David Hockney-esque saturated blue, my depiction of the Memphis prints alludes to the ways in which chlorinated water dapples light on the floor of a swimming pool. Juxtaposed with a weaving of warm pinks, the small painting vibrates and manages to hold its own when hung amongst other larger works. There is so much information packed into this small work it would be jarring for it to exist on a larger scale. The composition is highly saturated, with no pattern dominating the painting. Rather, the viewer is confronted with a slew of graphic lines, cherries in motion, and sponged marble. This was the final painting completed for my thesis and I feel that it is an exciting new direction for my work. Introducing a simplified element of representation alongside abstraction places the viewer in a more tangible place of association. In my mind, it forces one to consider what the other elements may be abstractions of, rather than processing them as purely decorative.

Above anything else in Memphis’ work, I am most drawn to the brazen use of color and pattern. Barbara Radice notes that Memphis color “generates nervous impulses that open new doors of logic in the brain,” while the vibrations found in the squiggles that construct the iconic Bacterio pattern, designed by Sottsass, speak to the value system we assign to play. I include this pattern in my work as a direct reference to Memphis and what it represents. The Bacterio print was the most widely utilized design throughout the group’s short existence.

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printed onto plastic laminate and cotton fabrics. The story goes that Sottsass conceived of the idea of abstracting the forms found in microscopic details of bacteria while “drinking coffee at ten o’clock one morning at the pink-and-blue veined counter of a quasi-suburban milk bar.”\(^{30}\) I point this out because I think it is important to note that the history of Memphis is just as stylized and specific as the designs they concocted.

When Memphis debuted its first collection at the 1981 Salone del Mobile Italiano in Milan, Sottsass and another designer were on their way to the show in a taxi when they were confronted with a chaotic mob of people near the venue. They thought the commotion was the aftermath of a terrorist bomb, when in fact the crowds were all flooding into the venue to see the crazy new designs created by a group called Memphis. The New York Times wrote that the show “appalled some and amused others but put everyone attending the fair in a state of high excitement.”\(^{31}\) The title of one of the paintings in my thesis exhibition references the exact numbers of Memphis’s collection from that seminal show: *Thirty-One Pieces of Furniture, Three Clocks, Ten Lamps, Eleven Ceramics, and Twenty-Five Hundred People*. The painting depicts a close-up section of one of the most revered pieces of furniture from Memphis’s debut collection, Michael Graves’s *Plaza Dressing Table*.

I find humor in the status that objects can achieve, so it felt necessary to point this out through the titling of the first painting I made of this piece of furniture: *Perhaps the Rarest, Most Important Work of 20th Century Art Furniture Ever Created*. A geometric and clunky piece of furniture covered in tiny light bulbs, mirrors, and teal plastic laminate, editions of the *Plaza Dressing Table* were collected by David Bowie, Karl Lagerfeld, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Detroit Institute of Art. When searching online, I found one available for sale for $50,000. It is a piece of furniture designed for someone who has the time to sit down

\(^{30}\text{Ibid., 36.}\)

and primp. Historically, dressing tables have been furniture for women, aiding them to achieve societal expectations of beauty. *Perhaps the Rarest, Most Important Work of 20th Century Art Furniture Ever Created* focuses on the vanity section of the *Plaza Dressing Table*, simplifying the structure while also adding a few adornments. The original maple root wood is translated into a cotton candy pink marble. Glowing light bulbs are flattened into lemon yellow orbs. The edge of the furniture is defined by four thin saturated stripes of contrasting color that pulsate when situated next to one another. The reflection of the mirror is negated through the use of a pale, minty green; deadening a surface that could have transmitted light. By erasing the mirror, the feminine affectation and utility of the vanity are displaced. A similar strategy is used to remove the kitsch of the mirrored accents that rest at the base of the vanity. *Thirty-One Pieces of Furniture, Three Clocks, Ten Lamps, Eleven Ceramics, and Twenty-Five Hundred People* zooms in on the vanity even closer, adding a muted version of Sottsass’ *Bacterio* print to the background, which brightens the colors present upon the furniture.

The background pattern of *Perhaps the Rarest, Most Important Work of 20th Century Art Furniture Ever Created* is a direct translation of tiles on the border of a pool designed by Ettore Sottsass and Marco Zanini in 1984. The oval form alludes to the curvature present in kidney shaped pools while small dashes bring a frenzied energy to a structure intended for relaxation. The pool sat in the middle of a room that echoed the classical conceptions of beauty found in the atrium design of ancient Greek and Italian villas. I find it amusingly ironic that one of our best anthropological insights into ancient European civilization is through Pompeii, a resort town preserved in volcanic ash since 79 A.D. We are not privy to the experience of commoners, but rather, the exquisitely adorned vacation homes of Rome’s elite. It is important to note that while Memphis was aspiring to create disaffected design for the masses, it swiftly became elite taste, as “much of it is only to be found in private collections
and museums... A practical object and/or a work of art, or something between the two - this is the great contradiction of Memphis, but it is also where its originality lies.”

Michael Graves, “Plaza” Dressing Table for Memphis, 1981
Maple root, lacquered wood, mirrors, glass, brass, and upholstery, 89 x 55 x 18 1/2 inches
Image courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Perhaps the Rarest, Most Important Work of 20th Century Art Furniture Ever Created

2018, Highload acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

Image courtesy of the author
Thirty-One Pieces of Furniture, Three Clocks, Ten Lamps, Eleven Ceramics, and Twenty-Five Hundred People
2019, Highload acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24 inches
Image courtesy of Steven Casanova
Artifice

Sontag wrote, “Camp introduces a new standard: artifice as an ideal, theatricality.”\(^{33}\) I have always been amused by the theatrics behind design and the various tricks that are implemented to create an aesthetic. My family went to Rome over the Christmas holiday this past year and I marveled at the abundance of churches that are rich in artifice: faux marble everywhere. I enjoy the narrative that unfolds as one enters a cathedral as a non-Catholic who is there primarily for the visual splendor. One is greeted by the sight of such rich natural stone upon nearly every surface, only to get closer and realize it is all just plasterwork and paint as far as the eye can see. Even St. Peter’s Basilica, the Holy Grail of Catholicism, has towers of faux marble. The Villa Borghese, used as a party mansion by one of the most elite families of 17th-century Rome, now serves as an art museum, but what is most captivating to me is the maximalist approach towards artifice that is used throughout the building. Seven different types of faux marble are painted upon one lower section of a wall that hovers above three different terrazzo tile patterns. It’s entirely absurd and an absolute delight.

\(^{33}\) Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 275.
Villa Borghese artifice detail of faux marble and terrazzo tile
Image courtesy of the author
The level of craftsmanship that is required to execute faux finishes, terrazzo, stucco, and ornamental flourishes was once a highly respected and much sought-after skill. Today these decorative techniques are reproduced on a mass scale through mechanization, digitization, and cheaper materials. When making my work, it has been imperative for me to replicate the patterns and techniques of artifice that I am referencing as a way of honoring this history. I am also determined to make work that truly must be experienced in person.

Today’s influx of digital culture allows much art viewing to take place on screens rather than in person. For many years, I was making flat, colorful paintings that translated quite well to the screen, despite relishing in the physical process of making a painting. In my time at VCU, I have gravitated more towards making large works that require intimate observation, installed alongside small paintings that play with levels of intricacy. Hand-painted patterns, faux finishes, and architectural flourishes have been incorporated alongside flat blocks of saturated color. These decorative additions include references to Memphis, faux marble, terrazzo, stucco, and artificial sand. Each has held an important place in the history of designed spaces, and I’m drawn to the notion that at one time or another, they were deeply celebrated before being criticized. It becomes an embrace of ornamentation, eclecticism, and having good taste in bad taste. These patterns and artificial motifs are all nondirectional, repeatable, and abstractions of natural elements. They lend themselves to spatial manipulation through the use of color and material. How they function visually negates the way in which large blocks of solid color are processed by the brain. They break up the visual field and create a tension, a vibration that speaks to each of their precarious histories.

Stucco - the collective term used for an architectural finishing material comprised of aggregates, a binder, and water - has been around for millenia. Traditionally, it has been utilized to cover structural materials that are deemed unattractive: brick, cinder block,
concrete. It is a finishing technique that has been utilized both upon the exterior of buildings and in interior spaces. It is durable, weather-resistant, and can be manipulated to take on both flat and sculptural forms. In locations with warmer climates, its textured surface is the predominant exterior coating, often containing warm-hued pigments to create a soft, inviting structure. Covering a building in stucco is a labor-intensive process that is a clever solution for covering up cheap, utilitarian framework. It was once an architectural status symbol of aristocrats, finely sculpted to create intricate decorative work in cathedrals, palaces, theaters, and other buildings for the upper class. The Modernists saw stucco as an unrefined nuisance and vowed to steer clear of including it in their designs, as it distracted from the clean lines that formed the backbone of their architecture. In the past century, this attitude has prevailed, and stucco continues to be seen as an inelegant way to flourish a building. Regardless, it is utilized upon both residential and commercial structures, particularly in seaside communities to create a beachy vibe. In modern society, stucco is traditionally comprised of lime, sand, cement, and water. I have created my own stucco, made of pumice, artificial sand, acrylic polymer, and acrylic paint. I am drawn to the melding of natural and artificial materials in making this composite, and to the geological time found in the pumice as it mixes with factory made materials. The artificial sand is a paint additive for creating anti-skid surfaces on boats and waterside decks. It costs less than three dollars and can be found at a hardware store.

After practicing a few of the most widely used stucco techniques, I applied my stucco to a painting, sitting inside of an arch that functions as a wall, a window, a void. The stucco is pink, with a visible seam. The title of this piece, Let Us Not Forget Stucco - It Is Beautiful Provided It Does Not Imitate Marble is a quote from Italian architect Gio Ponti’s 1957 book In Praise of Architecture. In this text, Ponti details his love of architecture, but also declares guidelines for how one should consider and utilize various architectural elements. He also
includes a few pages in which he reflects on women’s whimsical relationship to architecture, in which he essentially depicts women as inferior beings who need to be educated on how to understand the spaces they inhabit. The particular mark making of the stucco in this painting mimics some of the techniques that have historically been utilized to create faux marble. They sit alongside areas that are rendered in the sponging marbling techniques of Renaissance Italy and present-day DIY projects.

Dividing these areas are lines comprised of Rust-Oleum textured spray paint in Desert Bisque, a cheap hardware store product designed to replicate an element of the natural world artificially through the simple means of a spray can. The label on the can reads, “Create Sophisticated Texture For Your Outdoor Patio Furniture,” showcasing the product’s ability to elevate one’s status by merely changing the texture of their furniture. The material’s frequent use upon objects that speak to modes of leisure is one of the reasons I found it important to include in this body of work. When one looks at Let Us Not Forget Stucco - It Is Beautiful Provided It Does Not Imitate Marble, the areas painted with Rust-Oleum appear vastly more artificial than the rest of the canvas. The lines made with it are almost unnervingly flat while still being composed of a gritty texture. They feel lifeless amidst the sponging and stucco that surround them.

Faux marble is utilized in Let Us Not Forget Stucco - It Is Beautiful Provided It Does Not Imitate Marble, but it is not the luxurious hand-painted marbling seen at the Villa Borghese. It is the economical sponging technique often implemented in weekend DIY projects promoted on HGTV. The level of skill needed does not compare to what is required to truly imitate natural marble. By placing numerous iterations of sponged marbling alongside delicately hand-painted terrazzo and textured stucco, I hope to bring attention to the value we assign to different architectural spaces.
Let Us Not Forget Stucco - It Is Beautiful Provided It Does Not Imitate Marble

2018, Highload acrylic, pumice, artificial sand, and Rust-Oleum on canvas, 48” x 36”

Image courtesy of Steven Casanova
Many of these decorative finishes are seen as tacky or out of fashion. Terrazzo is the exception. Specific iterations of terrazzo are some of the most popular design trends today despite being considered outdated for decades. Used for wall, floor, and countertop treatments, it is an artful and labor-intensive detail comprised of chunks of marble, granite, quartz, or glass set into a matrix of concrete or epoxy resin. The exhibition space that I requested at the Anderson Gallery was of interest specifically because it has a terrazzo floor. I feel very fortunate to have had a physical example of one of the architectural sources for this body of work present alongside the paintings. It allowed for a more direct dialogue regarding how design functions when removed from its original setting and translated to paint on canvas.
Terrazzo was invented by Venetian construction workers who were aiming to find a cheap method for surfacing their home terraces. Their solution was to make use of broken pieces of marble that were otherwise useless, and set them into clay. Once hardened, the material could be ground down to a smooth floor. Given the location of where this new construction technique was being utilized, they named it terrazzo, Italian for terrace. It was easier and cheaper to work with than mosaics, and as such, became a staple of Venetian construction.

Centuries later, terrazzo was the material of choice for large public projects like schools, libraries, museums, and airports in the mid-20th century. Examples can be seen in the ramp of the Guggenheim, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and the Hoover Dam. However, it swiftly became known as institutional budget flooring, replicated in laminate and linoleum formats that cheapened its value. It was seen as outdated, rather than a historic detail relating to Italian design heritage. As color changes everything, it is worth mentioning that the terrazzo of the mid-20th century was usually executed in a drab palette of muted earth tones. Memphis designer Shiro Kuramata created one of the first colorful iterations of the pattern for his Kyoto table in 1983. The material made its true comeback a few years ago, with more advanced engineering allowing it to be precast and utilized in any way you could imagine. Sources across the Internet and in design magazines have all been publishing articles with titles that are a variation on “Terrazzo: The Forgotten Flooring Material is Back, and Better than Ever.”34 It is not lost on me that Memphis and terrazzo are coming back into fashion at the same time. Just as Memphis was reacting to the austerity of Modernism, today’s generation has finally become tired of the simplicity found in Midcentury Modernism 2.0. Jessica Furseth notes, “After years of obsession with midcentury modern and restrained 1960s design darlings—Danish Modern,

the Eames classics, corporate modernism—we’re now waking up to a renewed appreciation of texture, color, and tackiness, as perfectly embodied by terrazzo.”35 Furseth later calls terrazzo “the perfect wild geometry,” and I have to agree.36 It is a playful way to increase the decorative nature of any space by elevating a large, flat plane to a surface with far more color and visual depth. In the past, terrazzo was traditionally comprised of smaller pieces of aggregates, all of similar proportion. Today’s iterations play with scale more than ever, exploring the possibilities of an utterly unique material.

Making the Same Painting Twice

What I consider to be the Grande Dame of my thesis exhibition are two paintings that are the exact same composition, executed at the same scale, but painted in different color palettes. They were hung together as a diptych, with one piece rotated ninety degrees. A few of the same colors are found in both paintings, but the main objective in recreating the same painting was to finally physically show what tremendous impact color has. The energy of Bacterio becomes manic when depicted in a deep blue against a cream background. Similarly, what starts as a quirky iteration of large-scale terrazzo in pink, deep green, and yellow ochre turns into something reminiscent of a Nickelodeon cartoon when executed in orange, cyan, and red oxide. Lemon yellow is transformed from a cheery accent into a radioactive hue overtaking the composition. As a diptych, the paintings hold an exciting tension. Hanging ten inches apart and slightly awry, the planes of salmon pink form a bridge between the two works. The blocks of slightly desaturated cyan upon the bottom of each piece act as stand-ins for pools of water, while the pillars of large terrazzo read as steps or columns. Together they hold

36 Ibid.
a grand presence from afar, while the intricate details invite the viewer in to examine the exactitude of craftsmanship that is carried throughout each of the paintings. It must be noted that while rebelling against rules of design, I am most certainly creating my own.

Installation detail of *A Surface Application of Decoration Using the Slippery Feminine Arts of Disguise and Solely Through the Display of His Wonderfully Appointed Little House Could He Seduce Her* hung as a diptych

Image courtesy of the author
The titles of these two pieces speak to manners of seduction through design more than any other title I have attached to my work. *Solely Through the Display of His Wonderfully Appointed Little House Could He Seduce Her* is taken from an essay by Anthony Vidler that in part discusses Jean-François de Bastide’s 1750 novella *La Petite Maison* (or *The Little House*). The novella details the Marquis de Trémicour’s efforts to seduce Mérite through his splendidly appointed home. As the Marquis leads his woman of interest through his home, she is overcome by the decor, each room more fantastic than the one before. Many of the decorative devices, as well as the social tactics, used in the Marquis’s Little House are modes of artifice. Vidler notes that the “spatial eroticism” depicted in de Bastide’s novella became the blueprint for creating real-life petite maisons in the French court.\(^{37}\) In *A Surface Application of Decoration Using the Slippery Feminine Arts of Disguise*, modes of seduction and artifice are enacted by the woman. Women have long been linked to beauty, domesticity, and seduction through acts of deception. By being relegated to the world of domesticity, women have existed in an “emotionally charged environment, dominated by morality, social aspiration, and the exercise of taste and display.”\(^{38}\) To navigate these waters, modes of artifice have become survival mechanisms used by women who have become so closely associated with the idealism surrounding taste.

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A Surface Application of Decoration Using the Slippery Feminine Arts of Disguise
2019, Highload acrylic on canvas, 48" x 48"
Solely Through the Display of His Wonderfully Appointed Little House Could He Seduce Her
2019, Highload acrylic on canvas, 48” x 48”
Conclusion

Our sense of beauty and the so-called good life are intertwined. We add decoration to objects and spaces in order to provoke a certain mood or feeling. We assign value to aesthetics as a means of finding a deeper connection to our surroundings. We seek out experiences in particular locations because we are led to believe that we will be happier, more fulfilled people if we do so. Philosopher Alain de Botton meditated on these vulnerabilities, stating, “In essence, what works of design and architecture talk to us about is the kind of life that would most appropriately unfold within and around them. While keeping us warm and helping us in mechanical ways, they simultaneously hold out an invitation for us to be specific sorts of people. They speak of visions of happiness.”

David Hockney’s painting Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures) was sold at auction in November of 2018 for $90.3 million, the highest price ever paid at auction for the work of a living artist. The piece depicts an idealized poolside landscape in warm, vibrant colors: a rippling aqua swimming pool overlooks a luscious green mountain terrain while one figure swims in the water, and the other gazes on, donning white pants and a pink blazer. Is it really so surprising that during a highly contested time in history such high value would be attached to a painting that allows the viewer to dive into the realm of escapism and leisure?

By removing patterns from their utilitarian context and inserting them into labor-intensive formalist paintings of abstracted leisure spaces, I encourage viewers to dethrone notions of taste. In turn, the tacky becomes a delight, and the sumptuous is no longer relegated to the realm of frivolousness. This allows the artificial and superficial to ascend to the

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hierarchy associated with modernism. Above all, my paintings are an invitation to be consumed by the visceral pleasures of color, pattern, and texture—a reminder that there is serious value in playful acts of leisure.
Key Terms Relevant to My Practice

- Color
- Hard-Edge Abstraction
- Surface
- Pattern
- Taste
- Design Histories
- Architecture
- Artifice
- Camp
- Play
- Natural/Artificial
- Labor/Leisure
Bibliography


