

Thoughts on My Art

For me, the idea is there, and the image follows. So the title is quite important and often comes first.

My work relates to experiences in my visual life . . . stored up memories and associations.

Within an intellectual construct, a thought-out structure, I can be free and spontaneous and obsessive and repetitious and sensuous.

I am interested in the kinds of pattern found in architecture and weaving-pattern created by forms fitted together, with no sense of figure-ground.

In Mexico I found built patterns . . . patterns that were central to the structure and function of a building or a piece of woven cloth (created through the stacking of bricks or the pulling of threads.)

I am sympathetic to the ideology of pattern-making, of a non-hierarchical process that goes on and on

I decided in Mexico that I wanted to break down the hierarchies between the decorative arts and the high arts. I wanted to accept all those art

forms on equal terms and to negate my education with its western, male Christian biases. The categories of "crafts," "decorative arts," and "primitive arts" were invented here and reflect our prejudices and ignorance.

There have been immensely complex forms of abstraction developed throughout the world. I was taught that abstraction was a form of reduction and that as the twentieth century progressed, elements in earlier art were progressively taken out. Lately, I've begun to think that the only sensible thing to do now is to go in the other direction, the direction of complexity.

It is hard at this moment for feminists to deal with the history of western painting objectively: the patriarchy of church and state are stamped so blatantly on all the images we were taught to worship.

So we can look at the works of other cultures (perhaps equally repressive cultures) and the symbols and metaphors in the visual language are less accessible — we can once again respond to art visually with pleasure. But if indulged in

extensively, this could become another formalism, another denial of content.

Throughout modern art, there's a counter-tradition to the reductivist "mainstream": art deco, art nouveau, symbolism. One wave after another has been beaten down by the drive towards bland surfaces. I want to fuse the two traditions, to play them off against one another, dissonant yet precariously integrated.

Islamic geometrical pattern has proven a particularly rich source for me. The patterns are so complex and sophisticated that one often finds several overlapping systems of pattern compacted together, providing alternate and shifting readings. Arabic wall surfaces are meant to be seen in flickering, dazzling light. The rotating star patterns of faience on these walls are never static or immediately graspable. There is a nervous linearity that carries your eye along on an endless journey; it can sometimes go back and forth in space as it traverses a frontal facade, then up and down, rarely leading back to where you began. With these rotating patterns, I found I could create

an active, dynamic space.

There are mathematical formulas for these patterns which go back hundreds of years and are still used. I want to reinterpret and reinvent for myself these traditional patterns.

In Morocco, I became aware of roofs and floors — as well as walls. Sometimes the floors were richly inlaid and the walls were bare. Sometimes I would see a partial fleeting glimpse of a courtyard or alcove through an open gate. There would be austerity against ornamentation and unexpected shifts in scale. In the mosques many patterned passage co-exist in the same space. I had seen this in Persian miniatures and Japanese prints and wondered if it could be made to work in large-scale paintings.

If a painting is non-hierarchical and extends horizontally down a wall, it can be perceived sequentially. I want to make separate passages seem to lead into each other, yet hold their own place in sequence.

A painting may include references to the decorative arts, architecture, landscape, and abstract painting. Color may

be metaphorical, associational, mood provoking — orchestrated, deliberate, and intellectual.

Much contemporary women's art, poetry, and film has to do with rage and pain (as if we identify ourselves as women through our suffering.) But the decorative arts that women have traditionally done over the ages have expressed a sense of wholeness and continuity. I want to connect with those traditions and help build an art and culture in which women play a central role.