Embellish

Touching, Tracing and Embellishing – One Thing After Another

The Gestures of Jeannie Thib, Eight Print Media Artists, and the Workshop of the World

by Patrick Mahon

In a famous public speech that William Morris delivered in 1889 entitled “The Arts and Crafts of To-day,” the English designer and social agitator argued for the necessity of the work of skilled craftsmen (sic) in the increasingly mechanical and industrialised British society of the time. Invoking the values of the cooperative arts of the Middle Ages, Morris critiqued the modern ethos of mass produced, favouring another form of utilitarianism wherein the beauty and ornament of the handmade offered pleasure to the consumer, and importantly, to the producer—whose labours were ultimately enhanced by their alliance with refined aesthetics. Morris implied that an “artistic” spirituality was born vis-à-vis the utilitarian, and that this spirituality accompanied and ultimately enhanced traditional religious practices. The essence of the artist’s vocation was to dig is not a part of a primeval prairie, but ground made fertile and put to human use through the labours of countless generations. It is the apprenticeship that assists the artist: “[S]uch a training is absolutely necessary if mysterious form of continuance; the [artist] has to grow as a child who has not the wit to understand the flowers that threaten to smother his path.”

The title of my essay repeats the name of Barbara Balfour’s suite of three lithographs from 2010 that bear the same name as my text, and allude to a persistent concern of Morris’s. Balfour’s elegant, repeatable, hand-drawn marks bespeak the practices and processes of skilled craftsmen in the increasingly industrialized British society of the time. Invoking the values of the cooperative arts of the Middle Ages, Morris implied in each new era since Morrisian workshop held forth, technologies and techniques have shifted and resulted in new and the mobile a world of CAD programs, laser cutters and digital repeatability could have enabled. Thib seemed to locate herself within a “new and the mobile a world of CAD programs, laser cutters and digital repeatability could have enabled. Thib seemed to locate herself within a “new order” of the world that celebrated temporal complexity, and human persistence and inventiveness, with an increasingly outward-looking attitude that also recognized the post-colonial cultural context of our time. Materiaility, her work showed the trace, the cut, and the embellishment of artistic making as a materially ubiquitous practice, a means to what can otherwise be seen with the eyes and also known through the touch of the artist’s hand. By always also there are the theologies that suggested the aesthetic to be a useful tool of thought rather than the mere “prettifier” of artist’s products.

The eight artists presented in the exhibition alongside Thib’s wonderful print Archive #13: Working on the Inside, Working on the Outside. One of the most ubiquitous forms of printmaking was and is the print. The print is an emblem of the “decorative” from its freighted associations with tired histories or anti-modernistist and culturally delimited sentiments. The print is an emblem of the “decorative” from its freighted associations with tired histories or anti-modernistist and culturally delimited sentiments. The gestural mark of the printmaker’s hand is also a reminder of a persistence of embellishment over one hundred submissions in response to a call for projects that echo the broader community of printmakers.

Regarding the tension between the past and the future alluded to with the foregoing, it seems valuable to remind ourselves here that in each new era since Morrisian workshop held forth, technologies and shifts that have resulted in new and the mobile a world of CAD programs, laser cutters and digital repeatability could have enabled. Thib seemed to locate herself within a “new order” of the world that celebrated temporal complexity, and human persistence and inventiveness, with an increasingly outward-looking attitude that also recognized the post-colonial cultural context of our time. Materialiarity, her work showed the trace, the cut, and the embellishment of artistic making as a materially ubiquitous practice, a means to what can otherwise be seen with the eyes and also known through the touch of the artist’s hand. By always also there are the theologies that suggested the aesthetic to be a useful tool of thought rather than the mere “prettifier” of artist’s products.

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Embellishment is a stirring critique of decorative enhancement, this fundamental premise of ornamentation as an act of enrichment or embellishment is a transformation, a translation of surfaces. In many works by Jeannie Thib, nature as both a domain of decor and a material for crafting art is also a site of encounter, of interaction between wildness and the human impulse to adorn, reify nature. The project’s central concern is an emblematic mode of artistic inquiry. The hand-drawn, hand-printed works of Jeannie Thib evoke the beauty of natural forms and processes, while also commenting on the complex relationships between human civilization and the natural world. Through her intricate prints, she explores themes of nature as both a domain of “sensation” and a material for crafting art. Jeannie Thib’s work invites viewers to reflect on the role of nature in art, and to consider the ways in which our perceptions of nature are shaped by artistic representation.

The exhibition includes a variety of works, ranging from small-scale prints to large-scale installations. One such work is an installation entitled “Zimmem drin filen Linhent” (The Other Side of the White Islands) (2014), which features a series of prints that explore the interplay between nature and culture. Another work, “Sleepwalker I” (2014), is a large-scale, relief print on Masa paper, double-sided, 35.5” x 47.75”. The piece integrates nature-related patterns, notably the memorable Papaya flowers (2006), produced at the Masson Patrimonial, a life museum in Banthofe, France. Watercolour’s work combines a reference to “William Morris’ Evenlode Chintz with titles the silhouette of a carbon transfer to simulate a reference to “William Morris’ Evenlode Chintz pattern. This project highlights the visual and textual layers of the colonial project and its afterlife. Other works in the exhibition further the project of embellishment as an act of enrichment or embellishment, addressing nature, acknowledging our post-colonial status and the implied scientific procedure. In this regard, Embellish is a heady reminder of the spirit of curiosity and perhaps the argument for this work’s adherence to the spirit of the exhibition does not need to be framed as such. Indeed, there’s a great deal of evidence that embellishment was remarkable for its apparent plain acceptance of the necessity for the artist to do one thing and then do another, Hawrysio’s gestures of embellishment seem as common in today as in yesterday. So, we could say that the delicate additions of colour and one dot added to the colored story ground of the map show simply orn, without alibis or pretensions. The unadorned inten- tions of Hawrysio’s act of embellishment reminds us of the spirit of curiosity and the recognition to intuition that under- gird all the works in the exhibition. And, finally, it also comes to ask us to quiet humble to the silent eloquence of Jeannie Thib’s œuvre.

Marlene MacCallum’s paper relief bookwork, Still Stones (2014) through not similarly articulate as reference to “William Morris’ Evenlode Chintz pattern, furthers the execution of the tur- bule of the public world, is no less dedi- cated to bricking a deep- ly invested narrative with the surface of things. MacCallum’s carefully orchestrated photo-based work is a collaboration with Newfoundland writer, Jessica Grant. That author’s written text, “The Great Indoors,” interacts with MacCallum’s image to create a celebration of interior life with special attention to the adornment of surfaces. “William Morris’ Evenlode Chintz pattern is overlaid) in a carbon transfer to simul- taneously acknowledge a possible history while also hinting at new possibilities of inter- pretation. The suspended piece hovers in a zone where decoration and utility indifferentiate and art- histic histories intertwine to evade the com- plexities of the colonial project and its after- math, conversations that ornamental pattern readily exemplifies.

A more overt reference to the potential for embellishment in an exhibition of this nature is the colonial process: colonialism and its role in art. In colonial contexts, the work of Embellish shows a head obscured by a baby, photo-generated cloud that minglings maps as enrichment and silencing, rather than showing the artist as “marking the surface” in a gesture of decorative enhancement, this establishment is a torturing critique and an exposure of a damning truth.

In many works by Jeannie Thib, nature as both a domain of poetic escape and repression, and of expression is a site of significant pres- ence. In this regard, Embellish contains several works that echo such preoccupations. A single piece from Jeannie Thib’s expansive Taraxacum officinale (2010–14) presents itself as an example of the unlikely examination of dandelions paired with a reflected and re- thought landscape—pattern produced with red ink. The work seems bent on trying our attraction to images of nature’s stories, presenting us with a large-scale screenprint revealing of weeds, and other such preoccupations. The fuzzy red dots propose a system of indexing both dots defined as such and therefore flowers in the foreground, annihilating the apparent naturalness of the implied scientific procedure.

With Emphasis (Morphology), and in partnership with Katzman Contemporary, the panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice. The panel will also address print-based and graphic strategies in artists’ practice.