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**MAD PRESENTS THE GROUNDBREAKING FEMINIST
COLLAGE PAINTINGS OF MIRIAM SCHAPIRO IN CONVERSATION
WITH THE WORKS OF NINE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS**

**Featuring 29 works by Schapiro alongside works by
Sanford Biggers, Josh Blackwell, Edie Fake, Jeffrey Gibson, Judy Ledgerwood, Jodie
Mack, Sara Rahbar, Ruth Root, and Jasmin Sian**

Surface/Depth: The Decorative After Miriam Schapiro

March 22, 2018 – September 9, 2018

Press Preview: March 21, 2018, at 5 pm



Miriam Schapiro, *Flying Carpet*, 1972. © Miriam Schapiro/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery.

NEW YORK, NY (March 14, 2018) – From March 22 to September 9, 2018, the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) presents *Surface/Depth: The Decorative After Miriam Schapiro*, an exhibition that showcases twenty-nine collage paintings by the pioneering feminist artist Miriam Schapiro in conversation with twenty-eight works by nine contemporary artists: Sanford Biggers, Josh Blackwell, Edie Fake, Jeffrey Gibson, Judy Ledgerwood, Jodie Mack, Sara Rahbar, Ruth Root, and Jasmin Sian. Bringing into focus the key, but unheralded, role Schapiro played in the reframing of craft and decoration in the American art world, this juxtaposition of historic and



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contemporary work highlights ways in which the decorative continues to be utilized as a critical tool in art today.

“As an institution founded to combat the dismissal of craft as a lesser creative practice and that from its beginning supported the careers of women artists, there couldn’t be a better time for MAD to highlight Miriam Schapiro,” said Elissa Auther, MAD’s Windgate Research and Collections Curator. “Many contemporary artists outside of the studio-craft tradition of the 1950s and 1960s now work across the fields of art and craft, openly using techniques and materials traditionally associated with craft in ways unheard of even a decade ago, and Schapiro is an important, but unacknowledged, source for that phenomenon.”

Historically marginalized as ornament, pattern, or craft, decoration is often dismissed as mere surface, an attractive object with no underlying depth or meaning. To this day, to dismiss a work of art as “decorative” is to judge it as minor, reveling in surface-level expression over any commitment to intellectual rigor or cultural critique. In the early 1970s, within the context of the women’s art movement, Schapiro reappropriated the decorative in a new type of work she would come to call *femmage* (a combination of *feminine* and *collage*), a collage-painting hybrid inspired by women’s domestic arts and handicrafts.

Her objective in embracing the decorative was to catalyze a seismic transformation in the perception of materials, processes, and styles rooted in craft, women’s experience in the home, and everyday forms of making, recasting practices like embroidery, crochet, paper crafts, and even decoupage as legitimately artistic. For Schapiro, the absence of such work from the cultural record was a reflection of the broader patriarchal devaluation of the woman artist, and she viewed her work as a feminist intervention in the history of art.

In *Surface/Depth*, Schapiro’s twenty-nine works on view are exhibited alongside a range of archival material, including her writings, fabric swatches, costume jewelry, and women’s needlework, all of which contextualize her invention of the femmage by illustrating the rich vein of material culture she mined.

Biggers, Blackwell, Fake, Gibson, Ledgerwood, Mack, Rahbar, Root, and Sian expand Schapiro’s initial exploration of the decorative as a language of abstraction tied to the personal and the political. Like Schapiro, these artists refuse received opinion of the decorative as artistically trivial and use abstract, decorative elements to address a range of topics and concerns—from gender, racial, and sexual identity to issues of aesthetic hierarchy, migration, community, and loss—exposing the hollowness of the surface/depth divide and the separation of appearance from meaning.

SELECTED EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

- *Surface/Depth* presents **Miriam Schapiro’s** earliest femmages, including *Curtains* (1972) and *Beauty of Summer* (1973–1974), as well as later works inspired by Persian miniature painting, such as *Gates of Paradise* (1980) and *Tapestry of Paradise* (1980). Also on view are several of the artist’s shaped canvases referencing the feminine and domestic realms: *Orange Crush* (1979) and *Mexican Memory* (1981) take the shape of a lady’s handheld fan, with its connotations of female decorum, while the heart-shaped



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Baby Block Bouquet (1981), *Mardi Gras* (1982), and *Pagoda* (1982) evoke associations with valentine making and scrapbooking, both traditionally considered women's domestic craft forms. Schapiro's monumentally sized hearts are treated with a surface density that, combined with the works' sentimental, folk art, and romantic connotations, elevated decoration to a new height. In *Baby Block Bouquet*, for example, she combines the heart with the quilt pattern "Baby Blocks," which dates back as far as ancient Greece. The artist drew inspiration from a wide variety of visual and material traditions, as further evidenced by the Asian-inspired patterns in *Pagoda* and the use of glitter and sequins in the carnival-themed *Mardi Gras*.

- A site-specific tempera mural by **Judy Ledgerwood**, *Chromatic Patterns for the Museum of Arts and Design* is inspired by the history of abstract painting as well as a range of domestic textiles. Reveling in the promiscuity of pattern and the association of the decorative with the female body, sensuality, and immersive experience, Ledgerwood offsets the gallery's architecture and the logic of her underlying gridded composition with an animated floral motif and a seductively intense color palette.
- **Ruth Root**'s inventively shaped paintings are comprised of two separate, interlocking units: a painted lower panel, hung from a buckle-like upper panel made of canvas and covered in a fabric of the artist's own design. In the two untitled works made for *Surface/Depth*, photographs of feminist artists and cultural icons like Judy Chicago and Patti Smith appear alongside miniature sculptures by Eva Hesse and Lee Bontecou, Schapiro's femmage *Mexican Memory*, and works by Josef Albers, among others.
- For her ongoing project *No Kill Shelter* (2013–2018), experimental animator **Jodie Mack** creates fabric collage animations that function as screen savers for obsolete monitors and computers, which are further preserved in a protective decoupage sheath of floral wrapping paper. Through animations of textile patterns—from paisleys to kente cloth—that highlight the connections between high abstraction and popular design, Mack unleashes the kinetic energy in the everyday materials that surround us.
- The intricate drawings and paper cuts by New York-based Filipino artist **Jasmin Sian** reflect a range of decorative sources usually found on the ornamented borders of religious imagery. Through a labor-intensive process of drawing, painting in ink and gouache, and cutting minuscule shapes to create nets, filigrees, and floral motifs, she treats secular images—trees from Yosemite, plants from New York City's parks and community gardens, and animals from the Central Park Zoo—with devotion, transforming what is usually understood as a decorative border into the subject of the work of art, and elevating the ornately decorative to the level of the divine.
- American/Iranian artist **Sara Rahbar**'s ongoing "Flag" series comprises assemblages that combine the American flag with a variety of Middle Eastern textiles, livestock tack, equestrian gear, tags, embroidered badges, and camouflage. The collision of decorative surfaces and ethnic patterns with the American flag—itsself a patchwork textile—reflects both personal and political issues related to the restless feeling of living between two countries.



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- Known for his sculpture and performances that incorporate the use of materials such as clay and found objects, and in particular the beads, ribbons, and metal jingle cones essential to Native American ceremonial garments and dance regalia worn at powwows, **Jeffrey Gibson** (who is Choctaw and Cherokee) speaks to the power of ornament to transport the wearer from the secular to the spiritual realm, blurring the boundaries between creative practice and everyday forms of activity. In the video *Like a Hammer*, Gibson wears a heavily embellished garment of his own design in a performance that features trance-like pacing, drumming, and drawing, capturing a state of being poised between the human and the animal.
- *Ooo Oui* and *Dagu* exemplify **Sanford Biggers'** embellishment of found quilts with his own abstract language, including cosmic and celestial imagery, and sequins to highlight the nearly hidden geometry of a Tumbling Blocks pattern constructed in the “crazy quilt” style. Biggers has described his practice of incorporating objects and images—from antique quilts to African sculptures—into his work as vehicles for the discussion of history and race as a “conceptual form of patchwork.”
- Tapping into the false dichotomy between surface and depth, and reclaiming the decorative, **Edie Fake's** series of drawings, “Memory Palaces,” commemorates the loss of friends and activists, as well as real or imagined spaces of queer and feminist social life in Chicago, while conflating unrestrained color and kaleidoscopic patterning with queer history. Rather than constituting a faithful documentary of the buildings in his queer “neighborhood,” as Fake has described the subject of his series, his decorative, mosaic-like patterns of façades and gateways transport the viewer to an otherworldly realm of utopian community.
- **Josh Blackwell's** embroidered sculptures bridge feminist and queer art worlds. Inspired by the feminist elevation of women's needlecraft, his work also addresses the construction of homosexuality as a condition of all surface and no depth. His *Neveruses*, hybrid objects made from recovered plastic bags and colored fibers such as wool yarn, silk thread, and patterned cloth, reference baskets, textiles, and ceramics as well as techniques that are traditionally marginalized under the category of “craft.”

ABOUT ELISSA AUTHER

Elissa Auther joined the Curatorial Department of the Museum of Arts and Design and the faculty of the Bard Graduate Center in the fall of 2015. She has published widely on a diverse set of topics, including the history of modernism and its relationship to craft, the material culture of the American Counterculture, and feminist art. Her monograph, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), focuses on the broad utilization of fiber in art of the 1960s and 1970s and the changing hierarchical relationship between art and craft expressed by the medium's new visibility. Auther is also an accomplished curator. In 2012, she co-curated the exhibition *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965–1977* and edited the accompanying catalogue. Most recently, she co-curated *Pretty/Dirty*, the retrospective exhibition of the painter and photographer Marilyn Minter, and *Improvisational Gestures*, a survey exhibition of the sculptor and performance artist



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Senga Nengudi, both of which were also accompanied by scholarly publications. A feminist public intellectual, Auther co-directs *Feminism & Co.: Art, Sex, Politics*, a public program at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver that focuses on issues of women and gender through the lens of creative practice. A testament to her advocacy of feminist art and culture is her recent opinion piece for Slate.com in defense of the relationship between feminist material culture and lifestyle as a political identity.

EXHIBITION CREDITS

Surface/Depth: The Decorative After Miriam Schapiro is curated by Elissa Auther, MAD's Windgate Research and Collections Curator, with the support of Assistant Manager of Curatorial Affairs Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy.

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Research for this exhibition was supported by a Craft Research Fund grant from the Center for Craft.

RELATED PROGRAMMING: MADactivates

Encounter | Tour and Conversation of 'Surface/Depth'

With featured artists Josh Blackwell, Edie Fake, Judy Ledgerwood, Jodie Mack, Sara Rahbar, and Ruth Root

Thursday, March 22, 2018 – 6:30 to 8:00 pm

Free with Pay-What-You-Wish Admission

4th and 5th floor galleries at MAD

Join Elissa Auther, MAD's Windgate Research and Collections Curator, for an in-gallery conversation with six contemporary artists featured in *Surface/Depth: The Decorative After Miriam Schapiro*. Beginning in the 5th floor galleries, Auther will provide a brief overview of the exhibition before introducing the first of four short conversations that consider the decorative as a language of abstraction tied to the personal and the political.

Cinema | Posthaste Perennial Patterns: Talk and Screening of Recent Works by Jodie Mack

Thursday, May 31, 2018 – 6:30 to 8:00 pm

The Theater at MAD

Using domestic and recycled materials, this program illuminates formal and cursory elements shared between fine-art abstraction and mass-produced graphic design. Questioning the role of decoration in daily life, the works unleash the kinetic energy of overlooked and wasted objects.



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Cinema | The Mood Mosaic Shorts Program

Curated by Jodie Mack

Thursday, June 7, 2018 – 6:30 to 8:00 pm

The Theater at MAD

Objects and collections take center stage in this program, which offers a parade of motifs from the ornamental to the lexical.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN

The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) champions contemporary makers across creative fields and presents the work of artists, designers, and artisans who apply the highest level of ingenuity and skill. Since the Museum's founding in 1956 by philanthropist and visionary Aileen Osborn Webb, MAD has celebrated all facets of making and the creative processes by which materials are transformed, from traditional techniques to cutting-edge technologies. Today, the Museum's curatorial program builds upon a rich history of exhibitions that emphasize a cross-disciplinary approach to art and design, and reveals the workmanship behind the objects and environments that shape our everyday lives. MAD provides an international platform for practitioners who are influencing the direction of cultural production and driving twenty-first-century innovation, and fosters a participatory setting for visitors to have direct encounters with skilled making and compelling works of art and design.

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