Models of Entry

From the simplest spirals cut out of paper, to experimenting with materials to look at mathematical Fibonacci sequences and geometry, to three-dimensional computer programming, pattern excites. Consisting of regularly repeated units, as in a textile quilt, pattern can be a repeat, a motif, a design, a device, a numerical order, or a succession of tones or steps, as in music or dance. There are patterns of behaviour, genealogical patterns, patterned design, grid pattern, fan pattern, patterns of growth, Islamic patterns, pattern books, mosaic pattern, Paisley pattern, weave pattern, coat pattern … we live in a universe of patterns, as the American mathematician Ian Stewart puts it in *Nature’s Numbers*:

> Whilst human perception is not as perfect as mathematical ideals, people need patterns as a means of creative expression across time and space and as such patterns become devices, methods of investigating personal and social worlds. Pattern is both a noun and a verb but as a verb it is an active way of seeing the world, a process by which to take in and make coherent the random and often chaotic information the world has to offer (Stewart 1998:11)

Stewart argues that pattern provides a way of seeing the world as if for the first time and can open our eyes to new and unsuspected regularities. For him pattern denotes a system of thought, or a mode of operation and a means of understanding rules. He presents a pattern method that provides a ‘system of thought for recognizing, classifying and exploiting patterns’. i

Mathematicians are concerned with pattern as a visible indication of a hidden logic suggesting rules and order. I am taken by the idea of pattern as metaphor that can undo classifying systems and concepts of “objectivity” to propose a method that is more intuitive, a kind of collaging process which brings other people’s voices and writings with my own. Pattern as device encourages us to think in terms of multiple perspectives and
mobile subjectivities, of forging collaborations and alliances and juxtaposing different viewpoints.

**Pattern**
What is it about pattern that I – no mathematician - find so compelling, so endlessly seductive, and so endlessly purposeful for methods of research? Part of pattern’s appeal has to do with certainty and predictability. Pattern – generally characterised by rigorously repeated motifs – is the embodiment of order but taken as a metaphor it can change its spots. It can be obsessive, oppressive, unsettling, as is the eponymous ‘yellow wallpaper’ of the neurasthenic nightmare evoked in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s famous short story. And as the design reformers of the 19th century recognised pattern, however logically formulated, can also be deceitful, enabling/fostering disguise and illusion. Such suggestions give us a way of thinking about pattern as a method that is not a system or code, but, rather, is powerful in its ability to disturb our psychological comfort zones; this can have an impact on how we look, see, write and think. Pattern as a device - as in embroidery or writing - can lead us astray.ii In *A Pattern Constellation* (2007:14) Araujo argues that pattern is neither a visible indication of a hidden logic nor a neutralizing backdrop but rather emerges as play between the two. In this way of thinking, pattern cannot be precisely located but becomes a device that troubles categories, disturbs the boundaries between fixed meanings and chafes at rational constraint.

Fig. 1 Janis Jefferies, Jacquard *Pattern 1*, detail 2004

In this essay a range of spaces will be opened up by an exploration of the material knowledge afforded by pattern: conceptual, emotional, textured; the surfaces of patterning make the invisible, visible. Pattern is physical evidence of abstract knowledge, material evidence of the oscillations of the world. My approach here however is not to focus on what patterns show exactly but rather how pattern operates as neither quite one thing nor another, refusing to be stabilised into a fixed practice.iii Take the example of writing. As Roland Barthes (1990) describes, written text may also be a ‘woven fabric’ made up of a ‘weave of signifiers’. Pattern can exceed itself and act as an open-ended exchange between viewer and audience, text and reader; it can operate within a text, between the text and reader, and then be a method for the reader in
becoming a writer. The implication is that all writing – all creative activity – can be located within wider systems of reference: a network of ideas across time and space, launching interdisciplinary procedures and critical discourse. Rather than thinking of the text as something finite, Barthes sees it as open-ended; the reader may join the author as a weaver of texts, a teller of tales, a patterner of practices. This is what leads me to adopt – alongside the practice of criticism - the practice of site-writing, an instance of pattern as device, a way of writing that makes visible the role of the reader.

What I am trying to think about or even perform in this essay is pattern as a textured medium, a device, if you like, for thinking through and reaching out but neither fixing nor restraining the complexities of negotiating the external world we live in: a device for making an active surface through which we may negotiate our place in the world. In writing here, I am temporarily an art critic but I engage with pattern as a device precisely because of its oscillating dynamics, as method and object simultaneously: investigations of surfaces of pattern across the creative arts and material culture can open up and provoke innovative thinking. Thinking by doing, thinking through seeing, probing through writing, pattern opens up a space for practice as a way of knowing and a way of thinking. It is a form of knowledge production.

What drives this writing about acts of looking, feeling and interpretation? On the one hand my sense of responding and engaging with a text is performative, a live essay, an attempt to create a new form of critical/creative and responsive writing that fosters dialogic engagement with ideas, concepts and a particular artwork by immersing me, the critic and author, in a pattern that confronts how I write and in what method. The format also aims to highlight the conventional downgrading of the senses in Western philosophy and to argue against the sterility of systems of knowledge that are divorced from bodily experience and the ways in which we relate to our surroundings.

As a small child and as a young teenager I had an aversion to pattern; most likely it was the garish floral frocks of the 1950s or the large blue blooms of the wallpaper in my bedroom. Either way, pattern for me projected the anxiety of emotional chaos. Reading The Yellow Wallpaper (1997) did not help this. The story confirmed my worst fears. Pattern making
itself can be playful, repetitive or repressive; pattern can make sense – but not meaning. It can tease, frighten and enlighten. I am not so sure about pleasure. Nonetheless, the patterns that I have admired (and now revere) have been those that were the most restrained and restricted. Small repeats blur the conflicts and emotional tensions between metaphor and abstraction; a delightful sense of play can emerge, a strategy, which saves the viewer who is also a writer (or this viewer at least) from distress.

Interiors

Fig 2. Kathleen Mullaniff, Interiors: Canterbury Bells, oil on canvas (detail) 2004

Site writing part 1

Stand in front or rather move across the surface long enough to give it some play and it starts to play with you. Try and grasp the pattern. It defies you. Try and hold it, finger its details and you are denied. Try to let it ‘unfold’ itself towards you, perhaps as a musical sequence, then as your eyes flirt and flit around the motifs, listen attentively to its quiet rhythms. There is an eloquent, soft, kind of melody at work here, composed in a funny little speed of brushstrokes that entice a lightness of step in the fingers and the eyes. Observe a field of imprints, traces and gestural marks as you glance from one canvas to another or perhaps it is a skip. All appears to be remarkably underscored but subtly orchestrated in the coupling of colours that merge as if into a hazy sketch. There’s dusty pink here that glides into a blue grey pink and then chases a yellowy pulse. An edge of gold slips over and under a hatched, grey toned slippery grid. Shimmering lines and slivery flicks of black, score and cluster into an optical impression as if it’s a Monday or Tuesday. Do not be deceived, something is jostling for attention, but there is no single area of importance to fix your gaze, nor a hierarchy or priority of where you should fix your attention. There’s a plaid, corn-like combination (but then it could be Canterbury bells, but aren’t they upside down?) that run the length of the horizontal, but it won’t be joined up, but then at the bottom of the canvas the motifs congeal. There is no more space. I am falling down. It does not seem safe just now to linger.
**Haptic**

Pattern holds back from telling you entirely what to do because you are not sure quite where to view it from. The technical crafting of Mullaniff’s *Interiors* gives the viewer just enough resistance to make her linger in a flat space and narrow field of memory traces. The whole is restrained, anxiety is held at bay, for just long enough for the imagination to feel at ease (well almost) until the oscillating dynamics begin once more.

As the surface of *Interiors* is explored in site-writing, ideas of spatial perception are shaped as a fully embodied and emotional experience of the world in which we exist. In their *Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari embody such a pan-sensual collaboration within a single term: haptic. They note that haptic “may be as much visual or auditory as tactile” (1988: 493), acknowledging within the term a sensory interrelation of the eye, the ear and the limbs. As a concept, ‘haptic’ speaks to our embodied experience of a space’s textural qualities (its weight, mass, density, pressure, humidity, temperature, presences, resonances) as they are simultaneously orchestrated by our vision, hearing and touch.

The term ‘haptic’ is used by Merleau-Ponty (1964) and Paterson (2007) to also involve emotional connotations and affective response. Translating the words ‘haptic’, ‘sense’ and ‘emotion’ in Greek there is an obvious interconnection: haptic originates in the Greek word απτό, which means something that can be touched or grasp-ed. Sense, translated as aesthesis / αισθήση, in Greek involves notions of feeling, grasp-ing and understanding. Consequently, the concept of ‘grasp’ is central to both aesthesis (sense) and haptic. Emotion, on the other hand, translated in Greek as αίσθημα / aesthema, shares the same root with aesthesis, as both derive from the word αισθάνομαι / aesthanome, whose ambiguous meaning can be equally translated as ‘I sense’ or ‘I feel’. Among these three words -haptic, sense, and emotion- one can find an underlying relation that brings out the very nature of haptic as a term that is ultimately bound up with emotional grasping.

The term haptic is further elaborated in Fisher’s *Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics* (1997) where she addresses the haptic as the merging of the bodily senses and affect. Such a concept can be theoretically supported by the work of Berenson (1906) in which he notes that our bodily response to the ‘tactile properties’ of a space
depends on our understanding of that space’s ability to affect and ‘touch’ us. From a haptic point of view, pattern provokes our bodies into a visceral response rather than a purely visual grasping of form alone.

Site-writing part 2

And, now, somewhere in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Mullaniff comes across a tiny, densely worked 18th century wood block print on stitched cotton. It forms a pleasing textural pattern. The pattern is thought to be made up of Canterbury bells. The dye is madder, the blue is hand painted and the bells appear to bleed one into the other. Recalled and traced from memory, this is where Interiors begin their journey, a kernel of an idea that will permit the painter to reflect upon her own interiority. ‘I will only like it if it’s pretty’, she says, when making Interiors over an 8-year period.

Motion and rest, rhythmic unity combine to indulge perception but the decorative surfaces which I see now both impregnate and transform that which may, at first glance, seem merely pleasing to the eye. A fine line is trodden between excess and modesty. Which is it here? The surface is dispersed, the damp cloth is put down, and the paintings conjure their own disappearance as light floods into the studio. I am left to remember what I might have seen.

Surface space

In pattern-based work within contemporary art practice repeated forms are presented in merged space. This means that the surface structure is not weighted, balanced or logically coherent but forms coalesce and converge, they merge in and on the surface of the picture plane. Meaning is derived from the viewer attending to the repeated intervals and arrangements of patterned elements, viewed simultaneously. An overall arrangement is scanned in a never-ending process of engagement within the changeable worlds of appearance, perception and meaning. Robin Leher describes this kind of scanning from the artist’s point of view but we can also adopt it as a viewer’s perspective as we scan the surfaces of material forms. To repeat and reemphasize, I am using pattern as a verb rather than as a noun. It is a way of seeing the world, a process by which to take in and make coherent the random and often chaotic information the world has to offer. It is the thread of my connections, which makes the world intelligible to me. The act of connecting, of ‘patterning’, provides a structure through
which is sieved new information, which in time becomes, part of the structure through which new information is sieved. viii

Detail, the minute and intricate deployment of pattern, has the potential to destabilise an internal ordering of surface structure. Detail participates in a larger semantic field, bounded on the one hand by the ornamental, with its connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the everyday, whose prissiness for masculine critics is rooted in the domestic sphere presided over by women (Schor, 1987). ix At the beginning of the twentieth century, Adolf Loos accused ornament, and by implication decoration, of the crime of turning back the clock of cultural development. In the essay ‘Ornament and Crime’ Loos (1908) argues that all ornament can be traced to childish graffiti—sexual images smeared with faecal matter. x He saw the same impulse manifested in the practice of tattooing, claiming that only savages and criminals bear tattoos. Decoration represents only the lowest of human impulses for Loos, and so it must be stripped from art and design, especially from useful objects.

The taste for the decorative was pathologised as feminine, as embellishment, as style, as frivolous, as excessive and was therefore constantly repressed within the rhetorical devices of Modernism. Detail and fabric were viewed as decorative extras and were excluded from the rigid confines of the regularly ordered space of the picture frame. Once released, detail and pattern become excessively magnified and erupted, exceeding the borders which once tried to contain them. In his discussion of ornament, Mick Carter (1997) observes that, with its association with adornment and decoration, it has a tendency to wander from its proper place, threatening and undermining the aesthetic value of an artwork. Drawing on Derrida’s suspicions of any rigid distinction between essential and non-essential (supplementary) registers, Carter argues that it is only within the play, the tensions between ornamental errancy and the confines of the picture frame, that meaning may be created. xi The idea of play, being mischievous, playing off and against the rule that the centre is the focal point of a work, such as in this case a painting, is challenged by pattern as a device – an all-over ornamental pattern or design that goes astray, runs amok, is a supplement that takes centre stage. There is a double sense of the supplement here, the supplementary economy of the feminine as described by Carter above.
Like patterning itself, Pattern Painting - an art movement situated within the USA during the 1970s and 1980s - was viewed as “two dimensional, non-hierarchical, all over, a-centric, and anionic” \(\text{\textsuperscript{xii}}\). Many of the women artists who participated in this movement, like Valerie Joudon, Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff produced paintings that purposively deployed the decorative: whereas minimalist paintings were often austere, pattern paintings were boldly coloured, and sometimes suggestive of floral patterns. \(\text{\textsuperscript{xii}}\) In the 1970s, John Perrault recognised the movement as a challenge to the divisions between fine and decorative arts, referring to weaving and mosaics (Joyce Kozloff made mosaics as wall panel in architectural settings) as having essential qualities that gave pattern its surfaces and details. He went on to claim that the grid was the basis of all patterning and that weaving was its true source by virtue of the way in which the lines of the “warp and weft make up the primordial square block grid”. \(\text{\textsuperscript{xiii}}\)

In her essay for the catalogue of the 1996 Jaudon retrospective, art historian Anna C Chave fully explores the Pattern and Decoration movement as a context for Jaudon's early work, emphasising the distinctly feminist inflection of the movement. \(\text{\textsuperscript{xiv}}\) As Chave observes, quoting the art historian E H Gombrich, decorative richness offers "a feast for the eye without demanding that we should taste every dish" (1996:39). \(\text{\textsuperscript{xv}}\) Interestingly, Gombrich analysed two functions of perception in respect of decorative richness and pattern. For him, these were associated with the differences between the presentation of form in pictorial and pattern art—looking at order and scanning for order, with the cognitive skills associated with these two functions drawn along gender lines. \(\text{\textsuperscript{xvi}}\) Pattern art has been historically noted as a sign of the repetitiousness of women's art and was explained away as a reflection of the repetitious nature of women's domestic work. \(\text{\textsuperscript{xvii}}\) Lucy Lippard's oft-quoted observation that ‘the quilt has become the prime visual metaphor for women's lives, women's culture’ provided a situated knowledge for a version of feminist art practice that now may be seen as universalising female experience (1983:18). In the verbal quilt of (an) other feminist text, Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that there is an appeal to the voice of the female body “which speaks of itself as subject as: non-hierarchic... breaking hierarchical structures, making an even display of elements over the surface with no climatic movement, having the materials organised into many centres and many patterns of experience” (1990: 5) Reflections on self, on writing, on pattern as I write on site are unsettling. When ‘I’ reflects on ‘I’, what do I imagine it to
be? Perhaps ‘I’ will only know myself when another is there? Is the ‘I’ that makes a piece of the work the same ‘I’ that will write its interpretation? How ‘I’ moves will be in relation to that which ties? to cohere? the patterning of that which is performed through this text.

**Site writing – part 3**

*I repeat. Which is it here? Where is here now? The surface is dispersed, the damp cloth is put down, and the paintings conjure their own disappearance as light floods into the studio. I am left to remember what I might have seen working with writing and visual devices that probe reflective considerations; between the writer and the reader, the artist and art work, somewhere between the Victoria and Albert Museum a studio and the Yellow Wallpaper and an Interior on my wall.

Mark Freeman suggests moving towards a 'more poetic way of writing' in research, 'using words in such a way that they can carry the weight, and the depth, of the phenomena in question.' (Ruppel, 208: 32). For me, here, it is about pattern as a device, site writing and the ‘I’. Such writing, Ruppel goes on to say, 'will be less orientated toward arguing, convincing, making a definite case, than toward appealing, suggesting, opening, pointing toward the possible.' (Ruppel, 2008: 33).

Writing in research can produce many sites of interdisciplinary exchange following what can be perceived as a spatial pattern of enquiry. In order to find a place from which to reflect upon new modes of enquiry, new ways of knowing and being I have to draw on the patterns that emerge out of ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway, 1991:111). The inter-relations between where I might be sited and located operate in the slippery exchange between practices of writing and the writing of practices. Sometimes for a nomadic theorist and a theoretical nomad the interstitial relationship between patterns of thinking becomes a compelling device to ask where does autobiography end and theory begin? Where does writing the self blur the boundaries of research as an academic convention and point towards the possible and the experimental? To return to where I think I started, I am taken by the idea of pattern as metaphor, a method that is intuitive, a kind of collaging process which brings other people’s voices and writings into ‘our’ own. This patterning device opens us to
engage in multiple perspectives, mobile subjectivities juxtaposing different viewpoints at the moment of being on site and in view.

End notes

\[i\] Ian Stewart is Professor of Mathematics and Director of the Mathematics Awareness Centre at the University of Warwick.

\[ii\] http://www.thefreedictionary.com/pattern, accessed 18th January 2010


\[iv\] See Jane Rendell (2011) Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism in which she outlines a theoretical framing for the spatialization of art-writing as site-writing, identifying the potential of particular concepts in feminist, art and literary criticism for developing understandings of positionality and subjectivity in critical writing.


\[v\] In the short story, The Yellow Wallpaper, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman it is interesting to note that an otherwise simple plot becomes increasingly complex due to the of the wallpaper. The story describes a woman, her psychological difficulties, and her husband’s so called therapeutic treatment of her ailments during the late 1880s. It was first published in The New England Magazine in 1892 but the edition I have is the Dover one published in 1997 and called The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories.

\[vi\] This essay is composed as homage of another kind of trace. It attempts to trace Virginia Woolf’s Monday or Tuesday a deliberately fragmentary and experimental sketch in which a woman gazes at a mark on a wall . I am gazing at Interiors, three paintings by Kathleen Mullaniff (oil on canvas, 5’x6’, 1995-2003). I return to them in 2009. One is hanging on my bedroom wall in New Cross, South East London. Colour is given an expression in words.


Perreault, “Issues in Pattern Painting”, .34.


Perreault, “Issues in Pattern Painting”, .36.


“Situated knowledges” are marked knowledge’s that produce maps of consciousness reflecting the various categories of gender, class, race, and nationality of who is speaking, who is writing and from where. Donna Haraway develops these ideas in *Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, 575-599.
**Bibliography**


