

Pattern Recognition

The City Gallery Leicester 20 June to 24 October

‘Pattern Recognition’ proposes art that is an expanded field of physics, and 31 artists in this exhibition reflect, illustrate, interpret and resist this notion. Curated by Hugo Worthy, a mixture of mostly small-scale works – including painting, animation, pottery and digital artworks – are evenly displayed in this converted Victorian, shop-fronted building. The show is built around a DVD of Robert Smithson’s film *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, together with his theories of entropy as a cultural metaphor. Some familiar names are included, with Eduardo Paolozzi, Alison Turnbull and Bridget Riley, for example, interspersed with emerging artists.

Many of the artists’ concerns are echoed in the book *Critical Mass*, 2004, by Philip Ball, which tries to explain every feature of the world in terms of complexity theory and emergent patterns.

Here is the story in a nutshell: when water vapour changes to snow a myriad of symmetrical paths of atoms are formed, depending on conditions of the freeze. Similar patterns can be observed in the collective behaviour of all living things. Ideas of evolution, history and free will are thereby radically challenged by geometry, physics

and statistics. A ‘physics of society’ today analyses patterns in fields such as sociology to predict events. It is this approach towards patterns in nature and culture that is extended to art in this show.

Andy Harper’s painting *Path*, 2009, displays a labyrinthine composition of symmetrical branches of plant forms. As with the snowflake structure, the pathways dissolve into entropy, or disorder, at the edges. Plant tissues are rendered with translucent layers of paint and detailed, combed veins into drapery-shaped folds. This image of an edenic cornucopia takes the work beyond structural illustration of pattern into a complex metaphor for our perceptions of the natural world.

The tradition of Mughal miniature painting informs Aisha Khalid’s dynamic abstract series: *Kiss*, 2007, *Truth*, 2006, and *Entangled*, 2007. The theme of love is explored as a narrative sequence, and reference is made to traditional Pakistani textiles in these paintings of flower or cell forms. Blood-red nuclei composed of geometric lattices are surrounded by white-on-white petals. In *Entangled* two embryonic shapes merge as though in embrace and the two lattices ripple into three-dimensional illusion. From a western viewpoint one is reminded of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, 1809, in which a comparison is drawn between the connecting of

electrons in chemical reaction under certain conditions, and the interplay of love relationships. As with Khalid's paintings, a dynamic of human will and loss of self occurs as events appear shaped by chemistry and chance.

A group of collages by Abigail Reynolds continues the themes of her recent series, 'The Universal Now', 2009. Initially they appear to be doll's house versions of Gordon Matta-Clark's incisions into architecture. The collages consist of superimposed guidebook photographs of historic interiors taken at different time periods, say 1960 and 1980, for example. Her interest in time is stated through patterned folds and windows that open like an advent calendar projecting one time frame through to another. The claim of a 'universal now' connecting space/time, quantum and relativity theory puts a weighty, positive spin on the work. Following a different interpretive path, the collages could be considered as guidebook images of cultural tourism that demonstrate a consumerist endless present. However it is the persistent creativity and sense of play – rather than theoretical allegiance – that gives the collages depth.

The curator also considers pattern in relation to figuration as the pre-eminent tradition in western art. The small image that condenses the themes of this exhibition is Lahore-based artist

Mahbub Shah's *Untitled*, 2007, collaged portrait of an anonymous sitter, possibly Shah's ancestor. Key facial features – nostrils, lips, jaw and eyes – are loaded with disembodying circular twists incised into the image then twisted slightly, as though made with a little apple corer. The coded patterns of reading a portrait have thereby slipped or revolved, producing an image that is pleasurably meditative rather than de-humanised or machine-like. These visual slippages or twists of the tongue, eyes and lips collage together an enigmatic image of a person that is fluid, obtuse and decentred, yet comfortably lucid.

Portraiture and pattern also figure in Dryden Goodwin's *Cradle 15*, 2008. This large black and white photograph of a young black male has scratched lines over the face, both curvilinear and geometric, that resemble scarification. Reminiscent of Le Corbusier's modular figure of measurement, here the abstract patterning is carried easily on this life-size image. Hetain Patel's intense portrait, *A(r)t Home*, 2008, explores his Indian heritage with a photograph of a naked torso immersed in tattoos up to the neck. This encrypted body full to the brim with ritual meaning is contrasted with his austere western apartment.

The title of the show is borrowed from William Gibson's 2003 book of the same name. The book's hero is a 'coolhunter' looking

for effective corporate logos, and its contemporary coffee-fuelled environment of naturalised, corporate chic is overlaid with ideas of history and collecting. Similarly, several works in the exhibition engage consumer and corporate imagery that hovers between token critique and celebration. Gemma Holt's product design-aided *Pencil Bangles*, 2009, have more novelty value than aesthetic dimension; Graham Dolphin's *Chloe Proverbs*, 2008, is more advertising than proverb; Carey Young's corporate style video presentation *Terms and Conditions*, 2004, which is featured prominently on the gallery website, is more corporate amusement than cultural critique.

The unlikely inclusion of Bernard Leach's beautiful pot, *Leaping Fish Vase*, which dates from the 1960s, both reiterates and resists the themes of the show. Its emphasis on the absence of ego through the meditative quality of Eastern pottery mirrors other works in the exhibition: Mahbub Shah's portrait, for example, is concerned with contemporary notions of self, but linked to a non-western tradition. However, when describing the composition of his pots and the integrated arrangement of pattern, Leach used the tasteful term 'piquancy'. Whether we interpret this term as an 'emergent' configuration of atoms on the artist's tongue or as a

complex aesthetic judgement depends on our willingness to accept
the forces that push fashion.

Stephen Lee is a sculptor.