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paperpatterncolorculture

by *Emily Warner*

Pentimenti Gallery
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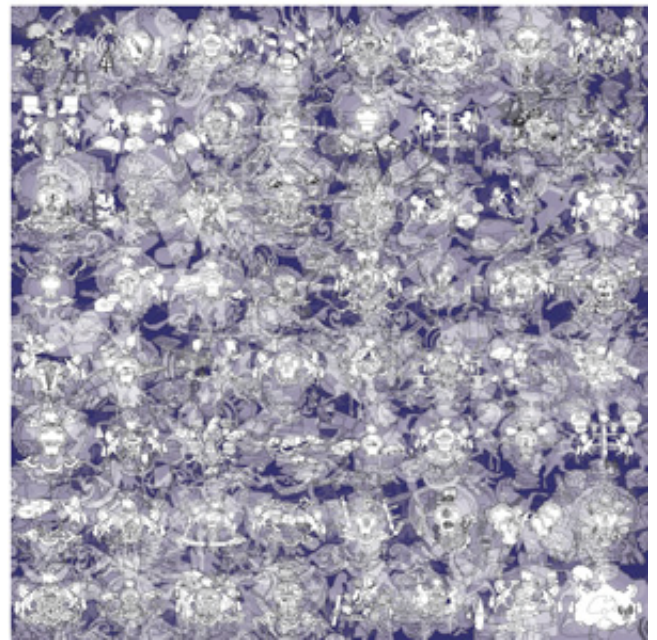
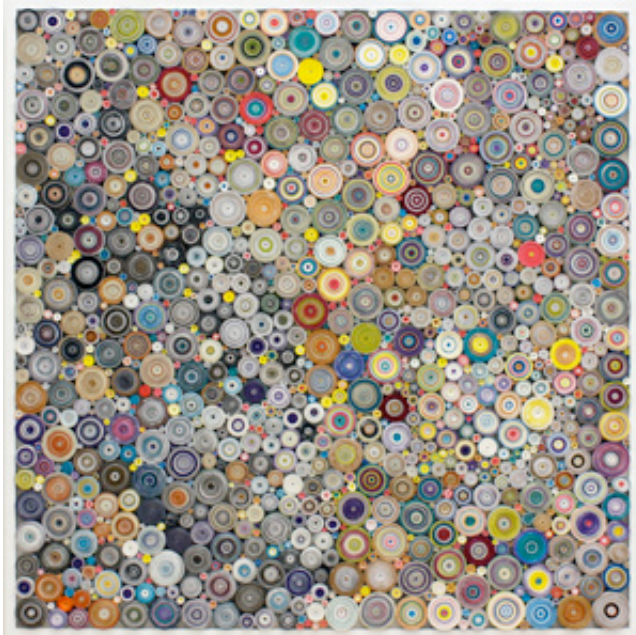
Paperpatterncolorculture, the fall exhibition at Philadelphia's Pentimenti Gallery, explores the layering of written and marked material. In the works collected here, calligraphy, heraldic symbols, and patterned icons wend their way through a variety of stacked and folded substrata: translucent papers, collaged vinyl records, tightly-wound paper scrolls. Marked by time and process, the resulting objects formulate new patterns from familiar signs, and suggest the personal and social ramifications of doing so.

The exhibition is presented as two concurrent solo shows, featuring on one side the Iranian-born Hadieh Shafie, based now in Baltimore, and on the other Philadelphia artist Ben Volta. Shafie's practice over the last decade or so has involved the repetition of the Farsi word "*eshghe*," meaning "love." In several works on paper, iterations of the phrase form map-like diagrams, an American flag, and a craggy nest of piled-up ink marks. Shafie's "scroll paintings" are made by the repeated inscription and printing of the phrase onto strips of paper that are then painted, coiled up, and displayed spiral side out alongside tens or hundreds of other rolled-up scrolls. The scroll paintings ride a curious line between the sublime and the quotidian; in their finished form, enclosed in wooden frames, they suggest both broader vistas (undulating landscapes, the speckled blue of a seabed) and clustered collections of ordinary things (buttons, spools of thread, bright glass marbles).

The drawings and scroll works carry specific markers of the political: the culturally transplanted flag, for example, or the “democratization” of the writing (Shafie ignores the rules of Persian calligraphy, by turns printing or writing in an untrained hand). But the real political event is the focusing of so much historical and wide-ranging mystical material into a personal, and personally altered, experience. She cites Rumi and Sufism, and the “search for the dervish within,” as sources of inspiration in her work, but her deployment of those ideas is far from traditional. Likewise, although she selects a word with its own emotional and spiritual connotations, she leaves out key vowel markers and piles it into overlapping layers, essentially rendering it illegible. The phrase becomes a carrier of a different kind of meaning, one that is personal, intense, and in many ways opaque.

This illegibility lends allure to Shafie’s pieces, but it also points to their limitations, for they veer dangerously close to solipsism. The scroll paintings are a case in point: peering at them up close, the bits of phrases peeking out along the trunks, or half-submerged in inky dyes, convey not so much transcendence as someone else’s search for it, the visual remainders of an interiority we’ll never grasp. For all their preoccupation with the divine, these works underscore most strongly the stakes of being human and the boundaries that seal us off from one another.

Ben Volta’s process is frequently



Ben Volta, "An Expected or Projected State" (2008). Archival pigment print on Hosho paper adhered to stretched canvas, 66 × 66 inches. Courtesy of Pentimenti Gallery.



Hadieh Shafie, "1506" (2009). Paper, ink, Farsi text (handwritten and printed), 12 × 12 inches.

Courtesy of Pentimenti Gallery.

Courtesy of Pentimenti Gallery.

collaborative, and the pieces here—two mural-size canvases of digital prints on translucent Hoshō paper and a series of collaged vinyl records—were projects completed with students from the Vare Elementary School and Grover Washington, Jr. Middle School, both in Philadelphia. “An Expected or Projected State” is a square blue canvas covered in a fractal-like pattern of riffs on the Pennsylvania state seal. In the designs, printed onto translucent papers that have been laid onto the canvas, the seal’s main elements are flipped, twinned, or subbed out for modern tokens of transport, communication, and control. In one, a transmission tower sits snugly inside the Pennsylvania coat of arms; in another, a schematic rendering of a brain is flanked by computers, police cars, books, and a column of cell phones.

An unnerving hint of authoritarian intervention runs through the plethora of information devices, but there’s a disarming humor alongside the unease; the systematic and deadpan substitution of parts seems to undo, or at least poke fun at, any consistent iconographic message. Volta speaks of his work as “framing” or “clustering” unique perspectives, and the themes of “State” have a strong resonance with that overall pattern, juxtaposing and knitting together part and whole, state and individual, emblematic pronouncement and personal emendation.

Volta’s works have a shifting, multiplying potential to them. Their meaning seems to lie in the process of accumulation, arrangement, and group revision that forged them, and in the viewer’s concomitant visual digging to make sense of them. Yet they can also feel disconcertingly blank. The “Perennials” series, portraits and plant motifs on old vinyl records, originated as a project on the symbols and aims of peace; you can see the works, on Volta’s blog, hanging in the school windows where they were made. But there’s a definite shift in their valence inside the gallery. Without their original context, they feel alarmingly naked, like ornaments without a message. We recognize that they have symbolic value (they hang like pendants or icons, begging emotional identification), but we lack the language for making sense of their specific allusions.

In both bodies of work, the artists play with common modes of visual communication, turning text into pattern, symbol into ornament, icon into personal riff. The resulting objects are compelling, not least in their technical facture; both Volta and Shafie are adept at material and textural flourishes that alternately disclose and obscure their objects’ genesis. But the works are also ambiguous about our interaction with the larger social body—construed as other makers, viewers, or publics. Together, they seem to pose two different approaches to the use and re-use of symbolic motifs: on the one hand, a slow and purposeful rewriting that is personal, seductive, and disturbingly narrow; on the other, a wide-ranging integration of signs that is shifting, clever, but perilously open-ended.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Warner is a New York-based critic and writer, and former Editorial Intern at NYFA Current.