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Craftwork

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Craftwork

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

by

Nathalie Christianne Shepherd

B.F.A. Rhode Island School of Design, 2003

May, 2008

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Abstract

Chronologically I have described the different environments that I have been exposed to in the past five years and how my interactions with the different locations have affected my work. I started writing about what I was doing a year after finishing my undergraduate degree, when I started to feel as though I needed to re-invent my work in a way that also meant trying to see the process of creating art differently. I didn't know yet how this new work would begin to generate, or what would inspire it, but I knew that I was seeking a studio practice that would be personal enough to sustain a lifetime of exploration. In the end I found the inspiration had always been all around me.

Keywords: Olneyville, Sarah Winchester, Katrina, Architecture, Sci-Fi, Freemason, cemetery, geometry, decoration, spiritual, craft, ruin.

Introduction

I must cite the relationship my aesthetic ideals have to the artistic communities of Olneyville, in Providence, Rhode Island. The post-modern craft aesthetic, collage, knitting, coloration, and patterning that is prevalent in Olneyville has undeniably influenced me and is the unadulterated source of such elements that are still present in my work. After finishing with a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, living in Olneyville was the aftermath and the icing on my art education.



The Prototype Workshop

During this time I worked in an industrial prototype shop. The aesthetic of the workshop was very science fiction: we all wore laboratory coats, cleaned pieces in chemical baths, and used industrial machinery, which seemed dated with a 1950's science fiction appearance: tubes, chutes, and primary-colored, unmarked buttons decorated the machines. The atmosphere was

loaded with fantasy, and instilled itself in me, along with a healthy work ethic involving never-ending, repetitive gestures. I worked five days a week for 8 hours sanding and shaving small, abstract pieces of whatever prototype was being produced. These little pieces of computer generated plastic were total abstractions, in that I was working on unrecognizable parts of a toy or action figure, such as a piece of Chewbacca's fur. Having patience and a vision for these small unidentifiable objects forced me to pay more attention to the rituals of production, as opposed to focusing on representation painting. At the time I was primarily a figurative painter, and so the existential mood brought forth through countless days of laborious meditation at the prototype shop changed my studio practice entirely. I became interested in the mode of production above all; the expressive gesture versus the laborious one. These issues still concern me and influence the choices I make regarding my practice and the materials.



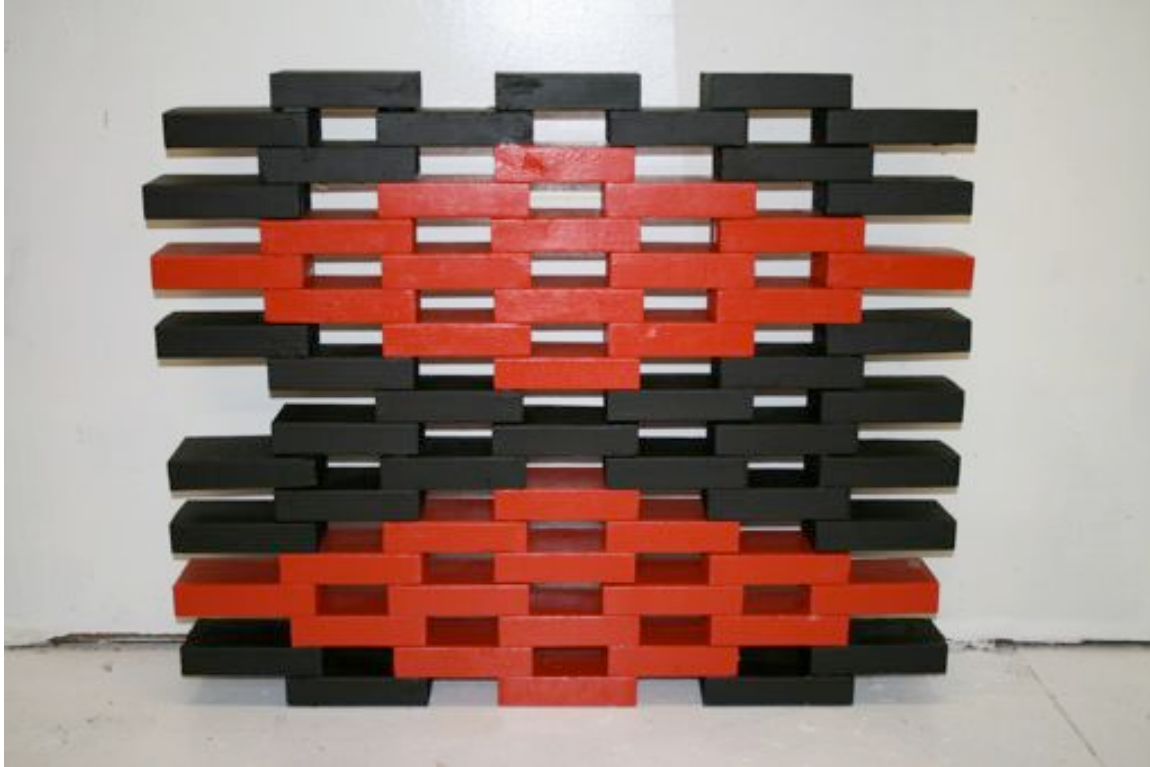
Manipulating the Industrial Surface

Many of the materials I use remind me of this industrial-art work experience. Making industrial materials and colors decorative is to take away their utilitarian potential and to re-consider them as an artist. An opaque black has a deep space feeling to me in a theatrical stage prop kind of way; the way I often felt about the machines in the workshop. I have been using metallic and fluorescent paint to achieve a similar quality. Sometimes a brighter, fluorescent color will show slightly through an appliquéd area of beads or rope, in order to give the surface a sparkle. When I have used beads, I have painted over them in layers of dull to fluorescent colors to create an unearthly patina. In the priming room at the workshop that I visited every fifteen or twenty minutes to prime the piece I was sanding to perfection, I would always admire the netting over the ventilator behind the spray-painting area. It looked like sci-fi warrior chain mail that had been buried under ground for a while and rusted, painted for years with a modern palette of spray paint hues, which look like wet confetti from beneath the grey primer. I enjoy this type of aesthetic where the natural world appears to be in dialog with the industrial world. Rope is a material I have used of late that lends itself to this type of aesthetic; it appears both organic and industrial. Traces of production from the factory machines leave irregularities and the manila color reminds me of hay. To be able to use rope as an artist material feels like a special event. I've been interested in the re-contextualization of materials and structures to mirror the world in it's less concrete moments.



The Environmental Surface

When I started graduate school in New Orleans, I was attempting to create art within a place that felt uncanny in its newly devastated, post-Katrina state. I saw the decaying gravestones on my daily walk to my Mid-City studio, and the ideas that I was having about the surrounding architecture in ruins started taking form. I was intrigued by the appearance of the masonry, falling apart and weathered, and the carved symbols. The general impression made upon me of encountering ruins everyday began to carry a literal significance.



In the same way that the Freemasons have borrowed from the stonecutter's symbolism, I like to borrow from the artisan tradition of carpentry and architecture. I like to think about showmanship as the Freemasons employed it. A visual element that can be found in other organized societies, such as the Girl and Boy Scouts or the military. Geometry, as in simple shapes and lines, is heavily used in the decoration of a uniformed group. The simultaneous irrelevance and importance of decorum, and the limited vocabulary of geometry and design is fascinating. I found a Freemason cemetery on Bienville Avenue on route to my Mid-city studio, and I became interested in the symbolism on the gravestones. The Freemasons, it seems, were a very flashy group, as far as the visual language they developed through symbolism, flags, costumes, and other ephemera. Much of the symbolism was appropriated from other societal groups such as the ancient Egyptians and the stonemasons whose workshops were used for some of the earliest congregations of the Freemasons and their "craft". What I liked about the symbols is the aura of misdemeanor and morality rolled into one cryptic package.



I went around the city of New Orleans taking photographs of graffiti and painted marks on buildings and structures, needing some sort of record on the subject of my surroundings (the post-Katrina landscape). The photos eventually ended up being used in a personal photo blog called Elizabeth. This project fed into my studio work as I began to approach making art more conceptually in my physical and psychological relationship to buildings and architecture in the city.

Site-Specific

I painted some found pieces of plywood with brightly colored enamel paint that mimicked the pattern of the wood grain and abstractly referenced water pooling. I put these painted plywood sheets against buildings in Mid-City to mimic the boarded up windows everywhere and photographed them as I had done the other buildings covered in spray-painted Katrina symbols. My intention was that the houses appear to be boarded-up by my paintings. I also documented a

path I made using watercolors of red and orange bricks. These photographs of site-specific painting/photo projects are still up on Elizabeth.



Housework

The interesting thing about the architecture in New Orleans is that it seems to be a historical mess, a combination of colonial and mid to late century influences. The hodge-podge decorative motifs on household facades bear little or no resemblance to the contemporary slickness found elsewhere. The architecture, as some of the population of New Orleans, remains traumatized and uncertain. To drive around some of the more devastated New Orleans neighborhoods is an experience in appreciation for the temporal and psychological meaningfulness of architecture. Collaborative efforts go into the production of a building project. Houses made by craftspeople are labor-intensive monuments of aesthetic decisions. Many houses in New Orleans can be pointed out as landmarks because they're strange looking. Strangeness in design is perplexing because it is counter-productive to the provision of comfort and organization. There are roofs I

have seen in New Orleans that have been covered in tiling



that

look like the scales of a reptile. The colors are bright yet dark and foreboding, even creepy. This type of creepiness is the opposite of design but more importantly it is the opposite of the idea encapsulated by that of the home front where the home would ideally signify safety. There are so many homes in this city that are dysfunctional architecturally and appear as surreal monuments of danger.

Class is also a factor in architecture and design that is indicated by the urgency in the lack of harmonious decorum. That urgency makes a visual impact when the house is spot painted in different colors or the roofing is patched like a quilt. It is rebellious, with a lack of concern for aesthetic norms, yet it is an implication of a real devotion to an aesthetic of its own, due to the labor involved in the process. For these reasons the architecture in New Orleans, as it represents such a paradoxical visual language, has been on my mind. I often think of the relationships between architecture and trauma that Mike Kelley has talked about in his work. He has used craft materials and the world of interiors and architecture to discuss the relationships between domestic and institutional

ritual in American culture. I often think that when a home's decoration shows evidence of craft rituals, the decoration looks insane and interesting. A highly ornamental room, especially a crafted one, represents time spent in the installation, production, and fashioning of an environment as being a transgression from reality: an individual utopian vision of home.

The notion of craft connotes domesticity and comfort. Craft in its traditional form is inextricably linked to the indoor landscape of the home: the site of domestic labor, woman's duties and daily chores. Not coincidentally, craft is an engendered tradition, a feminine hobby, the utilitarian impetus of a quilt or a pillow often disguised in baroque frivolity and geometric decorum. However heavily I borrow from craft I carefully separate my artwork by canceling out utility, and often I employ a garish quality that is at once too futuristic and retro to be quiet and comfortable. The industrial materials I have used of late demonstrate a tension within the craft analogy.

The naïve quality I use as a conceptual aesthetic simultaneously refers to the art of crafting in its lack of academic impulse, 'the fruit of thy labor': the admission of feminine qualities, and the faith in ritual necessary for production. All of these notions are a part of a utopian belief system by virtue of their irrelevance to the historical trajectory of the real issues demonstrated. The nostalgia is displaced. My work perpetually contradicts itself in this way with an anomaly of themes insisting upon the co-existence of paradox and the banality of the familiar.



Sarah Winchester

Spirituality and craft are entwined in a subversive kind of longing for one another in my art. Such was also the case for Sarah Winchester in her constant construction of her home, the Winchester mansion. After the death of her infant and husband, Sarah Winchester visited a medium that “urged her to move west to perpetually construct a house and contact these spirits. Building sounds, rather than rifle reports would drive evil spirits away. Sarah Winchester built her mansion in San Jose California, obsessively creating an armature to escape the persistent haunting that surrounded her” (Monk 96). The use of the word “armature” is intentional on Monk’s part, because he talks about the constructions she built as a type of artistic invention: an irrational invention that could not be put to any practical use and a deliberate gesture of twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, building.

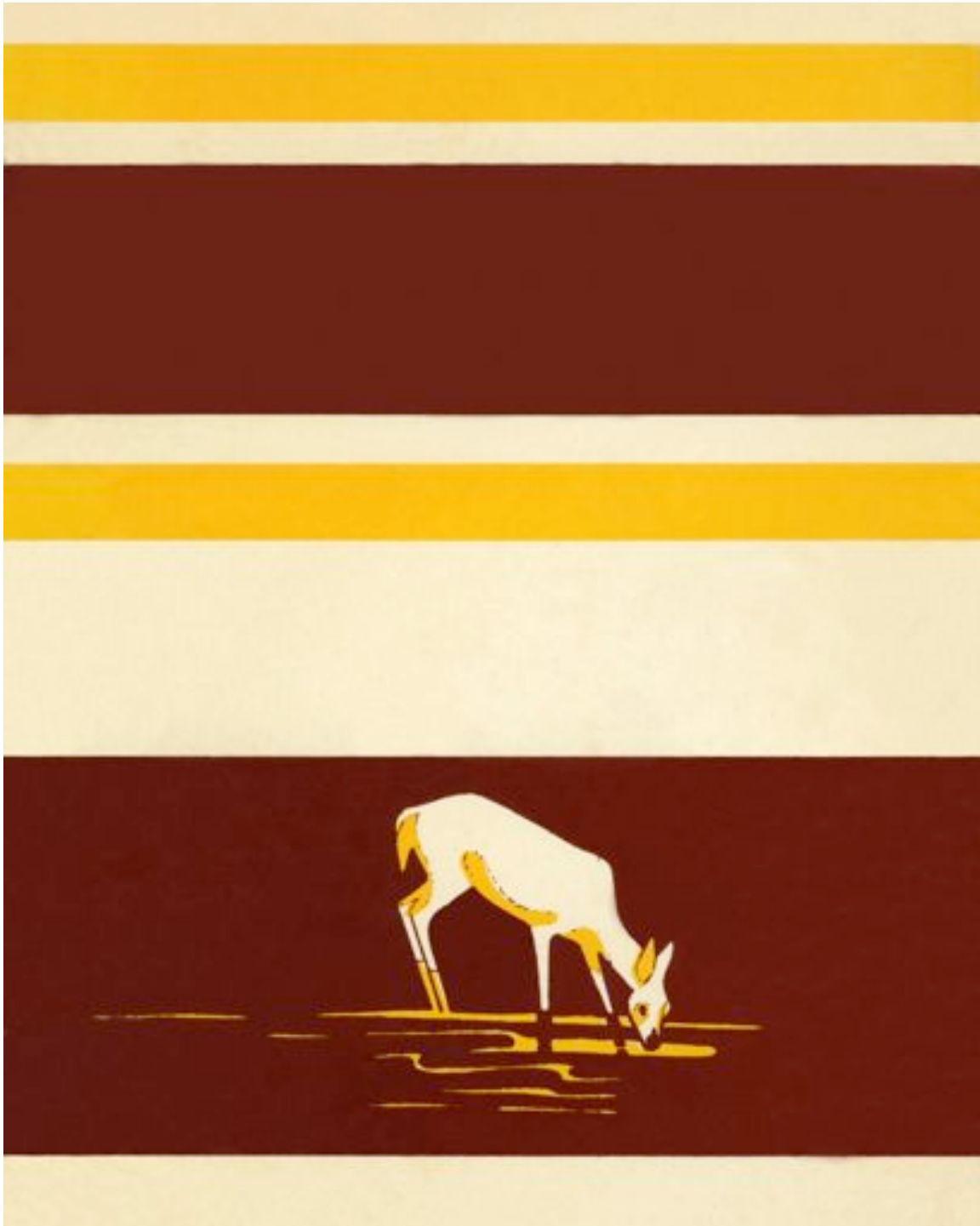
In relation to my artwork, I am interested in the historical Spiritualist movement that Monk speaks of here in relation to Sarah Winchester. The Spiritualist movement has a relationship to

contemporary art that is worth exploring. The cultural output that came of the Spiritualist movement now speaks of a feminist resistance to patriarchal tyranny, organized religion, and race issues. “Her enterprise also speaks to the liberation Spiritualism offered women in the second half of the nineteenth century...It gave voice to women hitherto silent, typically female, trance speakers could earn income and speak freely on social issues. Intimately linked, Spiritualism and the suffragette movement contributed to the ‘feminization of American culture’ as counterweight to the west’s lawlessness” (Monk 96).



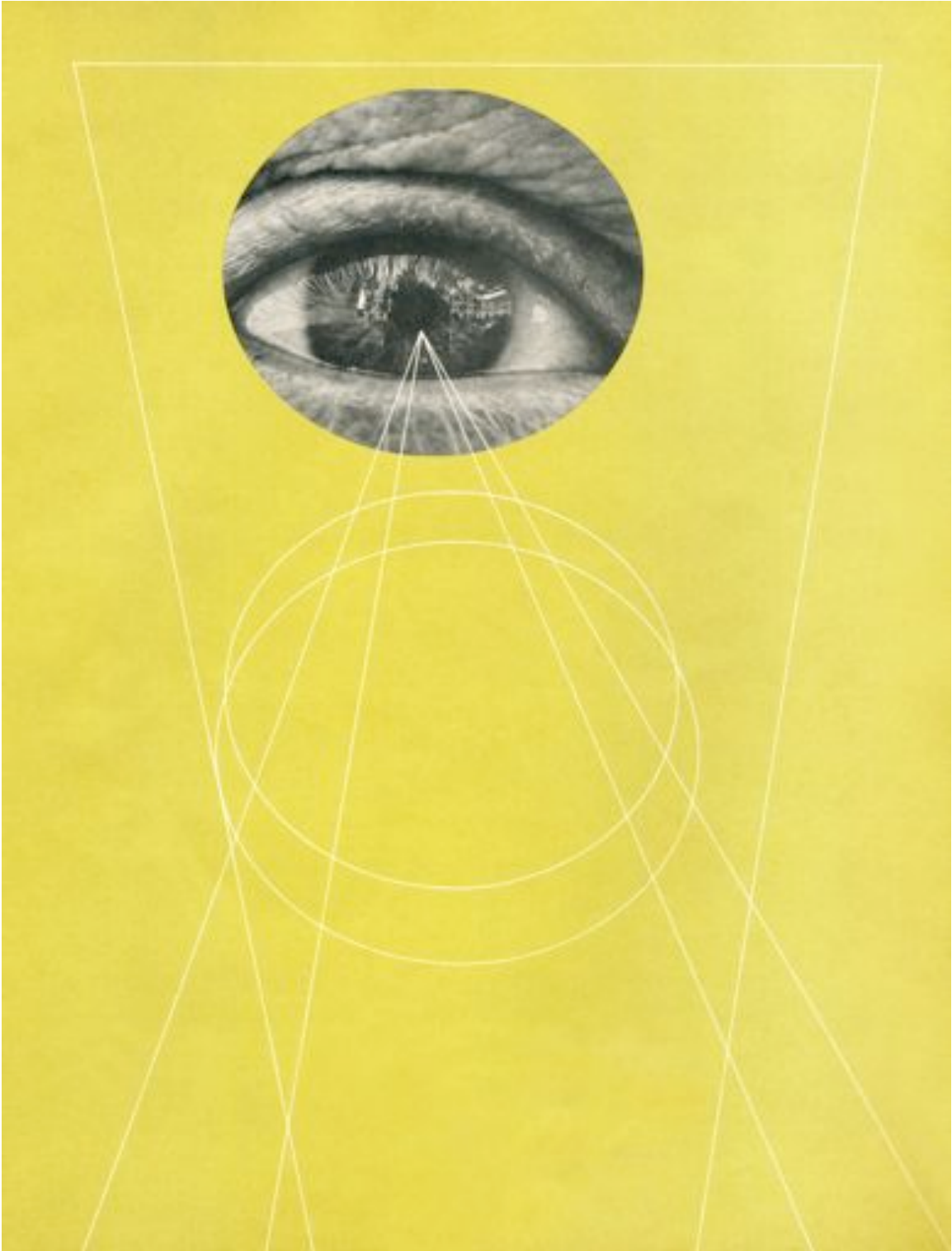
I feel empathy for Sarah Winchester due to the contextual reading of her impetus for creating the paradoxical marvel that was her residence. The Winchester mansion is a domestic enlightenment gone wrong: an exercise in failed potential. Winchester’s house became a place for spirits to congregate in only to be chased out by her. This pertains at once to spirituality and domesticity. As Phillippe Monk suggests, she would be an artist in the appropriate context. Hypothetically speaking, she is a model for the kind of abstract strains of thought I am interested in. Her unorthodox approaches to housework, labor and ritual, spirituality and its practice are infinitely

interesting.

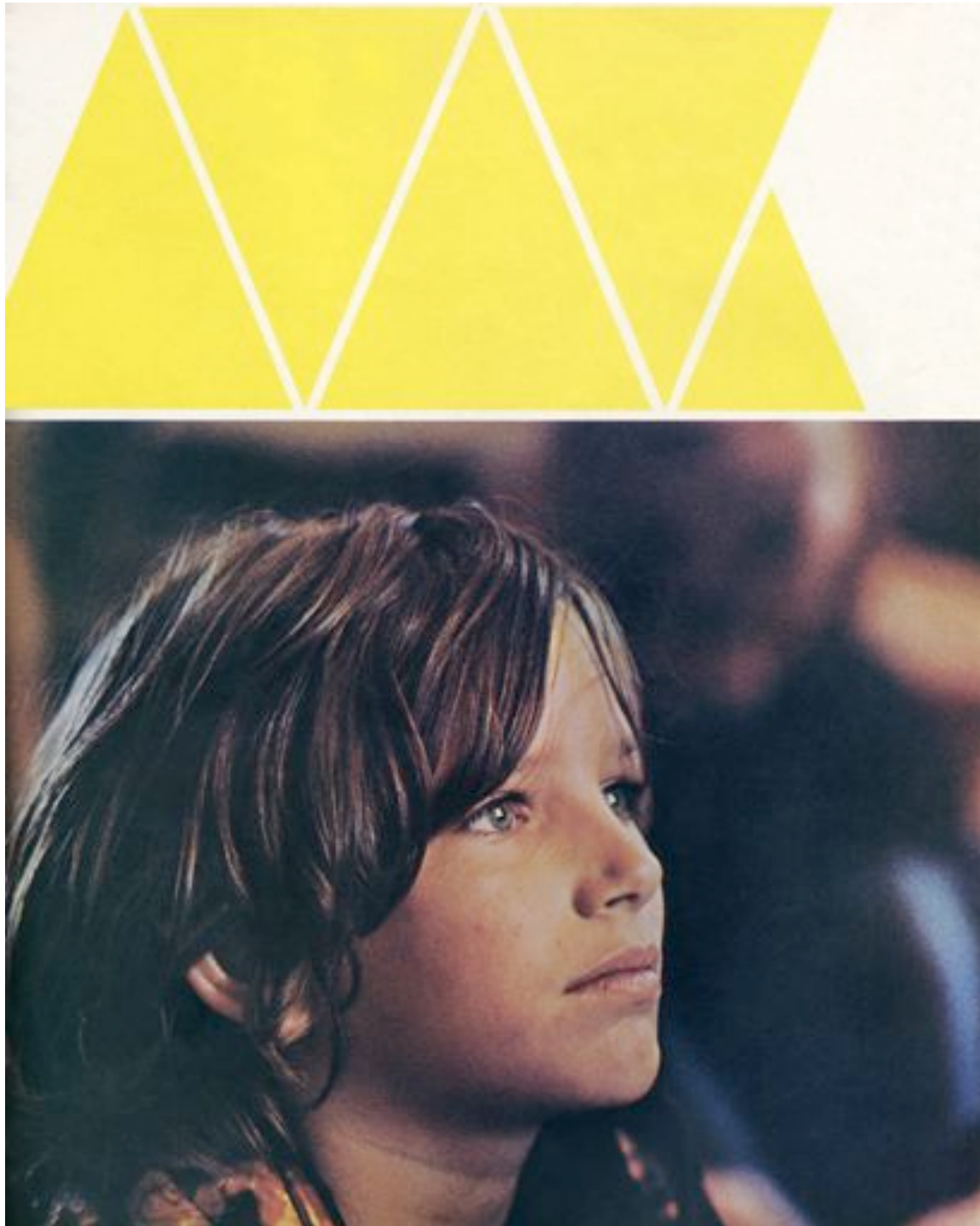


A Contextual Mood

In my most recent body of work I simultaneously appropriated and restored forgotten graphic



design from the early seventies. I am drawn to this specific time in art and design for the coloration, geometry, and the apparent folksy attitudes toward lifestyle and decorum.



Taken directly from covers of books on clinical psychology and psychoanalysis as well as from

the illustrated pages of Christian spirituality pamphlets, the singularly important change was the removal of text from each image eliminating the original context. Despite the dual subject matter the images previously represented, today they have an overall unified aesthetic in design and coloration.



As a result, imagistic approaches to mental wellness through religion and clinical psychology play upon the paradox of their similarities.

Shapes and Decorations

This recent photo project exemplifies relative elements important in all my artwork, including paintings and sculptures that portray an interest in geometric decorum from a faux-naïve folk perspective that references the arts and crafts movements of the 1970's.

Using industrial materials such as rope and plywood demonstrates my desire to participate in a structural building process that subverts the original intention of the materials. It is a dematerialization for these industrial materials to become elements of mind and pattern.

Simple shapes have been the source of my newest paintings. My sculptures, also basic shapes such as diamonds and pyramids, have flattened out this year into two dimensional, ornate surfaces covered with rope and other straw-like materials. This new work provokes an idea of the contemporary primitive, mixed with retro-kitsch decorative elements. The first piece I worked on this year was a large-scale imitation of an elaborate etching for a Victorian frame. I covered a wooden panel 4x6 feet entirely with rope to recreate the image. The center of the frame was an oval, so in a way, I thought of the oval as the subject of the piece. In my next series I used the oval as subject, working on smaller canvases, with rope adorning oval-shaped, woven placemats painted using acrylic and enamel spray paint.

My two most recent two-dimensional pieces mirror one another with the same pattern I found on a Victorian paper box. The amount of intricacy involved in reproducing the pattern's interlocking shapes reveal flawed craftsmanship that is dressed up with precious adornment of rope or stenciled. Coincidentally, many people thought that the first two-dimensional rope piece was a mirror, as well as the smaller ovals on canvas. I don't really think of the mirror metaphorically, only as an architectural form, like an oval. But I do like the connotation to a household object such as a mirror or a window, or even a placemat. I want my artwork to be objectified the same way that fine furniture or household trophies are, and used to decorate an environment.

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Vita

Nathalie Shepherd was born in New York City in 1981. She loves New York City and thinks she will live there again in the future. However, she is a nomadic girl, and has lived in Long Island, Anguilla, Miami, New Orleans, Connecticut, Lancashire, and Providence where she received her B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design.