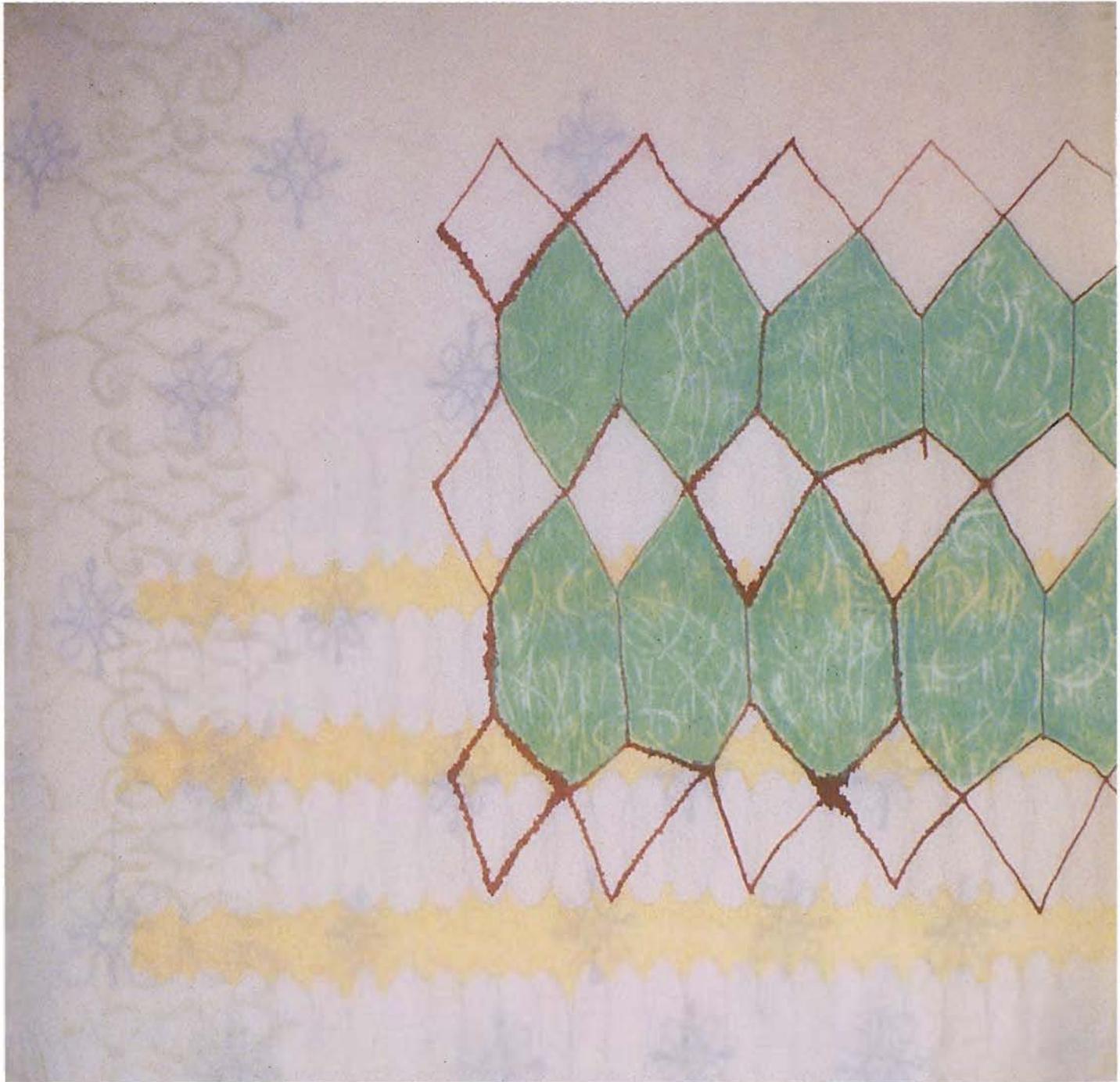


# MONICA PIERCE

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Pattern Book



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

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JANUARY 15 - FEBRUARY 19, 2000  
AUSTIN, TEXAS

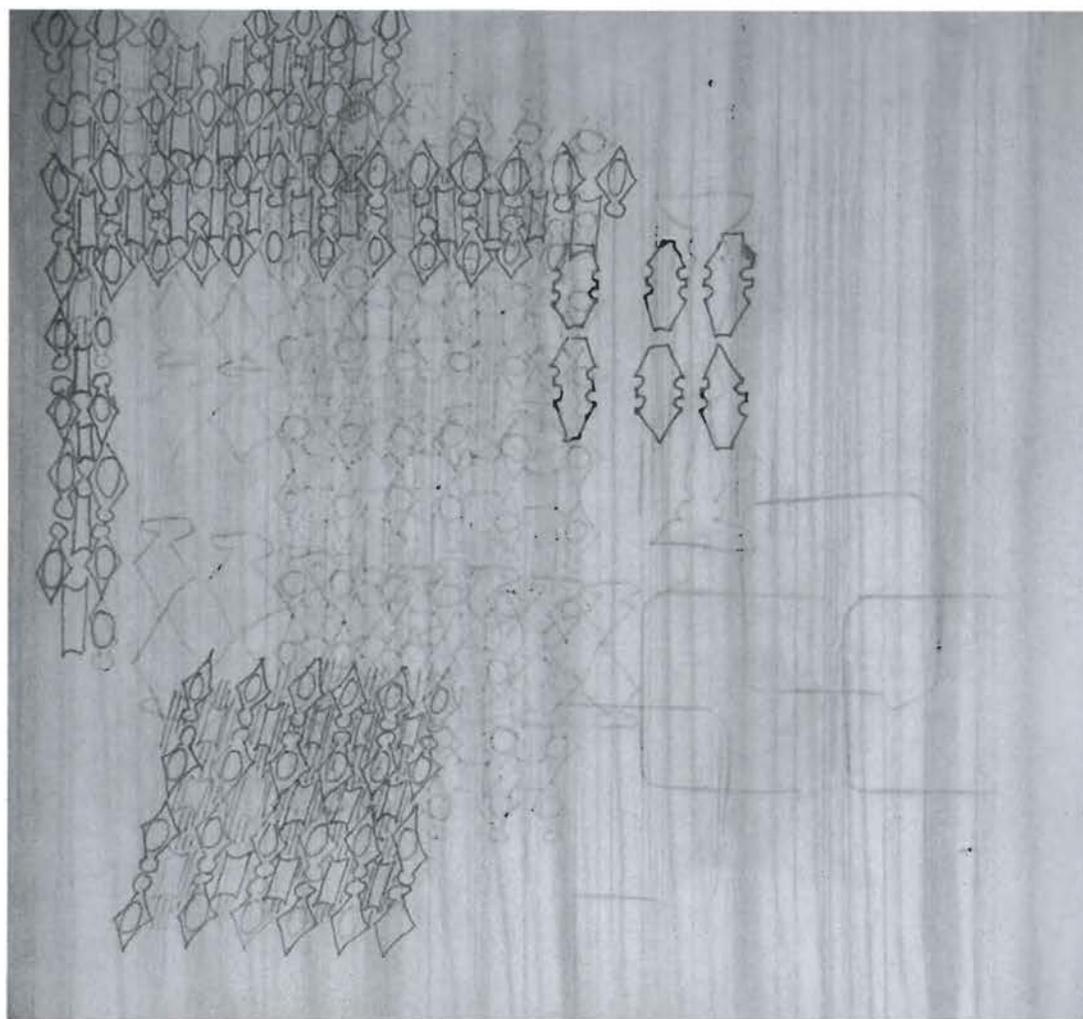
MONICA PIERCE:  
THE PATTERN BOOK

by Tom Moody

Although abstract art in the 20th Century has much in common with decoration and ornament (Roman tile patterns, Islamic weaving, Indian mandalas, to name a few examples), for decades it was considered taboo for serious painters to incorporate such motifs directly into their work. The critic Clement Greenberg, whose ideas greatly influenced the course of postwar art, believed that painting's job in the modern era was "to entrench itself more firmly in its area of competence"<sup>1</sup>—to depict colors, lines, and shapes without any reference to the narrative, the sculptural, or the decorative. Staunchly hierarchical, he deemed decoration "inferior."<sup>2</sup>

By the '80s, modernist orthodoxies had begun to break down. Ross Bleckner, Philip Taaffe, and others aggressively introduced pattern into large-scale painting, recycling Op art, arabesques, and even Art Nouveau under the heading of "appropriation" (a conceptualist meta-art plundering of past styles as a form of critique). In the '90s strict appropriation has given way to widespread sampling, genre-bending, and quirky personalization of form; what was once dismissed as bric-a-brac is now on equal footing with "pure," Greenberg-era brushwork. Nina Bovasso and Pamela Fraser, for instance, conflate modernist arcs and obsessive doodling; Beatriz Millhazes mixes in psychedelic motifs and folk art; Ludwig Schwarz layers abstract bands over graffiti-esque blobs of spray paint.

Monica Pierce's paintings on wood panels, crisscrossed with febrile strokes



*"Pattern Book", 1996-1999. Mixed media on paper, 11 1/2" x 9 3/4".  
Courtesy of artist and James Gallery, Houston, Texas.*

and subtle, modulated colors, conjure the amorphous sublime of Abstract Expressionism, but on a much more intimate scale. Shrinking the bombastic field of gesture painting down to roughly one foot square, she complicates it with fragmentary, enigmatic patterns (diamonds, heraldic crests, bouncy anthropomorphic bowties) emerging and submerging in the buttery brushwork. In *Blue Yodel*, for example, vertical streaks of blue-on-blue serve as both foreground and background for knobby, wobbly diamonds stacked on top of each other and squeezed together as if by the force of gravity. In *Mosey*, an orange line meanders through a sequence of cursive octagons, hovering in a yellow-green haze.

Many of Pierce's patterns have specific origins; she is a fanatic researcher, and looks at textile designs, architectural details, antique hardware, Victorian wall-paper samples, Italian grotteschi, and hundreds of other sources, familiar and obscure. It should be stressed, however, that she doesn't just "appropriate" these patterns in the literal, '80s sense. Instead, she internalizes them (committing them to memory, letting them percolate inside) and returns them to two-dimensional form as expressive, hand drawn "cartoons"—rubbery morphs of past and present sensibility.

Although a single motif (or partially obliterated fragment) typically holds

center stage in a Pierce painting, traces of brushed-over designs peek through the opaque layers of oil, suggesting a rich palimpsest lying beneath. Only the artist knows the panel's entire hidden history, but an enjoyable time can be had reconstructing the layers through a kind of archaeological detective work. In the "Pattern Book," however—an ongoing project running concurrently with her paintings—one gets a glimpse of what the veils might look like if magically rendered transparent.

The Pattern Book is a compendium of drawings in ink, pencil, gouache, and other media, made on sheets of tracing paper and bound in a leather cover. Comprising some 200 drawings, it is a unique artist's book; not a sketchbook, not footnotes to the paintings, but not wholly independent of them either. Each page (front and sometimes back) features a pattern-honeycomb, palmette, lozenge, rosette, spiral, chevron, snowflake, trefoil-filling up the rectangular field or covering a portion of it. As one leafs through the book, the semi-transparent pages create a series of ever-changing overlays.

Ranging from the familiar (stripes, ovals, harlequins) to the exotic (details from Indian miniatures) to the endearingly recent ('50s Populuxe), Pierce's caricature-like symbols become even more elaborate when superimposed in trans-geographical, time-traveling hybrids. A grid of iron crosses cohabits with mauve Paul Klee-style pylons and Scientific American-style rods and cones. Sand dollar/starfishes undergird theme park lattices and rows of Japanese V-shaped tentacles. Elastic explosions in automat drawers loom gauzily behind Dad's favorite tie. Scores of possible combinations of lightly pencilled,

delicately shaded motifs occur as one stacks and peels back the pages.

Pierce began working on the Pattern Book after seeing a collection of 17th Century tiles at the National Museum of Azulejo in Lisbon, Portugal. Overwhelmed by the sheer, unstoppable variety of the patterns, she decided to keep a notebook of designs, almost as a challenge to herself to see how far she could go without repeating an idea. Now, several years later, the book has become a consuming passion, as she continues to add new patterns, edit out those that don't work, and paste portions of rejected pages back in to make new drawings. Like the metaphor-inspiring archetypes of William Butler Yeats' *A Vision*,<sup>3</sup> (a mythic system keyed to the phases of the moon), the Pattern Book suggests new motifs and directions in her paintings.

And like Yeats' text, there's something medieval about the Pattern Book. The sheets of tracing paper have the feel of ancient parchment from years of manipulating, gluing, and soaking with watercolor; clasped in the embossed leather cover, they suggest a sacred manuscript or alchemical text. The almost encyclopedic collection of designs alludes to the "patternbooks" filled with pictographs of the visible world that were copied and recopied by artists in the Middle Ages (a kind of pre-Renaissance clip art).<sup>4</sup>

Yet at the same time her book isn't musty nostalgia, but a post-modern, interactive, and de-mystifying document. Like a series of overhead transparencies in a technological demonstration, or hypertext links on a web site, Pierce's clusters of see-through patterns elaborate on the contents of her paintings,

revealing their underlying research. Unlike a web site, however, the information isn't just available for the clicking. To experience the book, one must regress to the mode of an ancient scholar, carefully flipping through the fragile pages.

Obviously this raises logistical issues in a public exhibition space. The book will be available for perusal on opening night but for the remainder of the exhibition, it will be housed in a vitrine, to protect its easily-torn pages. Reproductions of the translucent sheets will be mounted on the wall, giving the viewer a sense of how the patterns are layered. The display, together with this brochure, approximates what is ultimately intimate and performative: an intriguing confluence of medieval and post-modern experience.

TOM MOODY is an artist and critic who lives in New York City.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," from *Art in Theory*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 754

<sup>2</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 66

<sup>3</sup> W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (New York: Collier Books, 1966)

<sup>4</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 150

## MONICA PIERCE

Born Houston, Texas 1970

Resides in Houston, Texas

### EDUCATION

- 1995 MFA, Painting, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, including one year at Temple University, Rome, Italy
- 1993 BFA, Experimental Studies, East Texas State University, Commerce, TX

### AWARDS

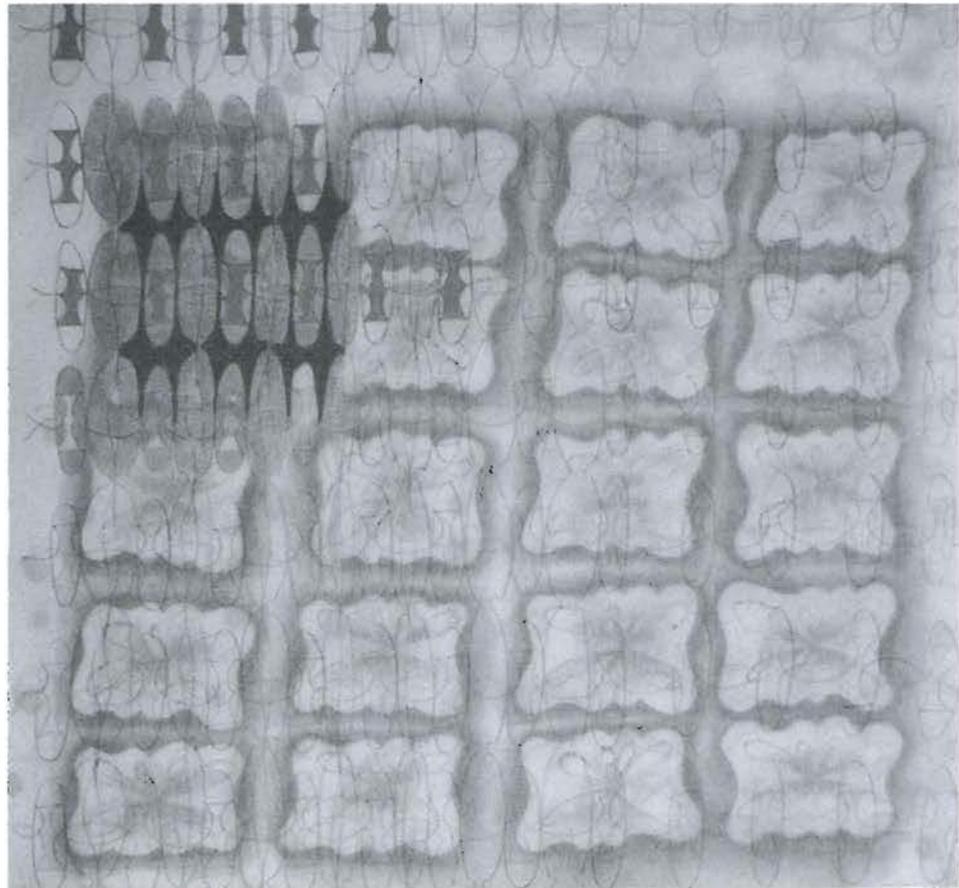
- 1997 Dallas Museum of Art Awards to Young Artists, Arch and Anne Giles Kimbrough Fund
- 1994 Academic Scholarship, Temple University, Rome, Italy

### SOLO AND TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 **Monica Pierce: Works on Paper**, James Gallery, Houston, TX (April)
- Monica Pierce: Pattern Book, Women & Their Work**, Austin, TX (January)
- 1999 **Trish Lewandowsky, Monica Pierce**, James Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1997 **Jimmie Hudson & Monica Pierce**, Gray Matters, Dallas, TX
- 1996 **Texas Solos: Monica Pierce**, Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, TX
- 1995 **Melissa Fellner, Monica Pierce (M.F.A. Graduate Exhibition)**, Temple Rome Gallery, Rome, Italy

### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 **Member's Exhibition, Women & Their Work**, Austin, TX, juried by Suzanne Weaver, Assistant Curator, Dallas Museum of Art.
- Some Kind of Wonderful, Part II**, Barry Whistler Gallery, Dallas, TX
- The Hot Show: Abstract Painting**, curated by Joan Davidow, Director, Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, TX
- 1998 **CAV(e) Painters**, University Gallery, Texas A&M University- Commerce, TX, curated by Michael Miller
- 1997 **The Visceral Intellect, Women and Their Work**, Austin, TX, juried by Sue Graze, Director, Texas Fine Arts Association
- Picture Play—Seven Texas Painters**, University of Texas at San Antonio Art Gallery, San Antonio, TX, curated by Constance Lowe
- Mark Cole, Monica Pierce, Tom Sime**, charlieuniformtango, Dallas, TX, curated by Victoria Montelongo
- New Views: Eight Emerging Texas Artists**, Gerald Peters Gallery, Dallas, TX, curated by Sue Graze



*"Pattern Book", 1996-1999. Mixed media on paper, 11 1/2" x 9 3/4".  
Courtesy of artist and James Gallery, Houston, Texas.*

- 1995 **MAC Members Invitational**, McKinney Cultural Arts Center, Dallas, TX
- 1994 **The Big Show**, Lawndale Art and Performance Center, Houston, TX, juried by Tom Moody

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1999 **The Dallas Morning News**, Mike Daniel, photo, July 30
- The Met**, Annabelle Massey Helber, July 14 - July 21
- The Dallas Morning News**, Janet Kutner Artifax (publication of the Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, TX), Summer
- 1998 **CAV(e) Painters**, exhibition essay by Michael Odom, October
- 1997 **San Antonio Express-News**, Robert Welch, December 11
- Dallas Morning News**, Janet Kutner, February 23
- Dallas Morning News**, Catherine Cuellar, August 18
- 1996 **Arlington Museum of Art Newsletter**, photo

### LECTURES AND PRESENTATIONS

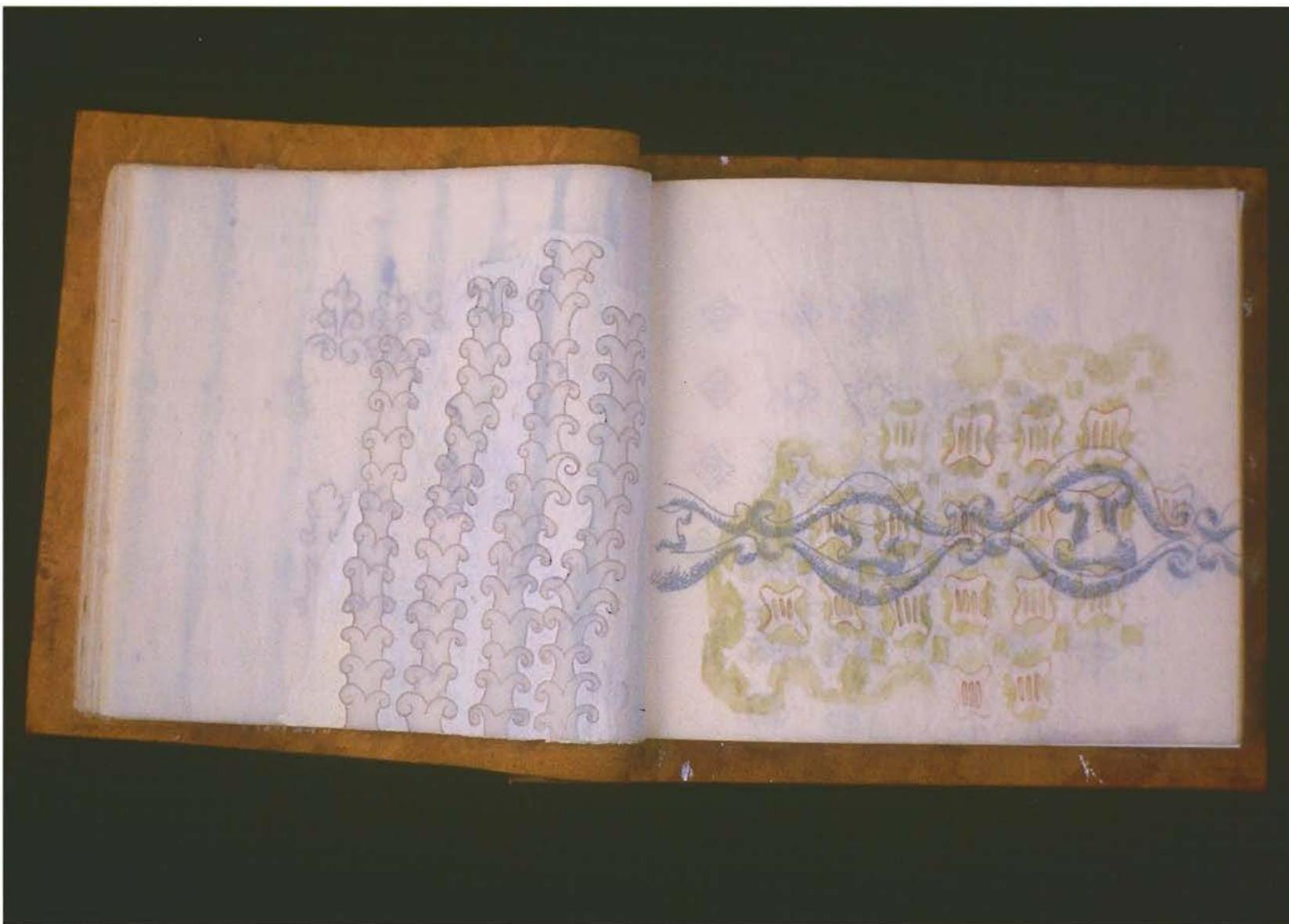
- 1999 **Exhibition talks for Looking At Art**, James Gallery, Houston, TX

### COLLECTIONS

- David Beasley, Houston, TX
- Kathy & Drew Berkman, Houston, TX
- Eugene Binder, Long Island City, NY
- Coleman Chustz, Dallas, TX
- Mark Cole, New York, NY
- Mr. & Mrs. Corporan, Dallas, TX
- Michelle Ganeles, Dallas, TX
- Marshall Gillespie, Dallas, TX
- McDavid Henderson, Philadelphia, PA
- Jonathan Hoak, Dallas, TX
- Kathleen James & Gary Retherford, Houston, TX
- Christine Jensen, Dallas, TX
- Mark Kirkham, Tulsa, OK
- Trish Lewandowsky, San Antonio, TX
- Lola & Todd Lott, Dallas, TX
- Michael Miller, Commerce, TX
- Northern Trust Bank, Bloomfield Hills, Dallas, TX
- Victoria Montelongo, Dallas, TX
- Deborah Phares, Dallas, TX
- John Pomara, Dallas, TX
- John Reoch, Dallas, TX
- Mary Jean White, Pittsburgh, PA
- Cassandra Weyandt, Austin, TX



This Panel: *"Untitled"*, 1996. Oil on panel, 7 3/4" x 13 1/2". Collection, Debra Jensen, Dallas, Texas.  
Cover Panel: *"Pattern Book"*, 1996-1999. Mixed media on paper, 11 1/2" x 9 3/4". Courtesy of artist and James Gallery, Houston, Texas.  
Back Panel: *"Pattern Book"*, 1996-1999. Mixed media on paper, 11 1/2" x 9 3/4". Courtesy of artist and James Gallery,



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