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**Kim MacConnel** at Holly Solomon Gallery

by Wade Saunders —

Kim MacConnel had two kinds of work in his recent exhibition. He showed five constructions made with voile and other fabrics, supported by bamboo, trimmed with ribbons, joined with thread. They are sumptuous, an obvious development of his previous work. He also showed four large, rectangular hangings made of cloth scraps glued together. They are less easy to look at, and far less accessible. The show is organized as a juxtaposition of high and low taste.

Both tastes are related to decoration; they aren't canonical, with claims to historical validation. High taste is present in the five constructions. They embody a type of craft: a thing is valued to the degree that it expresses the handiwork of its maker. The taste for handicraft, initially an elite one, has, over twenty years, broadened its base. As the bulk of our furnishings becomes ever slicker and less inflected, we turn to folk art or craft as a way of participating in the maker's commitment to his product, and so imagine we stay in contact with skills and attitudes that span generations. The lower the technology of manufacture the greater our pride of ownership, when such objects are mass-produced we regard them as *ersatz*, for they are then like our other possessions.

Such taste for non-manufactured, non-western work unfortunately represents a kind of cultural imperialism. The folk and foreign are lauded for their exoticness; an object requiring many hours of labor to make is purchased for a few dollars. We regard ourselves as virtually creating what we fortuitously discover. We are, we think, responsible for recognizing its quality. The mixed media constructions address such colonial taste. Details are handled exquisitely, time spent is everywhere evident. The subject isn't handicraft itself, but the taste that attracts us to such objects. The pieces do annex themselves to oriental hangings which are hardly folk art, but MacConnel seems more interested in the taste so embodied, than in the reference.

The glued hangings are roughly ten feet by eleven feet, slightly wider than high. They are made mostly of synthetic fabrics, seemingly scavenged and hoarded: nothing looks fresh from the bolt. The fabrics were manufactured over several decades. All are patterned, most are prints. The cloth is very palpable: a piece of fabric lies atop several others and imposes its contours on them, but the pieces aren't stacked so much as woven together. Up close we see the slightly milky glue squeeze out from under the edges.

The glued hangings are paintings made without paint. The selection and placement of the fabrics act as a marking system. *Spare Time Shooting Practice* is arranged geometrically: a circle at the right echoes across the leftward expanse where it gradually submerges in an onslaught of rectangles and quadrilaterals. There are no consistent rules. Certain swatches repeat, others don't; some swatches are used whole, others cropped. Any obvious arrangement within the painting is avoided. Half the fabrics have floral patterns, and the flowers form a second kind of ordering, with the hanging suggesting a naturalist’s illustration. The geometry of the other three hangings is less obvious. They all do fracture the picture plane, and each appears to have a referential nexus.

The fabric pieces, whether envisioned alone or seen in context, were not tasteful in any obvious sense. The arrangements made the swatches look worse than they would in isolation, even uglier, even gaudier. The bad taste is noteworthy because MacConnel's work has always been extraordinarily tasteful. The present lapse is so thorough as to seem his subject, a tease of our notions of good taste.

Particular styles often take root in certain economic classes. The glued hangings appropriate bad taste and connect to the American lower middle class, but it is an ironic connection: the pieces are such that they demand a suspension of taste to like them. Although the materials are from a lower middle class setting, they are arranged in a style reminiscent of cubism, a style at odds with their origin. Admittedly one can only buy what one sees in the yardage store, so this kind of taste is as much imposed as requested. But the fabrics do have a context when used singly or in combination by those for whom they were designed and to whom they were sold. MacConnel has taken them from that securing context. The removal makes us see the fabrics, and the kind of taste they embody, anew.

The two sets of pieces are about different ways of redeeming, reclaiming things. Since the raw materials for the two series are fundamentally similar, the works argue that a fabric's context determines our judgment of its tastefulness. If I make certain signs—folk, oriental, craft, and use certain ploys—layering, mixed media, formal symmetry, careful hand marking—to make a reference, the work will be read as being tasteful. Without these distinguishing attributes we will locate the pieces in a different context and so read them differently. Taste is shown to be relative, standards of appreciation to be multiple.

The titles for the constructions are restrained, suitable for hexagrams: *Opportunity*, *Progress*, *New Luck*, *Double Harvest*, *Prosperity*. The titles of the glued hangings are pervaded by irony. They are half Chinese slogans, half blue-collar injunctions: *Never Stop Being Industrious and Thrifty*, *No End of Bumper Harvest Pictures*, *Flourishing Sideline Occupations*. The references are to money, to lower middle class thrift in saving, as well as to the thrift of making pictures from fabric scraps, a waste-not-want-not ethos. *Spare Time Shooting Practice* may refer to the repeating circles with sections removed that dominate its composition. But the title is comic, just folks somehow.

The hangings make us see what we might otherwise take for granted. Each patterned fabric is founded on many previous designs and is also an ordering based on an idea of taste, Patterning is a luxury and as such must attract and appeal to the buyer’s taste. Each piece of fabric is designed with specific intentions. We don’t analyze those intentions, but we do choose one piece over another piece. Some fabrics rely on representation for their effect, while others embody varying degrees of abstraction. Even when we recognize the things depicted, the images remain flat. We refer the prints to pictures of things, rather than to things in the real world.

The hangings allow us to look at fabric for itself, not as it makes garments or household durables. We see that space is perceptually suppressed in fabrics. A fabric pattern copied in paint will be more dimensional than the same pattern made into a shirt and worn. The paint only makes manifest the space already present in the pattern, space that we've not seen. By placing fabric in a different cultural context, an art gallery, a painting, MacConnel calls our attention to its inherent flatness. He juxtaposes; things that are somewhat dimensional are placed against those that are flat so that both acquire space, but in different ways.

MacConnel's works make one consider the context in which fabric is usually seen. They are archaeologies of certain sign mannerisms, embodying as they do the interchange between fine and applied art, while blurring that very distinction. The hangings themselves, in composition and iconography, can be connected to objects, but more interesting is the way they make us see fabrics anew. Fabrics constitute a far greater part of our lives than paintings do, so any successful revision is remarkable.