



LIZ WHITNEY QUISGARD

The Seduction of Ornament

This catalogue coincides with *Liz Whitney Quisgard: The Seduction of Ornament*, an exhibition organized by the Kingsborough Art Museum at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. The exhibition was on view from November 15, 2017 — January 5, 2018.

Kingsborough Art Museum

The City University of New York

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www.kccartmuseum.org

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LIZ WHITNEY QUISGARD

The Seduction of Ornament

KAM

KINGSBOROUGH ART MUSEUM



DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

On behalf of the Kingsborough Art Museum, I welcome you to *Liz Whitney Quisgard: The Seduction of Ornament*. This colorful exhibition, comprised of works from the 1960s to the present, is a reminder of decoration's power to evoke feeling without the burdens of narrative or theory. While the terms *decorative* and *ornamental* are often used pejoratively in contemporary art circles, the urge

to embellish, as ancient as human creativity itself, nevertheless forms the basis of monu-

mental works in the skilled hands of Liz Whitney Quisgard.

Surface treatment—the application of ornament—is at the crux of Quisgard's practice. Generating meaning is not her intention, nor is promoting a message that would be better expressed through the written word. As pattern and decoration are understood more through intuition than through introspection, to apply any philosophical, psychological, or social meanings to her art would defy the *art for art's sake* credo by which she lives and works.

Hers is not a mimetic emulation of nature, but a dialogue *with* Nature, a human re-

Left: Liz Whitney Quisgard in her studio with a self-portrait drawing, November 1957. Photograph by Richard Stacks for *The Baltimore Sun*. Collection of the author.

sponse to the intricately-patterned organization of the natural world. Her most apparent inspiration, Islamic textiles, is but one of many influences to be seen in her work; her dazzling pieces also evoke the spirit of Byzantine mosaics, Medieval stained glass, Baroque ornament, and Navajo rugs. Yet Quisgard is not one for slavish copying of existing patterns, either in Nature or in history. Instead it is the uniqueness found in handmade textiles, the ingenuity and integrity behind these and other cultural creations done by hand rather than by machine, that guides Quisgard in her search for new and inventive designs.

Born on October 23, 1929 in Philadelphia, Quisgard began



Liz Whitney Quisgard in her studio, January 1958. Photograph by Joe Di Paola, Jr, for The Baltimore Sun. Collection of the author.

her career in Baltimore, where she studied at the Maryland Institute College of Art and the Rinehart School of Sculpture. Her work—then

comprised of depictions of dancers and horses reminiscent of Degas and Van Gogh—first attracted attention in the early 1950s. She would, however, soon jettison these nineteenth-century French influences to instead search for her own pictorial identity. Kenneth Sawyer, a noted critic at *The Baltimore Sun* (where Quisgard herself would write art criticism in the late 1960s), noted in 1955 that she was “developing into one of Baltimore’s most ambitious and independent painters.”¹

From 1957-60 she studied with the American painter Morris Louis (1912-1962). Like most painters of the era, Quisgard was enamored with the freedom promised by Abstract Expressionism, and she

began working in a non-representational mode. It was from Morris Louis, however, that she learned an important lesson: “A painting can be anything, but it must be *something*.”²



Liz Whitney Quisgard posing with her plaster and enamel sculpture *Crown* at her solo exhibition at Goucher College, Baltimore, October 1966. Detail of photograph by Edward Nolan for *The Baltimore Sun*. Collection of the author.

For Quisgard this new pictorial language opened a new door for self-expression, as she explained in 1958: "In abstract, non-objective painting, you are not confined by subject matter. When painting subject matter, you can distort but you are still confined by the necessities of dimension and theme and the restrictions of conventional art...[abstract art] frees you of those fetters so that you can experiment."³

Traveling regularly between Baltimore and New York to present her work to galleries, she finally was taken on by the André Emmerich Gallery, whose roster of Color Field painters included Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Helen Frankenthaler. Her debut exhibition with Emmerich, *Liz*

Whitney Quisgard: A New Talent (1962), established her presence in New York. While a career in the arts is often difficult to attain, women artists found it especially challenging; Quisgard recalls that André Emmerich informed her that had she been a man, he would have taken her on two years earlier.⁴

Ever striving to be unique, Quisgard soon abandoned Abstract Expressionism for a more decorative approach; while not generally acknowledged, Quisgard's ornate, embellished paintings and sculptures preceded the Pattern and Decoration Movement (P&D) of the mid-1970s by at least a decade. In 1981 she made the move to Manhattan, abandoning the life she knew in Balti-

more to finally become a “New York artist.” At age 88, Quisgard remains prolific with a steady schedule of exhibitions around the country.

Despite the seeming eclecticism of her oeuvre, there is a unity that runs through her architectural paintings, colorful wood turnings, painstakingly-dappled wooden towers, and the fiber pieces that now dominate her production. Throughout these works the decorative elements have endured and evolved in scope, with her latest works—such as the *Scrambles*, *Circles*, and *Clones*—sprawling across and down walls in expansive ways that nevertheless are organized in carefully-arranged patterns.

I invite you to visually explore the myriad of colors, lines, and forms that comprise *The Seduction of Ornament’s* wondrous sea of color, and to experience for yourself this remarkable artist’s insatiable passion for pattern.

Brian E. Hack, Ph.D.
Director

Notes

¹Kenneth Sawyer, “Art Notes,” *The Baltimore Sun*, October 16, 1955, 50.

²Liz Whitney Quisgard, interviewed by Brian E. Hack, Summer 2017.

³Robert G. Breen, “Abstractions a la Bach,” *The Baltimore Sun*, January 29, 1958, 12.

⁴Quisgard, interview, Summer 2017.





Liz Whitney Quisgard, *7 Clones*, Yarn on buckram, 2012-2017.



ARTIST'S STATEMENT

In my youthful, “truth-seeking” days, I wrote reams of justification for my work. Now that the work has matured, and I, simultaneously, have put less and less value on truth, words have become irrelevant. So, when called upon to explain what I do, I am inclined to say, “What you see is what you get.”

Couched in this flippant response is a firm conviction that the visual arts are exactly that—*visual*. No meanings. No preachments. No symbols.

Left: Liz Whitney
Quisgard in her
studio, 2017.

Politics, philosophy, the human condition, the environment,

and other causes about which people paint, perform, and sculpt these days are subjects for *discourse*—best expressed with words. Attempts to transform them into pictorial images tend to become mere illustration—most often *jejeune*.

My goal is to surprise and engage the mind by seducing the eye. Toward that end, I rely on pattern. The term *decorative* has been applied to my work—most often in a negative sense. But that’s okay with me, for some of the most important art is essentially decorative: Islamic rugs; Greek column capitals; Navajo textiles; Byzantine mosaics; Baroque architectural embellishments...and so forth.

We all understand a row of triangles, a strip of squares, an

arrangement of circles and
swirls. No need to ask their
meaning. They simply are
what they are. They speak to
us universally and without
apology.

Liz Whitney Quisgard

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Fiber Art

Scrambles

Yarn on buckram
100 Square Feet
2011-2015

Two Wall Hangings

8' x 15' each
2004

Chain of 17 Circles

Yarn on buckram
Dimensions vary
2017

Chain of 18 Circles

Yarn on buckram
Dimensions vary
2017

4 Chains of Circles

Yarn on buckram
Dimensions vary
2016

Hundreds of Circles

Yarn on buckram
Dimensions vary
2017

5 Ellipses

(Ellipses #5,6,7,8, 9)
Each ellipse 48 x 30"
2008-2009

9 Consecutive Circles

Various dimensions from
10" to 26"
2017

7 Clones

Yarn on buckram
Each clone approximately
Dimensions vary
2012-2017

4 Wall Squares

Yarn on buckram

Each square 30 x 30"

2004-2007

Sculptures

Peppermint Twist

17 1/2 x 6 x 6"

Acrylic on Ply

Maple Turning #20

Acrylic on maple

36 inches tall

Turning #8

Acrylic on walnut

21 x 5 x 5"

Turning #10

Acrylic on walnut

34 x 5 1/2 x 5 1/2"

Turning #17

Acrylic on walnut

22 x 7 x 7"

Spiral

Acrylic on ply

26 x 11 x 11"

Towers and Columns

A-Tower

7 pieces

Acrylic on ply

F-Tower

5 Pieces

Acrylic on ply

S-Tower

7 pieces

Acrylic on ply

D-Column

Acrylic on ply

3 pieces

Paintings

Baroque Vault

Acrylic on canvas

65 x 45"

1984

Baroque Revival

Acrylic on canvas

60 x 74"

1988

Column Base

Acrylic on canvas

6' x 4'

1988

Beaux-Arts Façade

Acrylic on canvas


80 x 32"

1992

Right: Liz Whitney Quisgard,
Beaux-Arts Façade,
acrylic on canvas, 1992.







Left: Liz Whitney Quisgard at work on one section of a large 8 x 40' mural for the William Fell Elementary School, Baltimore, Maryland, April 1979. Detail of photograph by Ralph L. Robinson for *The Baltimore Sun*. Collection of the author.

Front cover: Liz Whitney Quisgard, *Wall Square* (Detail). Yarn on buckram, 2007. Collection of the artist.

Back cover: Liz Whitney Quisgard, *4 Chains of Circles* (detail). Yarn on buckram, 2016. Collection of the artist.

