

The Shape of the City

Boasting the mesmerising quality of a kaleidoscope, an ambiguous scroll of mauve wallpaper created by An Te Liu solicits personal interpretations from every viewer. From a distance the sinuous pattern looks like snakeskin, with a notion of fakery introduced through its purplish hue. While the reptilian association makes it at once repulsive and exotic, some observers experience the visual buzz of op art in the spliced pattern. Others see a series of multiplied Rorschach blotches. The less imaginative describe a patterned wall covering receding into the background.

As the sharp-eyed gallery-goer approaches the vertical surface, however, Liu's visual trickery reveals a series of Spanish-colonial houses, flipped 90 degrees. Taken from an aerial photograph of an anonymous suburb in the American Southwest, the basic motif is not overtly manipulated. It was simply copied and mirrored until the composition became so large that it resembled wallpaper, as any extensive, repetitive and decorative wall overlay would. To critics who claim Liu is 'aestheticising the mundane', the artist swiftly retorts that 'everything is aesthetic and nothing is mundane'.

The title of the installation, Pattern Language II: Tantric (mauve), neatly captures its meditative and transfixing quality, while acknowledging the pattern-like appearance of residential neighbourhoods as seen from above. These patterns speak of Liu's interest in the thin line separating the normal from the pathological, while exploring the paradoxes of life in the suburbs. 'Suburban life is connected to ideas of freedom and individuality – having your own house and land – and to notions of safety and the desire for domestic stability,' Liu says. 'Also present, however, is a complementary set of anti-themes: conformity, subjugation, boredom, trauma and, of course, perversion.' What is especially disquieting about Liu's wallpaper is the implication behind the almost infinite array of houses. By repeating the repetitive, Liu renders the image even more disturbing than it already is.

Charlotte Vaudrey

16

"Pattern Theory"

Gary Michael Dault

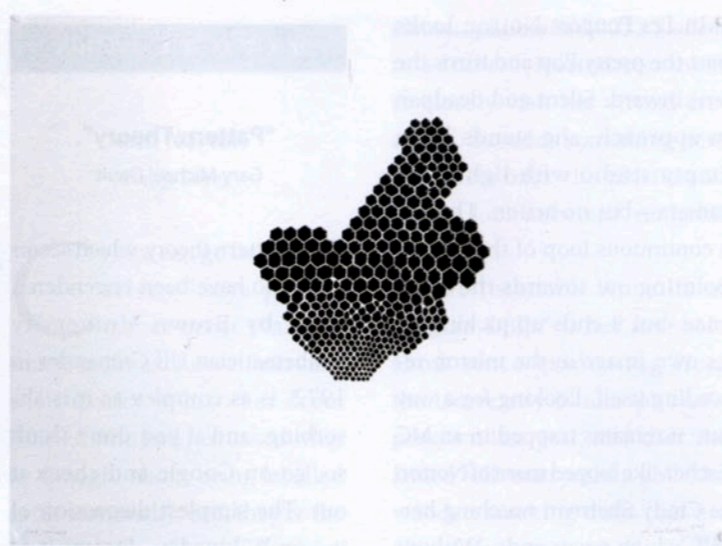
Pattern theory, which seems to have been engendered by Brown University mathematician Ulf Grenander in 1972, is as complex as it is absorbing, and if you don't think so, go on Google and check it out. The simplest discussion of it—on Wikipedia—locates it as a "mathematical formalism to describe knowledge of the world as patterns"—which means it differs interestingly and profoundly from structuralism, with which most



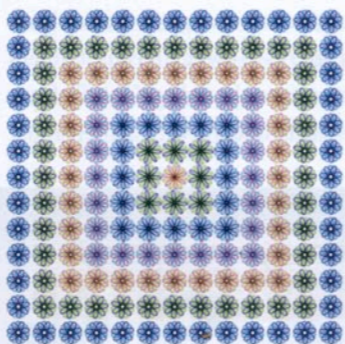
Installation view, MKG127, Toronto, 2007. Images courtesy MKG127, Toronto.

of us are more familiar. Pattern theory, intones Wikipedia, proceeds by prescribing a precise vocabulary with which to "articulate and recast the pattern concepts in precise language." How appealing all that precision is!

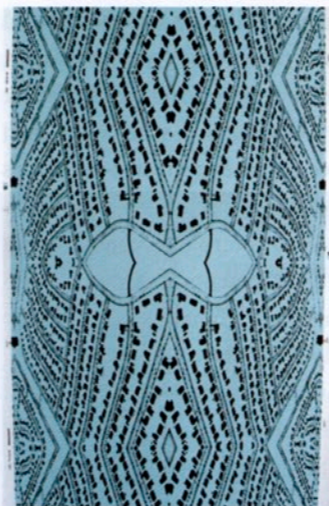
An exhibition titled "Pattern Theory" opened last November at Toronto's new MKG127 Gallery (MK for director Michael Klein, G for Gallery and 127 for the gallery's address on Toronto's Ossington Avenue). It was made up



top: Kristina Lahde, *Dark Corners*, 2007, ink on paper, 23 x 30".



lower left: Liss Platt, *Untitled (disk 60, holes 3 to 10)*, 2007, ink jet print mounted on dibond, 27 x 27", edition of 3.



lower right: An Te Liu, *Pattern Language: Levittown (brown/seafoam)*, 2007, hand-printed silkscreen on paper, edition of 30 rolls, each roll 30" x 16".

of the work of eight artists: Adam David Brown, Kristina Lahde, An Te Liu, Ken Nicol and Joy Walker of Toronto, New York-based artist Tom Koken, Hamilton-based artist Liss Platt, and Instant Coffee (counting the Toronto/Vancouver collective, Instant Coffee, as one artist).

The gallery's press release put it all very simply: "In pattern theory, the belief is that the world is complex, and to understand it, or part of it, one needs realistic representations of knowledge about it." Sounds about right.

It may be that I simply didn't take the exhibition's avowed aims quite seriously enough, of course, but for me there was an axis of inescapable buoyancy—almost levity—running through the show. Not that

the clarifying and the quantifying of concepts need inevitably to be a sombre undertaking. It's just that you don't expect an exhibition called "Pattern Theory" to seem so charming.

It might have been better to have titled the exhibition "Pattern Practice" rather than "Pattern Theory." Theorizing seems to call out for a little more discursiveness than most of these eight artists felt it necessary to offer. Most of what I saw was the result of an adherence to the realm of pattern-as-discourse, rather than any unlocking of such ideas.

Take Instant Coffee's construction, *Platforms*, positioned forthrightly on the floor, right in the middle of the exhibition. *Platforms* is a rearrangeable stack of pallet-like, bed-esque foam slabs, each with its own set of castors and each fitted with pseudo-craftsy, macrame-like, acrylic knitted blankets. You could call this stack of retro-fragrant platforms modular if that didn't seem, in itself, so insipidly retro. Plentifully patterned—though in a wildly irregular, ad hoc way—the platforms of *Platforms* seemed too busy with both the mockery of, and the adhesion to, concepts of shelter and coziness than to any commitment or adhesion to the idea of pattern theory—except to suggest that pattern is anywhere you lay your theory-weary head.

Liss Platt is to graphic art what Instant Coffee is to nostalgia-tinctured home furnishings. Her relentless employment of the Spirograph (you recall that insidious geometric drawing toy introduced by Kenner to North American kiddos back in 1966?), by which she offered some of the apparently infinite number of Spiro variations and combinations as ink-jet prints, resulted in aggregate pictures—row upon row of regular, if gnarled, graphic glitches in those unpalatably thin '60s toy colours: weak acid greens, chemical pinks, listless blues, Thrills purple—well, you remember. Arranged in rows (disc 60, hole 7), Platt's mechanical Spirograph blooms looked like a code or the phonemes from some needlessly ornate language.

Like Platt's Spirographs and Instant Coffee's *Platforms*, Ken Nicol's *Typer Grids* were pictures

made by employing the typewriter's clunky ease with repetition to create graphic patterns that tended towards the accumulative if not the strictly systematic. The work seemed to rescind pattern theory in favour of a kind of primitive systematic art—formulating patterns that lie, like Pratt's Spirograph drawings, somewhere between structure and utterance. Macrame, Spirographs, typewriters—how '60s it all seemed!

Tom Koken's tiny all-over oils on paper were visually mellifluous—though, for me, too reminiscent of pattern-devoted painters (like Joyce Kozloff) of the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s. Kristina Lahde's one contribution to the exhibition was an invigorating little ink drawing called *Dark Corners*—a kind of matrix of hexagonal, beehive-like patterning—that looked as if she'd cut out a swatch of beehive-printed cloth and then drawn it in perspective: a colony of close-packed nascelles.

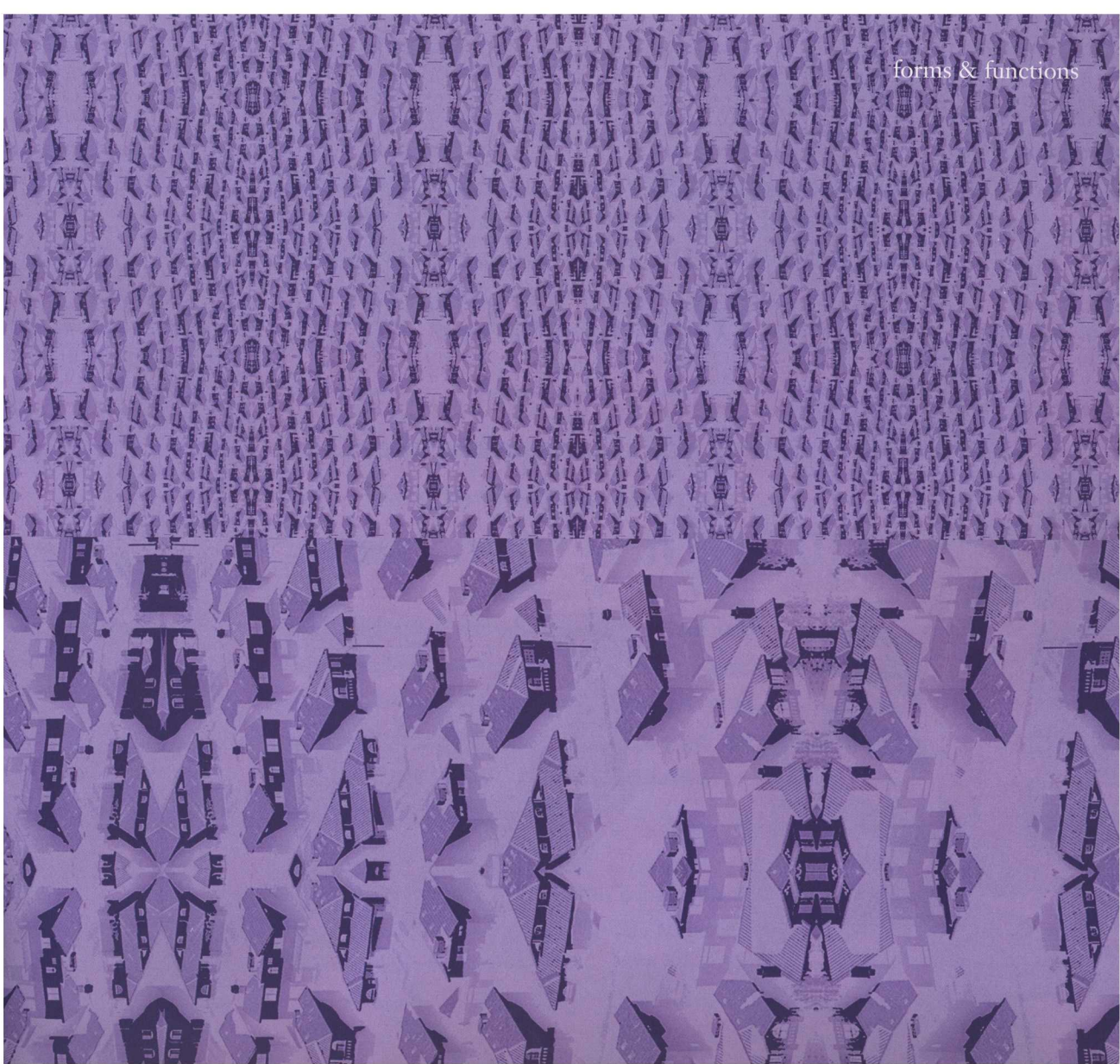
For me, the freshest and most provocative works in the show were by Joy Walker and An Te Liu. Joy Walker's taut, tense, geometrically precise, exhaustingly laboured graphic structures presented as silkscreen prints were grouped in sets of parallel lines arranged into some quite monumental and architectural shapes—arch-like structures, steles, portals, folds that erect three-dimensional places on two-dimensional fields. I loved the way Walker's line continually created fictively enterable spaces, graphic havens.

An Te Liu, who trained as an architect and works as an artist (he has the Canada Council Berlin studio this year), turned in "Pattern Theory's" wittiest work. His *Pattern*

Language—the title is a nod to architect Christopher Alexander's famous book, *A Pattern Language*, 1977—is an encyclopaedic work that attempts a systematic examination of what makes buildings, streets and communities work. An Te Liu takes an aerial view of the Long Island proto-suburb, Levittown (1947–51), cuts and reverses the photo into symmetrically ordered patterns and, in the form of hand-printed silkscreens on paper (in "brown/seafoam"), offers it all up again as wallpaper. The meaning of these overly rhythmic houses potentially pasted up inside other houses is dizzying, both optically, historically and metaphysically. ■

"Pattern Theory" was exhibited at MKG127 in Toronto from November 24 to December 22, 2007.

Gary Michael Dault is a critic, poet and painter who lives in Toronto.



The walls of perception

This is your neighbourhood on acid. Almost. This is wallpaper, designed by architect and artist An Te Liu to explore patterns of human construction and settlement. If you look closely at *Pattern Language II: Tantric*, you can see the recognizable configuration of suburbia. Liu multiplied an aerial shot of a housing development to distort the scale and meaning of the iconic suburb. As in previous works, such as *Condition* – his parody of the modern obsession with hygiene using stacks of air purifiers – Liu aestheticizes the mundane in order to evaluate it from a new perspective.

An Te Liu's work is part of New Modular, an exhibition on recent art practices involving design and architecture, at Toronto's Blackwood Gallery September 12 through October 20 (905) 828-3789

HEATHER MACKAY

Artist An Te Liu's suburb-distorting wallpaper. The top view is at 25% of real scale; the bottom view is a detail at 100%.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY AT MKG127

The inaugural exhibition at Michael Klein's new gallery on Ossington Avenue is a group show fittingly called Happy Birthday. On Aug. 1, it gives way to a second group show, titled Friendly Greeting.

Happy Birthday is mostly smart and fresh and charming. Some of it is also sort of silly and conceptually overfamiliar (like Anitra Hamilton's *1/2 Miler* - 2640 feet of continuous grey acrylic corking, and Laura Kikauka's plaque-like roadside-souvenir-shop paintings, wherein winsome animals have blinking electric eyes).

It won't be possible here to mention all the meritorious work in the show (there are a dozen artists and a collective - Instant Coffee - represented here), but there are some standout works that serve as key to the exhibition's tone.

Chief among those is Toronto-based architect-artist An Te Liu's *Pattern Language: Levittown (white)* - a demonically cunning, environmentally scaled graphic work that takes aerial views of the rows of tract houses making up America's first numbingly tedious post-Second World War suburb, Levittown, N.Y., and, by folding them in on themselves like a Rorschach test, reworks their pattern into an optically maddening wallpaper. The other unforgettable contribution to Happy Birthday is a small pile of faux books by Roula Partheniou. Having purchased a number of tiny, pre-

stretched canvases, Partheniou then proceeded to paint them so they would look as much as possible like the books she decided to imitate (in this case, books about space and astronomy: *Stars, The Nature of the Universe, The Bridge to Infinity* and so on). There are precedents for this (namely Jasper Johns's bronzed and repainted beer cans), but Partheniou's "books" are so damned cute, they're irresistible.

Eric Howeler

surfaces of pleasure: *luster*

Luster, the dictionary tells us, is a quality of a surface that is characterized by brightness, or radiance - gloss or sheen. It shares the root of lust which comes, like illustration, from the German. So, lust and luster are surfaces and pleasures, surfaces of pleasure and the pleasure of surfaces. The works collected by Henry Urbach all deal with surfaces in delightfully different ways. *Luster*, the new show at Henry Urbach Architecture, features work by a group of artists and architects addressing issues of surface, space, desire and pleasure. As stated in the press release, the participants "share a common obsession with the surfaces we construct and how they serve to manage anxiety and focus desire".....

Two of my favorite pieces are by An Te Liu: a column of household sponges entitled *Soft Load* and a swatch of wallpaper entitled *Levittown*. The odd tower of sponges makes up a polychromatic columnar member, tentatively installed under an exposed beam. The sponge, an instrument of hygiene, for maintaining clean (if fetishized) surfaces, is transformed into a bogus structural member, which feigns structural support, while made up of porous blocks of sponge, suggesting obsessive maintenance of surface. The classic opposition of structure/surface is put into play by this witty piece. Liu's other piece is a sample pattern of wallpaper made up of kaleidoscopic aerial views of Levittown. The source image, a view of the monotonous pattern of suburban tract housing in Levittown is reproduced to create a Rorschach-like surface. The aerial perspective, implying surveillance, is confounded by the multiplication of images and becomes decorative pattern. The bi-axially symmetrical pattern of generic American post-war landscape transforms to the erotic, traumatic form of the biomorphic. Wallpaper, at once a noun and a verb, parallels the reality of a speculative development of the American suburb that consumes both the suburban and rural frontier with a repetitive pattern of the familiar.....

Luster's steamy innuendo and its discursive underside illuminate much of what makes contemporary spaces stimulating and compelling, sensual and repulsive. Henry Urbach's curatorial effort is sharp and timely.....The works raise important issues, calling into question normative spatial practices and banal quotidian surfaces.