pam gaunt

selected works 1997 – 2004
Pamela Gaunt’s work undertook a dramatic change a decade ago when she began producing installations. Retaining the love of fine and meticulous detail so evident in the delicate collage, stitching and embroidery of her earlier textile pieces, the artist is no longer restricted to the traditional materials or limited dimensions of samplers and wall hangings. Gaunt’s vivacious textile works were already diverse: in their meaning, use of multiple techniques and incorporation of tools, equipment and fixtures – the pins, needles, buttons, spools, dress patterns and labels that symbolise the processes and craft of manufacture. Her production since 1992 has transcended the barrier from incipient collage to strident assemblage and has claimed the wall surface itself as part of her vocabulary. No longer a neutral or passive background, the wall has become an animated, articulated backbone and structural armature that weaves through lively patterns of carefully arranged modular elements. The dialogue between the processes of manufacture and materials that formerly defined her subject matter and characterised her artistic personality has become subordinate to fresh formalist impulses that tackle living, habitable space.

The motif of Gaunt’s singular and monolithic early designs is now converted to detail. By marooning the fine minutiae of craft techniques on the myriad individual cut-out islands that compose her works, she has found an effective means to challenge scale and break the shackles of convention. Whether exploding with the radiant force of starbursts or meandering at a more leisurely pace, her invasive installations use a lively staccato language of forms and symbols to track intriguing trails across the expressionless blank front of architecture. Works are tantalisingly tilted, provocatively placed off-centre or oriented to room corners. Even the intersection of floor and wall establishes a fresh rapport and challenges the accepted relationship between the artwork and its site. The installations are usually circumscribed by geometric constraints, but even when they assume random, cloud-like configurations their structure is still ruled by logic. One splendid large work [Material Witness] of knotted textiles that emulates the informal and scattered appearance of a field of flowers is in fact dominated by carefully controlled variations in density and colour which modulate in intensity as they burst like galaxies towards the extremities of...
the wall. In all Gaunt’s pieces, a sense of natural organic growth is implied both by cellular structure and open-ended configurations that defy containment. The artist cultivates an air of instability and unpredictability that enervates and compliments passive architecture with a feeling of suspense and vitality.

In its detail and overall appearance, Gaunt’s work is defined by a presiding sense of deliberate discipline. Despite their intricacy and complexity, her pieces are clean, precise, orderly, neat and tidy, and have a degree of deliberate refinement, restraint and sophistication that appeals to rational aspects of the intellect. Fragile, delicate and exceedingly elegant, the work preserves the aura of the precious object and despite its obsessive and introspective detail, uses pattern and repetition to convey a decorative, buoyant, extroverted and light-hearted atmosphere. Gaunt’s use of multiple units and modules sits comfortably with recent Australian tradition and has synchronicity with works by such contemporaries as Imants Tillers, which make use of grids of small panels to achieve large scale formats. For Gaunt, the motivation is not connected with the principle of dissection as a device to achieve monumental proportions but is highly individual and has sprouted from her intense preoccupation with modules replete with minute detail. Her work has evolved from the microsome and is concerned neither with illusion nor the formulation of a dominant integrated image. The specific identities of her pieces are carried, like DNA, in seed-like components that are consolidated into networks characterised by their non-conformity with conventional grids. Preoccupied with symbols, signs, systemic motifs, patterns and references that permeate both its detail and structural fabric, Gaunt’s work cannot be properly appreciated without close scrutiny. It is the successful reciprocation and reconciliation between these intriguing fragments and the conglomerate whole that characterises Gaunt’s maturity as an artist.
New Works documents a series of decorative interventions that explore the space between ornament and architecture. These works challenge the Modernist prejudice whereby architectural embellishment was considered an unnecessary, if not downright obtuse, adjunct to the built environment. Vile Nil may be read as an anti-Modernist gesture that confronts the space between fine art and craft through the use of retro-style materials that reference the domestic. Its placement between wall and floor is visually ambiguous and unstable, challenging the conventional relationship between work, support and surrounding architectural space. Many of the works conform to the structure of the grid, a system that underpins ornamental patterns as well as much modernist abstract painting. Others such as Material Whimsies and Flim-Flam (alias Whim-Wham) play in a seemingly random way across the architectural surface. The Traces series plays with the idea of a grid that is coming apart and on the threshold of losing recognisable structural meaning, while on another level references the melancholic allure of worn and faded patterned textiles.

While the individual motifs are in themselves insignificant, they acquire meaning and formal significance once repeated and organised in patterns across the gallery's floors and walls. The diverse processes and interventions that constitute these works present the decorative as a mutable and constantly shifting reality that affects both surface and structure. It is somewhat ironic that the gallery wall becomes complicit in an artistic play that pays homage to the world of mass-produced bibelot and other frippery.
Traces III
Letraline, recycled fabric and wax
190 x 180 cm
1999
Flim-Flam (alias Whim-Wham) [detail]
Recycled patterned cloth and wax
120 x 577 cm
1999
Conceived as a decorative floating floor piece, *Moth Eaten* refers both to the beauty of old textiles and to the history of the building the work occupies – Object Gallery in the old Customs House building in Sydney. Customs is the traditional protector and patroller of borders. The text embedded into the border of this work includes lists of imports banned between 1900 and 1960: toothpaste containing more than 40% alcohol, fertility prevention devices, communist literature and DH Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The text floats discreetly across the delicately embossed coloured surface of the border and is only visible on close inspection. The coloured border graduates to a shimmering centre, revealing an etched and embroidered metal surface. A few sections of the work have been removed from the grid-like configuration and appear discreetly on the surrounding walls. This makes the work appear incomplete, as if infested with moth holes. The layout disrupts the grid’s uniformity and the presence of the missing tiles on the walls is not always immediately apparent to the viewer.
Left: Disc-grace detail

Above right: Disc-lace / Disc-grace
Each: 1.25 x 2.5 m
Left: Photocopied acetate, thread, found materials
Right: High pressure jet-water cut vinyl records
2001

Below right: Disc-grace
Created for the exhibition *Lace – Contemporary Perspectives*, the piece *Disc-lace / Disc-grace* is configured in two half circles, divided by the corner of a room. Both sections make reference to Renaissance lace patterns, one utilising layers of photocopied acetate circles and machine embroidery and the other a lace pattern industrially cut into the artist’s collection of vinyl records. This work reflects the artist’s tendency to reinvent traditional patterns by developing processes that blur disciplinary boundaries and challenge conventions and hierarchies of practice.
Floribunda celebrates the lineage of the floral motif as a recurring image in pattern across many histories and cultures. The artwork focuses specifically (though not exclusively) on the fleur-de-lis motif and attempts to create new meanings through a contemporary reading of this ancient and culturally-widespread symbolic image. In Europe, the fleur-de-lis has been associated with right wing and royalist values through its frequent inclusion into medieval heraldic imagery and its adoption as a French royal emblem from the 12th Century. The fleur-de-lis has also been historically associated with strong Christian values through references to the Virgin Mary and the Holy Trinity. It has been used as a symbolic decorative motif in many non-Western cultures, although the specific origins and meanings of these diverse instances are difficult to trace. In pieces such as Fleur-de-Stijl, Floribunda celebrates the decorative potential of the fleur-de-lis as a historically significant motif, but also exploits its past conservative associations as a symbol to express the artist’s views about current political issues. This is exemplified in the works A Rose is a Thorn is a Bush and Fleur-de-Dumb, where media images of Australian Prime Minister John Howard and US President George W. Bush are embedded in the floral patteration along with text and tacky wallpaper. The intention of other pieces, such as Wallpaper Cluster Flowers, is to explore the surface of the gallery walls in a style intended to mimic the all-enveloping spatial and visual effects of wallpaper.
Pages 16 and 17:
Installation view of *Floribunda*
2002-03

Left: *A Rose is a Thorn is a Bush*
336 x 250 x 0.6 cm
Laser cut MDF, wallpaper, digitally printed and laminated vinyl
2003

Right: *Fleur-de-Stijl*
42 x 42 cm x 1 cm
High pressure jet water cut steel waste
2002-03
Purist Modernism’s pejorative branding of ornament as a marginal supplement to the essential core of Western art is well documented. The re-evaluation of the decorative within contemporary theory and aesthetics is relatively recent and it is within this more positive discursive context that I focus my analysis on the complexity and mutable nature of the ornamental register.

A note on terms: I would like to clarify my use of the terms ‘ornament’ and ‘the decorative’. Historically, these terms have been used with different meanings. This essay uses the terms interchangeably and in accordance with how they have been applied throughout Modernist discourse. From hereon the terms ‘Modernism’ and ‘Modernist’ refer specifically to the Purist and Functionalist regimes of Modernism.

Inherent in this discussion is the relevance of the Kantian notion of the *parergon* as a concept that may shed light on the Modernist denigration of the decorative as a result of its hierarchal distinction between ‘essence’ and ‘supplement’, or between what is considered central and what marginal in a work of art. For Kant, the *ergon* is that which is central to a work’s aesthetic and conceptual intent, whereas the *parergon* is something extra or additional. Modernist art theory has often interpreted this distinction as a simple binary opposition that highly values the essential core of a work of art and devalues the unessential and marginal *parergon* identified squarely with the ornament.

More recently, Derrida has discussed Kant’s *parergon* in relation to his notion of the ‘supplement’ and the theory of deconstruction. In the works of many philosophers, Derrida identifies apparently trivial elements that may in fact become of essential importance through the deconstructive process. For Derrida ‘the supplement’ is this apparently marginal element in any text, work or theory that may be revealed as significant and further, could destabilise the core of the author’s intentions and conceptual hierarchies. Through Derrida, it is possible to see how a reinterpretation of the *parergon* might position the ornament in a shifting and potentially disruptive position between margin and centre, surface and structure.

To exemplify ornament’s complexity and potential for disruption in a work of art, it is useful to turn to contemporary opinion. In different texts, Michael Carter and Marco Marcon have questioned ornament’s relegation to the margins of the Modernist position. Their analysis (which in both cases derives from Derrida) of the *ergon / parergon* nexus in Kantian philosophy offers a different perspective on the conventional Modernist ‘supplement versus essence’ position on the decorative.

Carter explains that Derrida has identified: “… two modalities for the supplemental relation. The first is a relation adding something in the sense of making up for a lack in the initial condition while the second adds something extra, something not regarded as integral to the initial concept, situation, or thing.”
Highlighting Derrida’s suspicions of fixed readings on the essential and non-essential registers, Carter argues that both the ‘supplement’ and ‘the essential’ are necessary for a work to define itself. Carter reminds us it is only “… within the play, the tension between both terms that the work is able to stabilise itself as that which it strives to be, the essential component of the work.”\(^5\) It is this interstitial interplay between supplement and essence that allows the work to establish itself and its meaning.

Marcon interprets Kant’s description of the *parergon* or ornament as “… something which is placed on the boundary between the ‘proper’ work of art and the surrounding environment.”\(^6\) In this sense it occupies an ambiguous space that is neither totally outside the work, nor totally inside it. For Marcon the *parergon* occupies a zone “… which belongs to both the work and the world.” This reading positions ornament in a liminal zone, where it contributes to the meaning of the work yet is not totally contained within its space, and places the decorative in a potentially subversive position. If not controlled, the ornament has the ability to ‘run riot’ and totally disrupt the work. Conversely, in a restrained capacity it can positively contribute to the work’s overall meaning and aesthetic impact. To focus only on the marginal or disruptive potential of the decorative and deny this latter, positive function would be to obfuscate a fundamental aspect of its nature.

The complexity of the ornamental register is the root of much confusion. For us to understand its indeterminate condition we need to recognise the potential duality inherent in *parerga*. Both Carter and Marcon claim that within Western aesthetics the *parergon* is not only a marginal adjunct to the essence of the work, but also the result of the fundamental act of exclusion by which process what is essential in the work is founded. What is at stake in this Modernist strategy of exclusion is the fear that the ornamental register could disrupt or ‘contaminate’ the formal purity so desired by tenets of this canon. If Derrida’s theory of the supplement is correct, however, this feared and reviled non-essential ‘other’ of Modernist purism – the decorative – may in fact be more essential than the essence its process of exclusion helps to found and legitimise. Ultimately, a Postmodern re-reading of the decorative as *parergon* may show that the decorative margins of Modernism are at its very centre after all.

The duality of the *parergon* is also evident in Massimo Carboni’s analysis of ornament in tribal cultures. Past and contemporary non-Western artistic traditions rarely marginalise the decorative. Carboni argues that in many tribal artefacts, such as clothing, the ornament is embedded as an essential component to the foundation of the object. Inherent in the tribal garment, the decorative manifests itself as a juncture between function, structure and aesthetic enhancement. Thus if the stitches were removed from many traditional garments they would not only no longer fulfil their practical function but would also cease to be embellished. Here we are presented again with a ‘fusion’ or ‘oscillation’ between essence and supplement.\(^7\)
Below:
*Material Whimsies, recycled fabric and wax,*
3.6 x 5.2 m,
1999
To further illustrate this point, I will briefly discuss the work of Adolf Loos and Mies van der Rohe, two architects closely associated to a functionalist, purist ideology of Modernism. Functionalist architecture can be read as a perfect example of the *ergon*, a reflection of ‘pure beauty’ in its denuded, undecorated form. From this angle, even the building’s interior is an essentially aesthetic rather than habitable space. So it is not surprising to note that for van der Rohe the purity of the architectural work becomes ‘corrupted’ once its inhabitants start adding their own *parerga* so that the building can be used as real living space. van der Rohe was often horrified by what the occupants of his buildings did to them – cluttering them with *bibelot*, cushions and ‘inappropriate’ furniture, contaminating their purity and paradoxically also intimating a perceived ‘lack’ in the architectural design. For Loos there also existed an essential contradiction between exterior architecture and interior space. His buildings were devoid of external embellishments, but such bareness was intended to contrast the ‘richness of the interior’⁸. Loos’ intention was to leave the exterior free from any decorative, sensorial or erotic suggestions. In Loos’ terms, the interior was the appropriate location for embellishment and the erotic and its ‘richness’ occurred through human occupancy and the decorative additions required for habitation. In Derridian terms, however, a Loosian building in total reflects the tension between supplement and essence that is necessary for work to define itself. Whether Loos realised that his approach to architecture was reflective of this dynamic between essence and supplement is debatable. Through these two examples we see the potential for Modernist architecture to suffer a ‘lack’ that is counterbalanced through the addition of decorative *parerga* and its *affective*, sensorial effects. What is often missing in orthodox Modernism is the ability to acknowledge the irrational, emotional and sexual forces that are fundamental to the human condition.

Carter, Marcon and Carboni remind us of the deep complexity of the decorative and its capacity to communicate on a multiplicity of levels. Ornament’s indeterminate condition positions it in a space-between, in perpetual flux between margin and centre, and constantly at play with the viewer’s expectations and preconceptions. Purist Modernism was never comfortable with notions of play, as the Surrealists and Dada discovered. Art was serious for tenets of the canon, and the frivolity associated with play was a potentially disruptive element and even a cause of anxiety in a purist aesthetic regime. But does play lack seriousness? Johan Huizinga states that, “… seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness.”⁹ The notion of ‘serious play’ exposes a flaw in the Modernist assumption of the decorative as an unintelligent modality and further, reveals ornament’s interstitial playground as a privileged space: one where meaning is created and gives credence to the decorative as an intelligent and meaningful register in a work of art, object or building.

**Pamela Gaunt**  Perth 2004

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1. For further insight see McNamara A, ed. *Ornamentalism* exhibition catalogue, Institute of Modern Art and Power Institute of Fine Arts, Brisbane, 1997, p. 6
5. Ibid p. 120
The exterior artwork for the Western Australian Ecology Centre was inspired by the shifting patterns of Bold Park’s tree canopy, which has changed over the years due to natural evolution and artificial influences. The tree canopy plays an important ecological role in maintaining biodiversity and is particularly significant for the high priority species found within Perth’s Bold Park. The work is an artistic representation of the patterns formed by the tree canopy floating above the map of Bold Park. The names of fifteen of the highest priority species are contained in the text engraved into its surface.

The interior artwork is a floor piece that embeds acrylic shapes in the form of the leaves of tree species commonly found within the Bold Park tree canopy, including one high priority species in the Wembley Wax flower. The pattern they form takes on a configuration akin to that of a pile of leaves that has blown in through the door and scattered throughout the building. The leaf shapes become small windows in the floor through which the viewer can read the names of the highest priority species in the park. These limited glimpses create the impression that one is walking on a sea of text under the floor. The leaf shapes hint at the fragility of our environment and the important role science and ecologists play in environmental management.

This project acknowledges the research undertaken by University of Western Australia PhD student Judy Fisher.
Exterior Artwork
Painted, engraved and laser cut Unimould (recycled and recyclable plastic), coloured and jet water cut glass inserts 8 x 13 x 0.2 m

Left: Exterior Artwork detail

Right: View of Interior Floor Work from Reception

Pages 28 and 29: Interior Floor Work detail
Dyed, screen-printed and laser cut acrylic inserts into laser cut marmoleum
Sequential image credits: 1, 2, 6, 7 & 8 by Pamela Gaunt; 3 by Marco Marcon; 4 by Peter Kernot; 9 by Robert Frith
Lyn Hughes and Dr Graham Raad commissioned the artist to create a site-specific work for their private residence. The location chosen was an ascending wall adjacent to stairs that lead to a panoramic view of the Swan River. The work incorporates abstracted leaf shapes from the roof-top garden and translates them into coloured glass motifs that are installed directly onto the surface of the wall. As the motifs scatter along the wall to become minimal at the top of the stairs, the configuration mirrors the way leaves naturally cluster and dissipate.
industry

This page is dedicated to the members of Perth’s industry with whom I have worked and developed friendships over the past seven years. Their knowledge, skill and creative approach to the many difficult and challenging moments in the development of my projects greatly assisted the work in this monograph. I am indebted to their commitment and assistance. - Pamela Gaunt
**EDUCATION**

BA (Craft), Western Australian Institute of Technology (Textiles Major), 1982

Graduate Diploma in Art and Design, Curtin University of Technology, 1989

MA by Research, School of Art, History/Theory, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales (currently completing)

**SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

1984  *Body Works*, Australian Craftworks Gallery, Sydney

1994  *One Size Fits Most*, The Story So Far Gallery, Perth

1996  *Marginalia*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), Perth

1998  *Nothing To Wear*, Distelfink Gallery, Melbourne

1998  *Patterning The Edge*, Craft Victoria, Melbourne

1999  *Moth-Eaten*, Object Gallery, Sydney

1999  *New Works*, Galerie Dusseldorf, Perth

2003  *Floribunda*, Galerie Dusseldorf, Perth

**SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

1984  *Body Rap*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

1985  *Ararat Second Biennale*, Ararat Regional Gallery, Ararat

1985  *Diamond Valley Art Award*, Diamond Valley Civic Centre, Diamond Valley

1986  *Survey Of Contemporary Australian Embroidery*, The Jam Factory, Adelaide

1986  *Tamworth National Fibre Exhibition*, Tamworth

1986  *America’s Cup Cups*, Galerie Düsseldorf, Perth

1987  *Challenges*, Craft Council Gallery, Perth

1988  *The Second Skin*, Beaver Galleries, Canberra


1988  *Small Scale Fibre Work*, Fremantle Art Centre, Perth

1989  *Fibre And Text*, Ararat Regional Gallery, Ararat

1991  *Threads Of Journeys*, invitation exhibition funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The High Court Canberra and 24 countries (travelling exhibition)

1991  *Australian Contemporary Design In Jewish Ceremony*, invitation exhibition, Jewish Museum of Australia, Melbourne


1994  *In Our Hands*, Nagoya, Japan

1994  *Sampler Art*, Mobilia Gallery, Massachusetts, USA

1995  *Symbol And Narrative*, travelling AsiaLink exhibition to India, Nepal and Thailand


1996  *Derivations*, Craft Council Gallery of ACT, Canberra

1996  *12th Tamworth Fibre/Textiles Biennial*, Tamworth City Gallery, Tamworth
1997 5th International Textiles Biennial, Museum of Kyoto, Japan
1997 Derivations, The Dowse Art Museum, New Zealand
1997 Galerie Dusstedorf – 21 Years On, Galerie Dusseldorf, Perth
1999 Material Narratives, The Jam Factory, Adelaide
2000 Second Look, Prospect Gallery Textiles Biennial, Prospect Gallery, Adelaide
2000 In Our Hands, Nagoya, Japan
2000 Australian Miniature Textiles, Gallery-Gallery, Kyoto, Japan
12th International Biennale Of Miniature Textiles, Szombathely Museum, Hungary
Chinese Whispers, The Study Gallery, Dorset, England
2001 Lace: New Perspectives, Craftwest Gallery, Perth
Divergence, Art Gallery Chiang Mai University and The Grand Hall, Siam Discovery Centre, Bangkok, Thailand
2003 Tali Ikat, Fiber Connections, Taman Budaya Yogyakarta, Indonesia
2003 Connection Visual II, an exhibition of Western Australian Contemporary Fine Art, Shanghai and Hangzhou, China
2003 Contemporary International Textiles, Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast

COMMISSIONS
1994-95 Co-supervision with Annette Seeman, SAFTI Military Institute Banners Commission, Singapore, in conjunction with MGT Architects
1995 Banner for the Festival of Perth, Red Cross in conjunction with the WA Crafts Council
1996 Banner for Local Government Week, Perth City Council
2003 Private commission for Lynne Hughes and Dr Graham Raad.
2004 Artwork for the Western Australian Ecology Centre, with Donaldson & Warn Architects and Botanical Gardens and Parks Authority (BGPA).

REPRESENTED IN THE COLLECTIONS OF:
Museum Fur Kunsthandwerk, Frankfurt am Main, Germany;
Art Gallery of Western Australia;
Sir James and Lady Cruthers Collection;
Jewish Museum of Australia;
Australia Council Visual Arts & Crafts Board;
Curtin University of Technology;
Ararat Regional Gallery;
and several private collections

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1994 Morrell A, Contemporary Embroidery, Cassell, London
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PROFESSIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
1992 Study Leave – India
1993 Curtin New Researchers Grant Scheme
1994 Curtin New Researchers Grant Scheme
1995 Creative Development Grant, WA Department for the Arts
1996 Project Grant for monograph production, Australia Council Visual Arts & Crafts Board
1997 Australia Council Milan Studio
Residency, Italy
1998  ArtsWA Artflight grant
1998  Vice Chancellor’s Excel Award for Teaching
1999  ArtsWA Artflight grant
2001  ArtsWA Creative Development Fellowship
2004  Curtin University Seeding Grant with Annette Seeman

COMMITTEES
1990-93 Artists Regional Exchange
1995-98  Indian Ocean Cultural Council

CONFERENCES
1984  FIBRE Conference, Canberra
1987  1st National Papermaking Conference, Hobart
1991  Modernism & Postmodernism in Asian Art, Canberra
2004  The Space-Between, Perth

JUDGING PANELS
1991  Curtin / Alumni Visa Card Competition
1991-96 Ansett / ACROD Art Competition
2003  Dido Fellowship

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This book is dedicated to bibelot, passementerie and other ornamental frippery

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pam gaunt

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selected works 1997 – 2004