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A Postmodern Garden: The Work of Margaret Lanzetta

by John Yau

This essay appeared in the catalog accompanying the exhibition, Margaret Lanzetta: Pet the Pretty Tiger: Works 1990-2010, Curated by Carol Schwarzman at the Cantor Art Gallery, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA, October 21 – December 15, 2010.



Margaret Lanzetta, Lotus (cayenne), 2007. Oil and enamel on panel, 21 x 21 inches. Collection of Leslie and Michael Meyers, New York.

Courtesy of the Artist.

If the world exists to end up in a book, as the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé claimed, or as a bodiless image on a high resolution screen, as postmodernist theorists have advanced, then one of the artist's preoccupations is how to read and understand a constantly changing, visually insistent, multitudinous world. In Margaret Lanzetta's bold, graphic paintings, the artist weaves, jams together and recombines patterns and shadow images in order to understand their often-unacknowledged presence in our lives. We see them, but do not notice them. Derived from both the world she inhabits and the very different societies in which she has traveled and stayed for extended periods of time—Japan, India, Syria, etc— her vocabulary of silhouettes and symbolic motifs embraces the postmodern age and ancient cultures, both East and West. Her sources encompass Buddhism and stylized details of Islamic architecture; nature (plant forms) and machinery (gear wheels and cogs); ordered and disordered grids; patterns and repetitions of distinct organic or geometric structures; and abstract, decorative signs often rendered in industrial or printer's saturated colors. Out of this plethora of diverse and competing languages, many of which are embedded so deeply in their respective cultures as to be taken for granted, Lanzetta fashions both a response and a commentary.

In some of the earliest works in this two decade survey exhibition (1990-2010), Lanzetta has woven rubber strips into elongated containers that are simultaneously organic and machine-like. Her weaving, wrapping or non-mechanical repetition of industrial materials in sculptures such as *Arcanta Group* (1991) and *Long Sack* (1990) connects her to the pioneering sculptor Eva Hesse (1936-1970), who led the way from Minimalism to Postminimalism. In Lanzetta's case, it's as if she wanted to gather things together, or repair things, as the act of wrapping implies, as well as make a vessel-like form that could hold different elements. Working primarily as a sculptor in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the artist began moving from the three dimensional realm to the two dimensional realm around 1992 without sacrificing her involvement with physically repetitive, meditative processes such as stacking, layering and weaving. One of the impulses that prompted this development was Lanzetta's strong desire to directly record physical imprints of the material world from which the sculptures emerged. To join the mechanical and organic in more extensive and meaningful ways, her insistent sculptural processes were

transformed into stamping, rubbing and printing, first on seven foot and later ten foot long industrial Mylar panels that referenced not only the vertical scale of her sculptures, but also that of the human body. In *Delivery* (1993) and *Syncopation* (1994), two early paintings on Mylar, her vocabulary is effectively broadened with a more diverse range of materials and painting techniques. Materially, the use of rubber and Mylar prefigured concerns still central in Lanzetta's work: specifically the intersection of nature and industry. Rubber, a natural substance transformed through galvanization, still retains the sheen and texture of animal hides, while the translucency of Mylar, a manufactured plastic, recalls fine calfskin vellum.

By combining a vocabulary derived from machine parts and surface textures of steel plates with floral patterns and architectural ornamentation, a grittiness emerges. It is as if modern technology and its often-deleterious effects have invaded paradise, which the floral patterns certainly recall. This is underscored through the forms she incorporates, as well as her use of intense, saturated color. The dark lotus floating near the center of *Lotus (cayenne)* (2005-06), for example, seems on some level to have succumbed to the effects of a poisonous world, while the overlay of rich black, flower-like machine parts in *Signal Jumping, Black* (2010) or *It's All Spiritual* (2010) transform the decorative into something far-removed from paradise.



Margaret Lanzetta, *Last Two Million*, 2008. Oil, enamel, and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.

At the same time, recognizing that mutation is constantly pressuring and altering forms, particularly those that have migrated across different cultures and historical periods, the artist deploys a variety of means to transfer her vocabulary from one domain to another; including silkscreen, digital technology, traditional oil paint, enamel, acrylic, and even pigmented pulp as in the *Brittle Spring* series (1998-1999), a suite of unique pulp paintings created during a Workspace Residency Grant at the Dieu Donne Papermill. Through these mechanical means of reproduction, combined with hands-on, textural applications of paint, the artist underscores the extent to which industrialization and postmodern technology have become pervasive influences on our environment and the way we view it. She acknowledges that we live in a world of media-images, enmeshed in relentless fields of visual information. Thus a question I believe the artist poses to the viewer as well as herself is whether mechanical repetition means the destruction of things done by hand or can the two be made to coexist constructively? There is a sense that the artist believes coexistence can occur, but recognizes that may not always happen.

Over the past twenty years, Lanzetta has gathered together a diverse vocabulary that enables her to construct multilayered works that evoke a host of narratives, none of which can be reduced to an overriding story. By this, I do not mean to imply that certain themes and preoccupations aren't evident, because that isn't the case. One constant theme reappearing is the sharp collision between the natural world and cultural production, with the understanding that humans have invested far too much belief in the artificial. Another theme, as previously advanced, is the conflict between modern technological advances and ancient traditions.

By enlarging and transforming flowers into bodiless silhouettes and placing them against a patterned background, as she does in series such as *Cultural Instructions* (2003-2004) and *Company Paintings* (2009), Lanzetta evokes the history of wallpaper as an inexpensive substitute for paintings; still-life paintings; the changing reality we inhabit, where plant life itself is becoming altered; black-and-white noir films of the

forties and fifties, particularly those influenced by German Expressionism with their fondness for exaggerated lighting and elongated shadows; and the lingering effects of colonialism and unregulated industrialization on rural culture.

Conceived and completed after the artist's six month Fulbright Research Fellowship to India and Syria in 2008, the *Company Paintings* series (2009) consists of twelve paintings in square format. Using a vocabulary of alternating bands and one plant motif, Lanzetta limited herself to using four silkscreens printed in different color combinations. Each painting is titled the name and telephone area code of a remote Indian town, such as *Beed 0442*. According to the artist, the title for the series "comes from the term for works commissioned by the East India Company to document India in the middle of the 18th century." A British corporation, originally chartered during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the East India Company monopolized trade between England and India for more than one hundred years; the commissioned paintings were meant to present the rosier side of colonialist history.

Lanzetta's *Company Paintings* are stark and jarring, their artificial colors hard and often disorienting. The series can be divided into three groups: those that juxtapose a plant form against geometric bands; those that create the plant form outline using geometric bands, thus inverting the figure-ground relationship; and those only made up of different colored bands, horizontally stacked. By working with a limited number of silkscreens, the artist is able to discover unlikely combinations, as well as push herself into new territory.

In *Howrah 0322*, the orange, black and white bands diminish in size as they rise toward the top edge, suggesting an aerial perspective of a landscape of tilled fields, as well as an unstable image found on old-fashioned television sets. By evoking these diverse readings, the artist underscores the ongoing clash between modern technology and ancient traditions that pervade many non-Western cultures, without offering a clear resolution to a persistent problem.

In *Jorhat 0376*, the artist juxtaposes a yellowish-green silhouette of an oversized plant against a pattern of vertical, horizontal and diagonal pink and black bands. There is something disturbing and threatening about the combination of forms and colors, which initially might come across as a still life, generally a benign subject, but upon further reflection clearly is not. The plant extends beyond both the top and bottom edge, disorientating a sense of its actual size; the leaves seem too large, as if the plant has been feeding on hormones. For all their repetition, the pink and black bands lack a detectable order. Why are some bands diagonal and others horizontal?



Margaret Lanzetta, *White Sulphur*, 2010. Oil and enamel on panel, 300 x 24 inches.
Courtesy of the Artist.

Questions like these, which are addressed directly to what the viewer sees, lead to other questions. What initially seems like a familiar image becomes less so the longer we look. In *Jorhat 0376* and other paintings, such as *Biophilia Eve* (2007) and *Last Two Million* (2008), a spiky flower or benign houseplant becomes super-sized and menacing. I would characterize this as one of Lanzetta's strengths— she can turn a familiar image strange, as well as transform what is perceived as elegant and decorative into something cold and threatening. This even persists, as with *Howrah 0322*, when the artist restricts herself to repeating geometric patterns. Again, in *Karnal 0184*, only horizontal bands of yellow, black and white are used. However, some bands are tilted, while a vertical band interrupts others, causing symmetry and asymmetry to collide. Order, it seems, has broken down, and disruption is unavoidable.

In *Ballary 0839*, the combination of plant-like shapes and geometric bands is pushed to an extreme, making it difficult to distinguish figure from ground. If anything, they keep exchanging roles: in one view we might conclude that the leaf-like shapes defined by black and white bands are in front of the yellowish-green leaf-like shapes filled with reddish-magenta leaf-like shapes. However, this view reverses, and we can also believe that the yellowish-green leaf-like shapes are in front of the black-and white bands. The instability of the view becomes a comment on the subject—the inextricable embrace of form and content is troubling. In contrast to Bridget Riley and other artists involved with op art, Lanzetta recognizes that there is no pure state of seeing; everything is inflected by culture and history.

The clash between symmetry and asymmetry, order and disorder, underscores Lanzetta's vision of reality as a struggle between two opposing forces made of the same, if not identical, stuff. In this sense, the artist undermines the sense of order and decorum normally associated with decorative and architectural patterns. She reminds us that the world has gone awry, and that there is no clear agreement on a resolution. We can neither restore the old order, nor determine how to create a new, widely beneficial order. Even the idea of progress is called into question.



Margaret Lanzetta, *Biophilia Eve*, 2007. Oil and enamel on panel, 22 x 22 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.

Conflict, entropy, mutation are also not concepts we think of with regard to floral patterns or decorative motifs. Yet that is precisely what the viewer encounters in Lanzetta's work. In the *Confection Series* (2005-06), which "relates to the proposed deployment of US military bases, dubbed 'lily pads', throughout Central Asia and North Africa," the artist mutates a lotus flower into exploding, cartoon-like forms, knowing that in actuality it grows in muddy water and rises above the surface to bloom, thus signifying in Buddhism rebirth and the purity of heart and mind. Clearly, another preoccupation of the artist is the devaluation of language and symbols. By transforming the lotus into an exploding form, the artist comments not only on external events over which she has no real control, but she also frames the viewer's relationship to art.

In *Lilypad Deployment I*, (2006) jagged orange and yellow forms float above a stylized floral motif and an aerial view of a plan for an enclosed fortress. In *Glassblower II*, (2005), part of the *Recitativo Series*, a large, elegant magenta floral form stretches across a ground of yellow arabesques. Its translucency evokes both the glassblower's breath and the fantastic shapes that molten glass can assume. Is art meant to be something pretty— a lush floral pattern, for example? Or can art insinuate itself into our lives, make us more aware of the world we inhabit? Rather than answering this question, and thus becoming ideological, the artist leaves it up to the viewer to decide what role art will play in her or his life.

Art, Lanzetta's work advances, can offer many possibilities, as well as lead to many places. Her work of the past two decades is the record of a journey and a search, as well as a document of one's passing through time and history. For all of its subjectivity, the work is neither inward and personal nor

purely political. Rather, there is an openness to her work, motivated by an attempt to embrace the myriad networks and patterns of information saturating the contemporary world.

John Yau is a poet and critic living in New York. His latest book is *A Thing Among Things: The Art of Jasper Johns* (DAP, Distributed Art Publishers, 2008). He has just completed a book, *Glamourless Reality*, which will be published in 2011 and is an Associate Professor at Mason Gross School of the Arts (Rutgers University).



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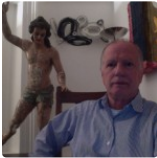
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