

BORDERLINES

An exhibition of painting

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION FOR ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION OF A THESIS

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This thesis paper is the supporting document for an exhibition that was held at the University of Waterloo art Gallery. The show consisted of a series of large scale acrylic paintings on canvas.

Through my paintings I deal with the current role that *pattern*, *ornament* and *decoration* play in our society today. My work is also concerned with the concept of the painting as a decorative object in and of itself.

Our understanding of the terms *ornament*, *embellishment* and *decoration* have changed considerably throughout history, being defined and re-defined time and time again. Moreover, we have yet to come to a definitive explanation for the existence of ornament and decoration. The persistence of ornamental motifs throughout time, as well as their continued presence in contemporary visual culture, evidences the fact that this subject requires further investigation. As such, I have chosen to explore this through my paintings. I alter the palette, composition and medium of my source imagery in order to re-present these familiar motifs in a manner that encourages the viewer to regard them anew. In doing this, I explore ornament's potential as a relevant visual language within contemporary western culture.

Acknowledgements

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My current work deals with issues of pattern, ornament and decoration as well as the idea of the painting as a decorative object in and of itself. What interests me about pattern is the manner in which we find it manifest in our society today. Examples can be found everywhere from furniture to textiles, design objects, wallpaper, advertising and architecture, etc. In his book, *A Sense of Order: The Psychology of Decorative Art*, E.H. Gombrich wrote specifically on this topic. The primary reason for its existence, he suggests, is that the human mind has a need to order visual information and as such, creates patterns of ornament. These patterns are integrated into our everyday experiences through most of the objects we encounter and use. Gombrich therefore claims that we cover everything in ornament out of necessity. Many authors since have echoed Gombrich's claims about our psychological need to create these types of images and visual systems. None of these writers however, have come to any conclusive explanations as to the reason for their existence. I am drawn to this imagery along with these hypotheses and therefore have chosen to explore my own obsession with pattern through this current body of work

Throughout my research, I have found that the definitions for the terms *ornament*, *decoration* and *embellishment* are rather problematic in our culture. This may be due to the fact that their associative meanings have changed considerably over time and are currently still in flux. Many different theorists writing on the above-mentioned topics have come up with conflicting definitions and varying uses for the terms, making the overall concepts difficult to comprehend. In the following paragraphs, some contemporary definitions will be explored in order to reveal our current position and to give some clarity to this subject.

Throughout Western history the terms decoration and ornament have been defined in a variety of different ways. Often times, they have been

used inconsistently and interchangeably. It is a common belief that the term ornament is synonymous with decoration, embellishment and enhancement. In his book *The Nature of Ornament* however, Kent Bloomer defines the terms otherwise. He looks to the Greek origins of the word *ornament* in order to clarify our current understanding of it. Bloomer explains that throughout history, ornament has performed two specific functions. The first, is the role of ordering elements into a unified and logical pattern. The origin of the English word *ornament* actually speaks to this idea. Our term originally comes from the Greek word *Kosmos*, which, in relation to the creation, was defined as the act of giving order to the formless (15). The other role that ornament performs is to provoke thought beyond utility. Traditionally, designs added onto the surface of objects served to imbue quotidian forms with further meaning. It is also significant to note that throughout history, ornament has existed alongside various other visual languages, such as painting, sculpture and hieroglyphic writing (49). This suggests that humans may have a psychological need for this particular type of visual notation, and that it fulfils a certain function that other visual art forms and languages cannot. Bloomer goes on to explain the significant differences between ornament and the related terms that are generally used as synonyms. *Embellishment*, for example, is probably the most common alternative used to describe ornament. According to his research, this word simply refers to a surface treatment *without* the intent to provoke further thought. Similarly, the term *decoration* "implies a pleasing arrangement of things and a suggestion of the decorous, a condition marked by propriety, good taste, good conduct, and good appearance"(35). Therefore, both embellishment and decoration hold subtle, but significantly different meanings than ornament. Ornament marks the addition of content, whereas decoration and embellishment perform aesthetic functions. For the sake of my argument I adhere to the definitions of the above-mentioned terms established by Kent

Bloomer. The fact that there remains such confusion surrounding these terms suggests that our society does not know how to properly define this phenomenon. The persistence of ornamental and decorative forms within our culture however, evidences the fact that these subjects require further investigation. In my paintings, I explore the current role of ornament and its relationships with decoration and abstraction.

I am consumed by the patterns and ornamental forms that surround me. I am particularly interested in the fact that this imagery has become so commonplace and so devoid of its original meaning that it is almost invisible to most. Instead of serving a traditional ornamental function, most patterns and motifs used today perform a decorative role, merely supporting other images or text in the contexts of advertising, fashion, and graphic design. I investigate the current role of ornament by placing it within the format of painting. I aim to reverse its role from that of mere surface embellishment, to an entity that encourages us to consider our associations with it. I aspire to make the ornament become forefront; to overtake the surface on which it sits; to become the subject matter as opposed to the superfluous in order to consider its relevance as a visual language and its current role in our society today.

The imagery in my work is intended to function as ornament in Bloomers sense of the word, however, in our historical time period this is difficult, as we no longer have specific associations with particular patterned forms. There is thus a danger that the imagery may be read as decoration or embellishment if it is presented in a familiar way. Therefore, in order to use this imagery effectively to communicate an alternate meaning, it is my duty to present it in a different or unfamiliar manner. In my work I am searching for an effective way of re-presenting the subject matter in such a way that the audience will be encouraged to view it anew, and that it may perform a different function from its current

role as mere decoration. Furthermore, if, as Bloomer claims, these ornamental forms no longer hold any specific meaning, then this allows me a great deal of freedom to focus on formal compositional issues without the danger of creating a predictable narrative. Ornament is a visual language that has been emptied of its content and as such it has become a very open and accessible language for appropriation. This loss of original meaning provides me with the framework to use this pictorial language in a new way. Therefore, if this imagery is to be presented anew, there is a necessity to breach compositional conventions currently associated with patterns and motifs. In my paintings I make formal choices regarding format, composition, palette and technique in order to shed decorative associations and explore the potential of ornament as a visual language and an effective means of communication.

Regardless of the content of a painting, as an object, it has a long history of being called mere decoration. Even within the discursive field of fine art, painting is often regarded as a decorative medium. Furthermore, much contemporary fine art also functions as luxury items, enjoyed by an elite few. Artist Kristen Hassenfeld comments on this idea in relation to her own work when she states: "My sculptures, as they reference specific markers of status, are themselves part of a larger economy of privilege. Contemporary art is, in the most extreme way, a luxury. My artwork self-consciously acknowledges its own extravagance and impracticality." Regardless of whether the piece is seen as a conceptual or an aesthetic work, it exists within an elitist framework and if consumed (whether visually or by monetary value) it can be considered a luxury good. This idea interests me a great deal, because it means that no matter what I create, it may function in this manner. The term *luxury good* itself has a double meaning. It can refer to an object whose high value is reflective of its quality, or alternatively, to an item whose value

is inflated solely by commercial purposes, regardless of the quality of the object. Often, luxury goods are associated with concepts of glamour, beauty, and status. When considering these ideas in relation to my work, the medium of painting seems the most appropriate to use in order to discuss ideas of ornament and embellishment. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss how I challenge the decorative associations with the painting itself through the manipulation of subject matter, scale and palette.

The majority of my source imagery is derived from my lived experiences. The images I use are taken directly from personal photographs of patterns and details that I have found on architecture, in textiles or domestic objects. Most of these patterns come from my immediate environment. I use images such as flourishes, stripes and checkers; forms that are considered banal and common by present-day Western standards but previously held specific, symbolic meanings. In the painting *Black Whole* for example, I have appropriated imagery of holly from stationery and a rosette star form from a Christmas ball. Both of these motifs have extensive histories of symbolic use in many different cultures. For example, the holly wreath has traditionally been used in Christian imagery to remind believers of Christ's crown of thorns at Christmas time. Comparatively, the rosette star dates to the fifth millennium and was used to refer to specific stars or planets and the deities associated with those heavenly bodies (Wilson, 165). In employing these forms, it is not my intent to make specific reference to historical readings, but rather to draw attention to their ability to communicate meaning beyond their formal characteristics. In order to integrate a motif into a piece, I alter the image so that it becomes considerably larger than its present form. In doing so I draw attention to imagery that originally performed a significant function, but currently embellishes the form of another object. Thus, in the work I place a great

deal of emphasis on an historical form that currently goes unnoticed, playing a rather insignificant role, simply 'enhancing' the surface of a functional object. In drawing attention to these forms I highlight their potential to be used autonomously, outside of their current decorative connotations.

In order to use ornament in a manner that challenges its current use as embellishment, I deliberately alter its appearance, so that the viewer's initial response is different from usual. In the piece *Black Whole* for example, I combine patterns from a variety of sources and I use an unconventional format. By simply layering these disparate forms on a single plane, the similarities and differences between them become apparent. The varying origins of the source imagery are significant as many of the ornamental motifs that we see today are influenced by, or directly appropriated from other cultures. According to Bruderlin, in his book *Ornament and Abstraction*, many of our Western motifs have their origins in Eastern cultures. Therefore, I work with a process of re-appropriation: sourcing motifs from my environment that have been repeatedly appropriated and altered throughout time. In this piece, the imagery is arranged as a border that surrounds a black void. The void in the centre of the painting suggests an absence. Generally when ornament is arranged in this manner in Western society it exists as support material for another image or text. In *Black Whole* however, I have arranged the pattern in this format, but omitted this central 'content' so that the viewer is constantly being referred back to the border pattern. This border exists to support itself, rather than another image, and therefore becomes the content in the piece.

With regard to selecting my imagery, I deliberately choose forms that don't have a very specific reading. For example, I would not use patterns that are only used by a specific culture; rather I select patterns

that have a history of being used cross-culturally. Similarly, I would not choose forms that contain symbols with specific readings (such as animal forms) in order to avoid creating predictable narrative-driven works that simply re-enforce the current readings of these images. Instead, I select forms that are rather nondescript and therefore, open for reinterpretation. In my work I draw attention to the current role of this imagery by selecting motifs from within contemporary visual culture that are the *most* banal and devoid of specific meaning. As these forms are so commonplace and so far removed from any original context, they are the most open for re-appropriation. Due to the prevalence of this subject matter however, there is the added challenge that such forms may not be noticeable. Therefore, in order to use these motifs as content in an effective manner, it is necessary to present them in a different way than they are commonly found. In my current work I remove all ancillary information and pare down my subject matter to what I believe are the essential elements involved. I reduce the amount of imagery and colour, employ a collage-like process and compose symmetrical, border-like compositions that are devoid of any central information. The symmetry of the piece, in combination with the central void, prevents the viewer's eye from moving freely through the piece and subsequently forces the viewer to regard the imagery anew.

I construct my paintings through a slow and laborious technique of painting, cutting and layering acrylic 'decals' upon a canvas ground. In order to make these decals I begin by applying a thin layers of acrylic paint upon a surface of plastic film. When this has dried, I then cut out shapes with a utility knife. Alternatively, I make templates out of acetate and stencil the forms onto another plastic surface. Finally, I transfer the images onto the surface of the support itself through a collage-like process. The only direct painting involved occurs in creation of the decals themselves. My reason for using this method is dependent on

the subject matter. For the depiction of pattern, I developed this technique whereby I can create multiple copies of a shape that are all 'the same' but differ slightly. It is important to me that the individual units in the patterns retain their specific characteristics, but also maintain a sense of unity when placed together.

The collage-like process is significant to the work in that it allows me the freedom to experiment with compositions before adhering imagery to the surface of the painting. As pattern generally originates from an orderly context, it is my first impulse to emulate this on the surface of my piece. Using the process that I do however, I am prevented from strict reproduction. This also enables me to work more spontaneously and intuitively, and try out many compositional arrangements before committing to one in particular. This process has led me to arrange familiar forms in an unfamiliar way which supports my intent of representing ornament in such a way that challenges its current function as support material or embellishment.

The significance of the handmade quality of the work lies in the fact that the patterns that I use are taken from the intimate and common language of domestic objects (where they are flawlessly, mechanically and identically reproduced). Using the methods that I do to create these patterns, I undermine their inherent structures as inevitable differences are created in the process of repetition. Viewing the piece from afar, one might assume it is a perfect pattern, but upon approaching the work, it becomes apparent that there are inconsistencies between the individual units. Our eyes naturally become fixed on these 'flaws', and as a result, the pattern cannot function as a visual ordering system. Just as Goldstein wrote of Christopher Wool's work, the viewer looks to the differences, the glitches, or the 'flaws' within a pattern to find meaning (51). It is also important to note that since the decals are handmade, the

brushstroke remains evident within the individual forms. The painting may appear to follow in the tradition of hard-edge abstraction, however I challenge this reading through the evidence of the brush. The handmade quality of the decals therefore subverts the role of pattern as an ordering system and causes us to consider its other functions. We are so used to seeing perfectly manufactured patterns in consumer culture, that the simple addition of the hand speaks about a deliberate intervention into and manipulation of the subject matter.

In my work, the palette that I have chosen to use is limited to black and white. I made this shift to an achromatic colour scheme in order to simplify my compositions and to draw more attention to the patterns themselves. In previous work, I had been dealing with the same subject matter but using a multicoloured palette and I found that the use of various colours imbued the work with unnecessary associative meanings. In my current series therefore, I have been working solely with black and white in order to add clarity to my subject and to draw more attention to the relationship between the surface of the painting and the imagery.

Working solely with black and white, I have come to consider the various associations that these 'colours' have. They represent binaries such as: life/death, good/bad, presence/absence, and positive/negative to name a few. These associative meanings are inevitably carried over into the paintings themselves. I find it interesting how these binaries relate to my process. For example, even though all of the decals that I attach to the surface of the painting are adhered through an additive process, the black forms may be read as negative rather than positive shapes. These ornamental forms may appear as shadows of positive shapes, or even the absence of a form in the painting. The format of the square or rectangular painting on canvas combined with some of the motifs I use,

connotes a Modernist painting. Thus, the black forms may be interpreted as a positive addition to the Modern surface, *or* as the absence of ornament within abstract painting. Either way, read as positive or negative, they make a statement regarding the role of ornament within the history of abstraction.

I have also come to appreciate the gravity that this particular palette possesses. The use of black and white in my work takes the sweet, passive associations away from the subject matter and changes it into something bold and challenging. We are so used to seeing these images in a supportive or diminutive context, so to have them transformed into enlarged, dominant forms is most unsettling. Furthermore, I believe that it is necessary to change the aesthetic presentation of this subject matter in order for the imagery to surpass its original function. Using this reduced palette, I create something aesthetically challenging out of that which was originally intended to be familiar, comforting or pleasing.

In order to grasp our current relationship with ornament, its history must be considered. Throughout time ornament has gone through periods of popularity and obscurity, but it has never been eliminated completely. In his seminal text from 1909 entitled *Ornament and Crime*, Adolf Loos condemned all surface treatment of functional objects. His text continued to influence Western notions of aesthetics for almost an entire century. As Tietenberg states, “even someone who has never read the polemical piece *Ornament and Crime* can depend on the fact that their own notions of “good” and “bad” taste are still arguably influenced by those distinctions, which Loos initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century” (6). Loos developed a large following, which later included advocates of the Weimar and Dessau Bauhaus schools. Building upon Loos’ claims, High Modernism renounced any surface detail in favour of

the motto “form follows function”. Modernity also taught consumers to see with the eyes of the producers and they too learned to reject elements that were not necessary to the function of an object. These Modernist principles were quickly disseminated into mass culture and aesthetics became a class issue. According to Pierre Bourdieu “an ostensibly ascetic lifestyle could for decades signal belonging to the educated upper class, whilst fondness for decorations because a characteristic trait of vulgarity” (8). This tradition of austerity continued up until the dawn of postmodernism. “It was not until post modernity that breaking up the structure of social distinctions and traditional building forms and decorative systems could be made presentable again with any success” (8). In the 1970’s ornament became a subject open for reinvestigation. As a revolt against Modernism, a group of artists called the Pattern and Decoration Painters arose. This group, which included artists such as Miriam Schapiro, Robert Kushner and Joyce Kozloff, sought to bring ornament into the lexicon of abstract painting. Their intent was blur the boundaries between ‘craft’ and ‘art’ and to give credit to the makers of the so-called decorative art forms who were most commonly women and members of cultural minority groups.

In contemporary art today we can see the influence of the P & D painters in a variety of artists work. Lily van der Stokker and Michael Lin are two contemporary artists who currently work with pattern in different ways. Michael Lin creates large scale paintings of floral motifs derived from traditional Taiwanese textiles. His process involves sourcing historical patterns and painting them as large scale installations over the walls of institutional spaces. He often creates wall paintings that extend themselves onto the floor or other furniture in the room. In his work ornament infiltrates the gallery space often enveloping many of the objects in its path. Lin’s work can be seen as a response to Adolf Loos’ manifesto “Ornament and Crime” where Loos eschewed the use of

ornamental forms in architecture. Lin covers interiors with pattern in order to blur the boundaries between surface and structure as well as architecture and ornament. Comparatively, Lily van der Stokker is an artist from the Netherlands who employs patterns and motifs to examine their role in contemporary visual culture. Like Michael Lin, her work consists of large, hand painted illustrations of flowers that cover various architectural spaces. Her intent becomes apparent through an examination of a recent exhibition where she painted similar patterns on the walls of two adjoining rooms in a gallery. The wall painting in the large gallery space was intended to be viewed as 'a work,' unlike the piece in the adjoining office space, which was intended as 'decoration'. "The one piece functioned as a comment on the imagery whereas, the other piece simply "assumed the function of simple wallpaper" (Verzotti, 1). By contrasting fanciful motifs with the seriousness of the art discourse in which she inserts them, Van der Stokker also "seems to denounce art's detachment from the quotidian reality of ordinary people" (Verzotti, 1). She deals with the topics of pleasure and decadence in art, as well as the elitist quality of institutional art through her use of this imagery in combination with the gallery context itself.

As Tietenberg states, it is only "since the turn of the century, it has seemed possible for the first time to bring in that reconciliation of practicality and ornamentation (8). It is therefore due to this current historical climate that we now have the opportunity for genuine exploration into this subject matter, and that is why I have taken up this topic in my research. I am not particularly concerned with the specific connotations to craft and feminist art practice that the D & P Painters were however, I acknowledge that the subject matter that I use still retains these associations. Rather, I am interested in the current use of this imagery within contemporary visual culture and its relationship with abstract painting. I look to the work of artists such as Michael Lin and

Lily Van der Stokker for inspiration and attempt to build on the work that they have done. Through the format of my work, in combination with the palette and technique that I use, I add my personal experience to the ongoing dialogues on ornament and abstraction.

In my paintings, I reverse the current role of ornament from that of mere surface embellishment, to an entity that challenges us to consider our associations with it as well as its role in our society today. Ornament is a visual language that has been used and misused, appropriated and re-appropriated, built up and destroyed, defined and redefined throughout history, and yet it still continues to exist. My fascination with this subject matter has fuelled my current research and my desire to achieve a better understanding of the role of ornament. Through my investigation of this subject, I have come to a better understanding of this phenomenon, my personal obsession with it, as well as its potential as a means of communication. Consequently, my research has also posed further questions that I need to answer. As such, I intend to continue to use this imagery within the format of painting in order to further my research, so that I may eventually add something to the contemporary dialogues on ornament and abstraction.

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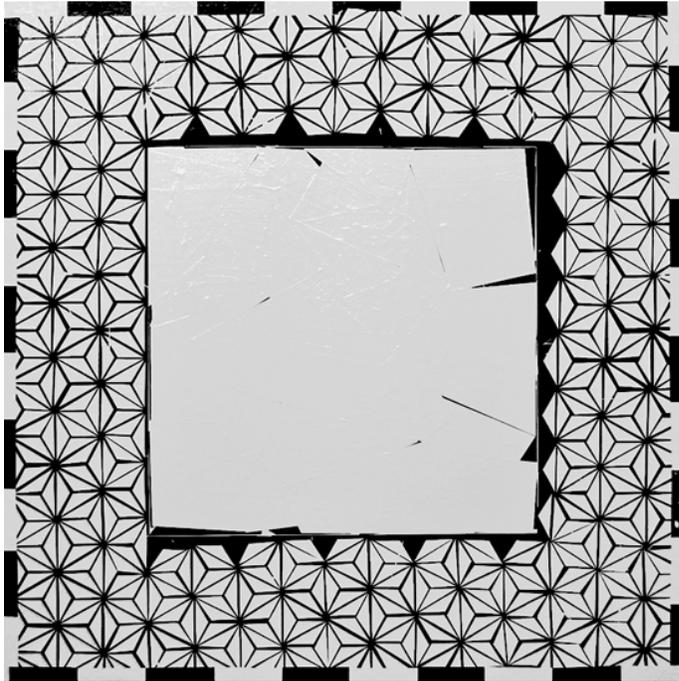
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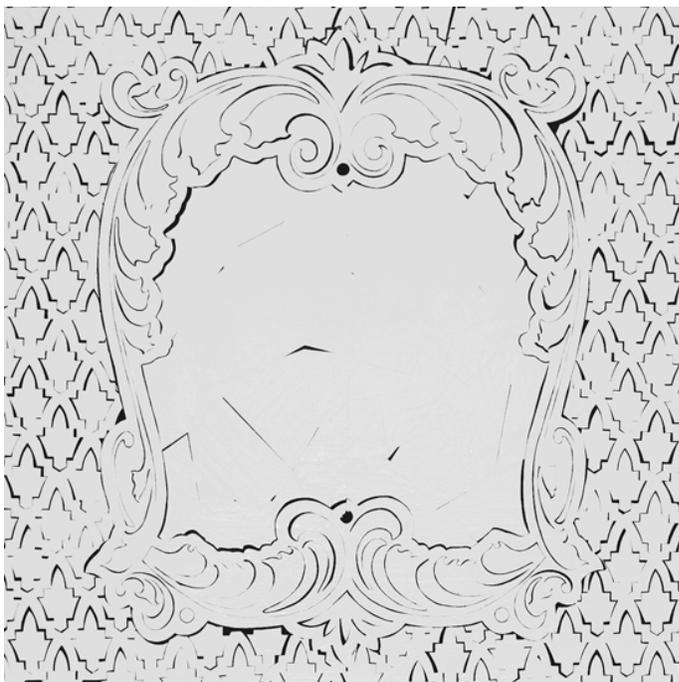
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BORDERLINES: Exhibition Images



1. WHITE CUBE, 60" x 60", acrylic on canvas, 2007



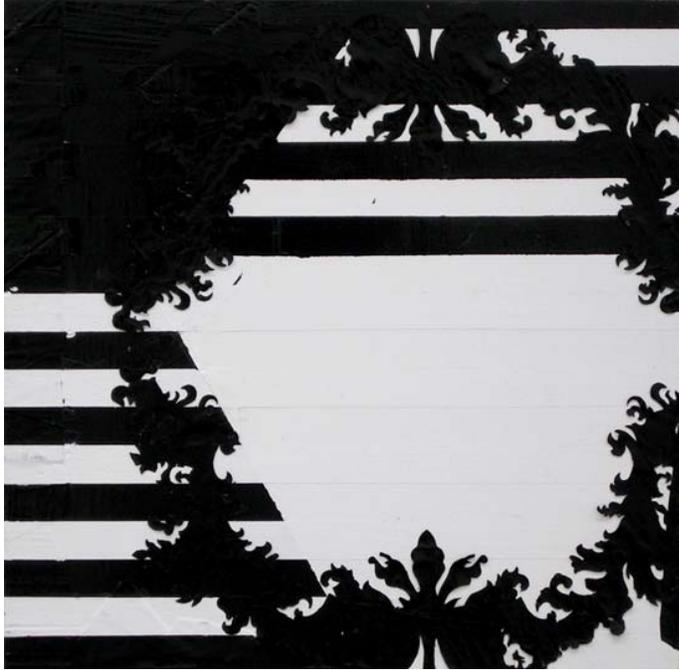
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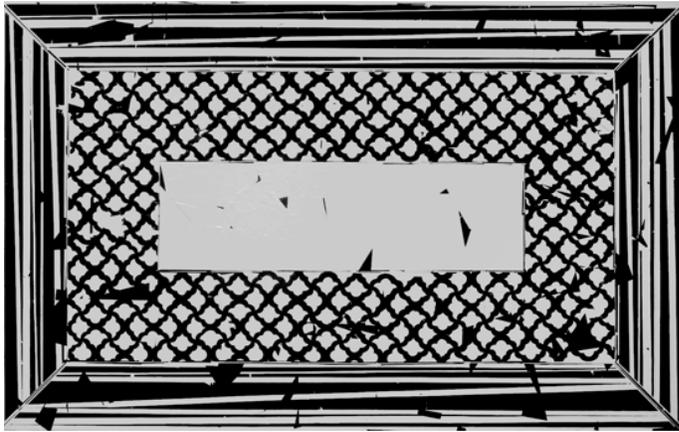
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7. BORDERLINES (installation view)



8. BORDERLINES (installation view)



9. BORDERLINES (installation view)