

A marriage of fine art and design

Why exchange ornamental pleasure for formalist purity?



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on *Culture High & Low*

This is not the first time in history when design is all the rage. During the sunset of the Victorian era, when the world seemed drowning in blunt and functional mass produced goods, the Art Nouveau movement won an entranced audience with the promise of florid beauty as an alternative to contemporary shoddiness. According to the advocates of Art Nouveau, everything from dresses to cutlery to window sills could be torqued into loveliness with ornate and languid lines.

Even in the heyday of Art Nouveau, not everyone loved design. Viennese architect Adolf Loos thought it was childish for designers to apply Art Nouveau flourishes to every object they could get their hands on, without regard for function or appropri-

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ateness. Loos wanted to preserve the autonomy of both the fine arts and design by keeping them at a safe distance from each other. "The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects," he declared in a famously fierce polemic ominously titled *Ornament and Crime* (1908).

Loos's strictures, which held a powerful sway during the rise of high modernism, sound hopelessly astringent and stuffy in our own let-it-all-hang-out art world where heroic designers like Frank Gehry and Bruce Mau are applauded for enacting their wayward whims. Yet not everyone believes the flourishing of design is leading to a new golden age of art. In his abrasive 2002 essay collection *Design and Crime* (Verso), Hal Foster tries to revive Loos's high-fence demarcation between fine art and design, although avoiding the outmoded ideology of purity that went with it.

An art theorist who teaches at Princeton University, Foster shrewdly links design mania with consumerism and niche marketing. In a polite and even schmoozy art world, Foster stands out for willing to make barbed comments on design gods like Gehry and Mau, figures who are so large it is difficult to view them with any distance. Yet for all the pleasures of Foster's prickly dissent, his ultimate argument is not convincing: Much of the most interesting work of our time mixes together the elements of fine art and the applied principles of design, which renders

moot any advocacy of an apartheid aesthetic of separating the ornamental from the functional.

All the abstract arguments against ornamental art lost credibility in my eyes when I went to see a new exhibit of the work of Michelle DeMello, a young Canadian artist who merges the formalist agenda of abstract art with the frilly pleasures of fashion and design. At first glance, her paintings look like what would happen if Jackson Pollock had been hired to illustrate a Gap catalogue. Like Pollock, she liberally applies drippy and droopy lines to the canvas, but her paintings have a perky, upbeat mood that is distinctive.

"I love fashion and I'm inspired by fashion," DeMello said as she walked me through her exhibit. "If you can combine fashion and art to make something to put up on your walls, that's pretty cool."

The ornamental and the oriental are closely linked: ornate design often has an exotic feel to it. For DeMello, part of her attraction to design comes from her personal background. She is the child of two Asian diaspora. On her father's side, her family can be traced back to India, via Tanzania. On her mother's side, DeMello has roots in China, via Malaysia. Manchester, England, was the common ground where parents met. The family moved to Canada when DeMello was two years old.

Without being reductive, it is not difficult to see DeMello's roots in her work, especially in her use of colour. Toronto is at the best of times a grey, even colour-phobic city, but inside the gallery, I felt like I had walked into a Bollywood musical, with vibrant multicoloured saris flying all around. On closer inspection, I noticed the expressive brush strokes of DeMello's paintings. With their mesmerizing variations of thickness, they call up memories of Chinese calligraphy. Although largely working with acrylic, she occasionally places rice paper on her paintings, adding another oriental layer.

DeMello's paintings are as much about texture as image. Areas of smoothness play against sharp and jagged bits of paint. This surface tension makes the paintings very inviting. They almost asked to be touched, which I did after being encouraged by the painter.

"I like to have a three dimensional appeal," she told me. "I like that someone can touch a painting. It's sort of like fashion when you want to touch the material. I enjoy after doing a painting to go and touch it. I have to be careful because I don't have the patience to wait for it to completely dry."

Among the most interesting of DeMello's fashion-inspired art are a series of smaller paintings devoted to shoes. She isn't afraid of celebrating the fun of sophisticated and elegant footwear. "It's for women and men as well," she notes. "There is a certain sex appeal to it. Men won't go out and buy women's shoes, but they have an appreciation for women's shoes."

With her unabashed revelling in the ornamental pleasures of fashion, DeMello might be a scandal to some of the more dour souls who adhere to an ideology of formalist purity. Yet for those who have eyes to see, her paintings show how fruitful the marriage of fine art and design can be.

Michelle DeMello's art will be exhibited until Jan. 31 at the Hitite Gallery, 107 Scollard St., Toronto. www.michelledemello.com

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LOST BUTTERFLY / MICHELLE DEMELLO (PHOTO BY NICK MOTA)

Merging abstract art with the frilly pleasures of design can be fruitful.