



ALYCE GOTTESMAN

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In Harmony

Essay by Julie Reiter Greene

Entwining Threads: In Conversation with Alyce Gottesman

Reflecting on the last three decades of her career, Alyce Gottesman describes herself as “inhabiting” two distinct genres of imagery: organic abstraction and geometric pattern. *Inhabiting* is an evocative word for Gottesman whose former body of work manifests environments of some kind. These canvases embody familiar places that are neither entirely abstract nor concrete, conceptual nor physical. To me, her amorphous paintings to date have evoked the sensation of being within a vibrant natural setting, of being surrounded and enveloped—the *experience* of inhabitation.

Gottesman’s new series returns to the latter subject, pattern, which she has probed since 1990. Yet for the first time, the artist does so by incorporating fabric into her work. Take *Jigsaw* (2023): A volcano of kaleidoscopic forms climbs up toward a sky-blue vastness. Overlapping and intersecting, these shapes almost erupt with clamorous color from the bottom edge of the canvas. Most are executed with a mix of acrylic or flashe paint and color pencil while some are cloth patches entangled in the jumble. *Jigsaw* is a puzzle of pattern and a mountain of media. Gottesman previously understood her landscape-conjuring abstractions as separate from such explorations. However, in our conversations about her latest group of paintings, Gottesman reveals how the two threads of her practice have finally entwined.

Around 1990, she tells me, Gottesman visited Lancaster, Pennsylvania where she came across an Amish-operated quilt shop. There, the artist purchased a vintage quilt, later studying antique examples of handmade Amish textiles in books. The artist’s pull toward these yard goods was formal: She gravitated toward their colors, pared-down designs, and stitchwork. Yet the draw must also have been haptic. I imagine Gottesman in the store, encircled by these Amish cloths, taking them in with her eyes and fingertips simultaneously—a strand forming between her senses of sight and touch.

Geometric patterns soon surfaced in Gottesman’s output. In 1991, the artist began making constructed works riffing on the Amish quilts. She created patchworks of paintings by affixing multiple supports to one another, edge to edge. In 1999, such patterns arose again in her *Grid* series. In *Black Dimension* (1999), for instance, countless rectangles ranging in opacity and striation seem to emerge and recede from the ground. The “push and pull” method of Hans Hoffmann comes to mind; the German-American Abstract Expressionist juxtaposed hues and marks to produce depth and movement. The nocturnal palette of *Black Dimension* (1999) is punctuated with surprising moments of spearmint green, crimson, orange, lavender, and yellow—as if the moon suddenly illuminated those motifs.

Some three decades later, Gottesman began sewing upcycled textiles. In our exchanges, the artist explains what precipitated this course of creation:

“For a few years, I had a studio in Point Reyes Station, California, that was situated in a building with an upholstery shop. I occasionally browsed the shop’s fabrics as I was inspired by the beautiful colors and patterns. In August 2019, the thoughts started coming to me that I needed to start sewing. Not understanding why, I nevertheless asked the proprietor of the shop if there were any discarded scraps or swatches that I could have.”

While textiles have always been woven into her life—as a freelancer in her early twenties, Gottesman made designs on silk for the garment industry—the artist is quick to clarify that she “*really had little experience with sewing.*” In turning to this craft, the artist was not intentionally recalling 1960s Feminist Art nor the 1970s and ‘80s Pattern and Decoration movement; though she now deeply admires those who have used or referenced fabric and collage such as “*Sharon Horvath, Al Loving, Joyce Kozloff, Sam Gilliam, and Robert Kushner, to name a few.*” Instead, Gottesman felt compelled by instinct to follow her own path.

Returning to New Jersey from California with a bag of swatch books and samples, Gottesman employed vintage sewing machines to start her *Fragments and Remnants* series in January 2020. She embraced some cloths that already had embroidered designs and added her own: “*I used the Singer zigzag setting to create undulating lines in different stitches, like drawn lines, and also to connect the pieces of fabric.*” The stitching thus acts as both an aesthetic and structural element—bringing us back to the artist’s constructed paintings of the early ‘90s in which the lines were compositional features and also the connective tissues between the Masonite boards or canvases.

Tsukiyama Niwa Hill Garden (2023) is one such new painting. As in *Jigsaw*, an alpine form—this time, in a blazing orangish-red hue—juts up against an aqua expanse scattered with cloudlike marks. On the left and right sides, where the ridge meets the sky, swirls of respective red and white lines appear. Texturizing the mountainous range are a handful of floral fabric pieces that ink the ground like tattoos on skin. Gottesman extends designs from the patches onto the painted surface; one in particular snakes down as line-drawn vines. These moments of encounter between textile and paint represent touch: where the artist’s fingertips, rather than a brush or pencil, pressed on the canvas. Through each of those cloth interventions, the distance between the artist and the work collapses.

I suggest to Gottesman that her notion of producing recognizable environments through organic abstraction may indeed relate to patterned cloth. Fabrics act as a kind of space or shelter—an idea that scholar Julia Bryan-Wilson investigates in her foundational volume, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (2017). As soon as we exit the womb and enter the world, textiles envelop us. I write: “Cloth is our first layer of protection against the elements; it defines the boundary between the surrounding environs and our bodies...” “*Or our innermost feelings,*” Gottesman interjects. She goes on:

“The fabrics (and patterns) create a human presence in the abstracted environments in my paintings. In some way I equate the patterns in my work to structures in the landscape and in the family—the harmonious coexistence of these various concepts.”

Gottesman’s response makes me wonder whether this “*human presence,*” as she puts it, may in fact be her own presence—a signature, an impression, a trace of her being in these spaces of her own making. “*It is becoming clear to me,*” she continues:

“That the recurrent geometric patterns represent a foundation of sorts: creating a home, holding up a family structure, building a family, societal concepts of women’s work. ...My role as a parent, partner, caregiver has felt like I create and represent the foundation of my family life, as mother, wife, daughter. It is a role I have lived for over thirty years and it is now becoming present in my work.”

Gottesman comes to the same conclusion as I do: “*Maybe this is the most autobiographical work I have done to date.*”

Julie Reiter Greene is a curator, writer, and art historian who currently serves as Collection Specialist in Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art. Her previous roles include Director of Research at Eric Firestone Gallery and Head of Research at Dayan Rohatyn Art Services. She has also worked for Luxembourg & Dayan, the Jewish Museum, and the Sally & Wynn Kramarsky Collection. Greene has curated shows such as *Sally Cook: Where Fantasy Has Bloomed, Painting and Poetry since the 1960s* (2023) at Eric Firestone Gallery and *Sounds Lasting and Leaving* (2020) at Luxembourg & Dayan. She holds an M.A. in Art History from the Williams College Graduate Program and a B.A. in English from Yale University.



Tsukiyama Niwa Hill Garden
2023, acrylic, flashe, fabric, graphite, color pencil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



Inferno
2023, acrylic, flashe, fabric, graphite, color pencil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



Path To Enlightenment
2023, acrylic, flashe, fabric, graphite, color pencil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



In Harmony
2023, acrylic, flashe, fabric, graphite, color pencil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



Big Sur
2023, acrylic, flashe, fabric, graphite, color pencil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



Time Space Color Continuum
2023, acrylic, flashe, fabric, graphite, color pencil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



Abracadabra
2023, acrylic, flashe, fabric, graphite, color pencil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



Nighttime Beckons
2022, mixed media on Arches oil paper, 27 x 23.5 inches



Over the Hills
2022, mixed media on Arches oil paper, 27 x 23.5 inches



Jigsaw
2023, acrylic, flashe, fabric, graphite, color pencil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



High Noon
2023, oil, acrylic, flashe, graphite, fabric on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Foundational
2022, oil, acrylic, flashe, graphite, fabric on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Whirlybird
2022, oil, acrylic, flashe, graphite, fabric on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Jazzy Splash
2022, oil, acrylic, flashe, graphite, fabric on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Garden Wizard
2022, oil, acrylic, flashe, graphite, fabric on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Roulette Rouge
2022, oil, acrylic, flashe, graphite, fabric on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Night Sky Blue
2023, oil, acrylic, flashe, graphite, fabric on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



Patchwork
2022, mixed media on Arches oil paper, 27 x 23.5 inches



NaPali
2022, mixed media on Arches oil paper, 27 x 23.5 inches



Coastal
2022, mixed media on Arches oil paper, 27 x 23.5 inches



Curve
2022, mixed media on Arches oil paper, 27 x 23.5 inches

ALYCE GOTTESMAN works in Jersey City, NJ, and Inverness, CA. Her work has been exhibited nationally, with shows at Montclair Art Museum, Imlay Gallery, The Painting Center, Carter Burden Gallery, Kent State University, Paul Robeson Center for the Arts, Visual Arts Center of NJ, Rupert Ravens Contemporary, Drawing Rooms, and others. Art fairs include 14c Art Fair Jersey City, SOFA Chicago, AAF Affordable Art Fair NYC, REVEAL Saratoga Springs, and Start Up San Francisco. Awards include a NJ State Council on the Arts Individual Artist Fellowship, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Fellowship, and Virginia Center for the Creative Arts Residency Fellowship. Her work is part of numerous private and public collections including Imagery Estate Winery, New York Presbyterian Hospital, Sloan Kettering, Soho West, Brooklyn Art Library, Provident Bank of NJ, SAP of America, Cinevative, Hoffman LaRoche, The College of NJ, William Paterson University, and a site-specific commission for Johnson & Johnson. She earned a BFA from Carnegie-Mellon University, an MFA from School of Visual Arts, and has participated in workshops at Bob Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop, Rutgers University Brodsky Center, and R & F Encaustics.

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