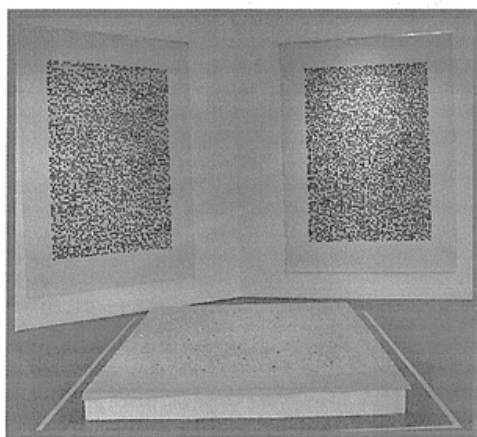


Above: Richard Elliot, *Human/Nature*, 2004, Xerographic transparencies, eyelets, Plexiglas, 42" x 96" x 6"; below: John Writer, *The Crystal-Knock*, 2000, dried pigments, wax on raw canvas, 76" x 108", at the Oakland Art Gallery.



'Hidden Order' at the Oakland Art Gallery

Searching for hidden meaning in patterns has become a modern obsession, from antic tech-assisted analysis of voting results in newsrooms to dreary dissection of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in countless college classrooms. But as any pundit or student worth her salt will tell you, finding meaning in patterns isn't necessarily so difficult; it's establishing the pattern that's the hard part. To do this requires considerable creativity, keen powers of deduction, and a willingness to posit a wild theory—all of which *Hidden Order: Pattern and Content in Contemporary Abstraction* offers in abundance.

Patterns are generally assumed to be random until proven otherwise, and found rather than invented. But it's not mere coincidence that the dot-encrypted canvases by the aptly named artist John Writer look like cosmic Morse code, or that Carrie Lederer's orb installations

products and factory labor. But they do serve to illustrate the glaring incompatibilities between our recent patterns of human behavior and the far more ancient designs of nature.

The title of Writer's *The Crystal-Knock* is also troubling, especially because the piece itself is so beguiling. Given the obvious reference to *Kristallnacht* and the unnatural acts of hatred committed on November 9-10, 1938, one might not expect a piece by this name to be a natural canvas that is embellished with a dazzling array of black, white and red circles

intricately connected with lines like constellations, and spread out on the floor as though it were a magic carpet. But as the artist's statement explains, the arcane language of circles is an encrypted prayer for refuge, made universal across languages and religions by "transcribing" the prayer from its original text into an abstract form. Writer's arcane notation is thus a profound synthesis of self and other: It recalls us to times in our own histories when we have sought refuge from others, as well as those times we have given others reason to seek refuge from us.

Writer's decision to include the prayer he'd encoded in his artist's statement was an enlightened choice; many lesser abstract artists play the game of being vague about their intentions and describe

their process as undefinably "spiritual," but their viewers are not fooled. Logically, we know much of what we experience in our urban surroundings is the result of concentrated human effort: When we see angels in the architecture, it's usually because some architect put them there. While we can plainly see the gargoyles and buttresses many architects use to suspend our disbelief, capable abstract artists send our fancies flying with a far more elusive (but nonetheless rigorous) calculus of color, geometry and internalized iconography.

In *Hidden Order*, this calculus is achieved with varying degrees of facility and elegance, mostly at the high end of the spectrum. Jamie Brunson's large patterned panels have the smooth texture and vastness of wallpaper, only there's a jittery psychedelic energy to these paintings that brings them to life. Brunson's *Garden* is the kind of painting that could easily drive Hunter S. Thompson to the brink of a flashback, with fluorescent red background and patterned with a botanically indistinct flowering scarlet vine that seems in *this* place to melt right into the painting, and in *that* place to smudge the

surface like lipstick. Her *Flourish* is tamer, with a net of dark green ivy that seems to be casting a faint shadow across the spring green background. This two-dimensional shadow is a nice trick of the eye, but the overall effect isn't quite as bracing and unexpected as *Garden*.

Bonnie Neumann and Richard Elliot also have mixed results with their patterned works. Neumann's off-kilter ten-pointed Islamic star pattern against a Persian glazed-ceramic blue background is an engaging meditation on symmetry and perfection, and echoes the practice of great Islamic architects and craftspeople of introducing an asymmetrical element to otherwise geometrically perfect patterns, to acknowledge our human imperfections. In contrast, *Always* is a painting by Neumann that resembles a marble cathedral floor a little too neatly; the diamonds in shades of ochre, terra cotta and ivory are too regular and staid to convey the complexity of a worn, well-worshipped floor, buckling under the weight of tourists and the faithful alike. Elliot restores our sense of wonder with *Human/Nature*, a curtain made of overhead-projector transparencies containing not pie charts, but organic patterns that cast an intricate, ethereal design of green and blue light on the wall behind the piece. By comparison, his *MicroMacro* is somewhat disappointingly mechanical: Here Elliot has transferred rust patterns onto circular canvases of varying size, and hung them on the wall in a cluster that resembles an array of wheels and cogs. The element of surprise is missing here; we don't get the same tension between material, pattern, content and context as in *Human/Nature*. But even so, Neumann and Elliot each provide their own points of positive comparison and debate, and that is a mark of accomplishment for any artist.

At their best, the artists in *Hidden Order* make human order seem natural, and nature's internal order seem programmed. They invite us to reflect upon the parallels and disjunctions between nature's schemes and our own, which are the essence of many a raging debate about what constitutes "natural" and "unnatural" in our modern world: Does bioengineering fit into the greater scheme of our world? What about stem-cell research? War? Monogamy? Plastic surgery? Parks? Abortion? Gene-mapping? Disease? Faith? Quintuplets? By drawing patterns that resonate with subtle distinction, these artists allow us to see how nuanced our own internalized distinctions truly are.

—Alison Bing

Hidden Order: Pattern and Content in Contemporary Abstraction closed in September at the Oakland Art Gallery.

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