



Henri Matisse: *La Perruche et la Sirène*, 1952-53, collaged gouache on paper, 134¼ by 305 inches. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. © Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

# The Goldin Age

By Robert Berlind

THE LATE 1960s saw various challenges to the iconoclastic austerities of Minimalism and Conceptual art, which were then receiving a great deal of critical attention. New alternatives included the more psychologically loaded Post-Minimalist abstraction, a broad range of painterly representation, and many other diverse, idiosyncratic, sometimes revisionist practices. (The sudden prominence of women in all this is noteworthy.) These dissenting modes included the lyrical, insouciantly impure sort of painting called Pattern and Decoration (P&D). Arguments in its favor—feminist, craft-friendly, populist, anti-Eurocentric—comprised a full liberal agenda, challenging established art-world orthodoxies.

Amy Goldin's support for Pattern and Decoration rested on several fundamental philosophical considerations: the importance of optical experience, the role of ideas in art (what do we mean by "meaning"?), art history's questionable relevance to seeing new work, and even the nature of art per se. She understood the need for serious investigation of just what pattern and decoration *are* and their place both in modern painting and in non-Western visual cultures. *Amy Goldin: Art in a Hairshirt, Art Criticism 1964-1978*, edited by the well-known P&D artist Robert Kushner, delves into all of this and more.

As a freelance critic, Goldin, who wrote regularly for *Art in America* as well other international publications, was adept at close readings of modern and contemporary works as well as exotica like Middle Eastern carpets. Her characterizations are illuminating, precise and at times rhapsodic. Here she is describing a Persian Sehna rug in her possession:

The pattern keeps coagulating and dissolving, pouring itself into different shapes and sizes. [It's] impossible to follow the repeats because of the multiplicity of eddies. . . . The whole thing set onto a stark midnight blue that goes black at the tawny borders. An incomprehensible rug, aristocratically out of its skull.

Goldin can gush and she can dish. Her early essays "Harold Rosenberg's Magic Circle" (1965) and "McLuhan's Message: Participate, Enjoy!" (1966) effectively take on major figures of the time. Rosenberg she considers "a menace," saying of his bevy of pet critical concerns (history, revolution, action, the new, the artist, identity): "It drives other critics nuts. Faced with any of his imposing inconsistencies, Rosenberg immediately recognizes a paradox and leaps forward to embrace it." She admires some of McLuhan's insights, while lamenting his lack of values: "For him, meaning is an old-fashioned concept, suitable to an age when information moved from one place to another by ox-cart. In an electric age, he says, we are more interested in effect." In "Conceptual Art as Opera" (cowritten with Kushner in 1970), she argues:

With conceptual art, no one is expected to contemplate the object for a meaningful artistic experience—he will soon become bored. By the same token, no one is expected to spend a day meditating on the ideas. They are too simple. . . . It is the juxta-

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position, not the object or the ideas in themselves, that is the conception of conceptual art. . . . The lesson that art can be visually innocuous is one that conceptual art learned from Uncle Minimal, but it does him one up by making the work simpleminded as well as boring to look at.

“Manny Farber: Reforming Formalism,” an insightful 1978 discussion of Farber’s abstractions, contains Goldin’s complaint that “dozens of younger, weaker artists are still trying to make a name for themselves with torted-up Minimalism—baby-talk simplicities of form combined with personalized, ‘lyrical’ elaborations of texture and surface.”

Goldin contests traditional academic discourse, typically with her own snappy Big Statements. One striking example comes from “Art in a Hairshirt,” the 1967 article that gave the book its title:

Unfortunately the difficult and pressing question of what art is about has been answered by making art history the subject of art—an idiotic idea that preserves the autonomy of art at the cost of making every other problem unsolved and unsolvable.

In the 1969 essay “Deep Art and Shallow Art,” Goldin asks with majuscule emphasis “WHAT IS MEANING?” Her answer is clear and uncompromising: “For most people, most of the time, meaning is something moral. . . . Whatever it may have experienced or felt, an audience deprived of moral orientation feels deprived of meaning.”

Her critique of most art historical and art critical thinking cuts through a pervasive field of received ideas. Thus in “Conceptual Art as Opera” one finds: “The nonsensical assumption that all modern art is peculiarly intellectual (as if earlier art were peculiarly dopey) has left us totally unprepared to assess the role of ideas in art.” In the Manny Farber article, she lodges this complaint about the valuation of art and artists: “The inflation of self-propelled winners denies the communal creation of significant styles and falsifies the assessment of individual artists.” Her polemic here, a critique of the emphasis on dominant style and the attendant assumptions of historical importance, aims to account for and protest Farber’s modest status:

For the last ten years our attention has been occupied with esthetic novelties, conceptual revisions of the nature and role of art. Our imaginations have been fired by notions of revolution, the total revision of sensibility, alternative realities, etc., so that the actual amplification and development of a visual idea has hardly been recognized at all. Our eyes have grown dull and theoretical novelties alone seem new.

A CONCEIT CENTRAL to Goldin’s thinking is that pattern, found more universally than images, is psychologically

more fundamental; it is to pictorial description as poetry is to prose. Poetry, according to her notion, preceded prose and is more deeply rooted, feeling having a deeper claim than the intellect. In her view, a crucial difference between pictorial images and decorative pattern is that the latter is seen essentially in a process of scanning as opposed to the focused viewing appropriate to the hieratic organization of European composition. In Islamic art’s various traditions of decorative pattern, she finds a stark alternative to Western visual thought, one which provides fertile ground for cultivating new esthetic values. Her influence on and support for the Pattern and Decoration artists stemmed largely from this involvement.

American music—from gospel, blues and jazz to New Music by Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass—has a long history of non-Western sources. Composers have used repetition, pattern, texture and instrumentation in ways that depart from the European canon. Goldin, though she did not draw direct parallels, made the case for a correspondingly radical development in contemporary painting. Here her focus is on pattern as a fundamental mode of organization, but, of course, other non-Western visual regimes such as the spatial structure and composition of Japanese *ukiyo-e* had comparably radical effects on modern art. Perhaps for her the continuation of descriptive imagery was a limitation.

In a key essay, “Patterns, Grids and Painting” (1975), Goldin convincingly demonstrates that pattern is not defined by the repetition of a motif, as is typically thought, but by a consistency of interval *between* motifs. Although the motif itself need not have any semiotic value—precisely the focus of theory-oriented writers on art—pattern is not without intellectual challenge.

As with the flow of good conversation, Goldin’s arguments can take you by surprise, slipping from one idea to the next unexpectedly. In “Léger Now” (1968), we read: “Léger is modern innocently and nonanalytically, by temperament, like Andy Warhol. And, like Warhol, the esthetic conventions he placidly accepts are as integral to his modern style as the violations of convention he instinctively introduces.”

In the probing essay “Matisse and Decoration: The Late Cut-Outs” (1975), Goldin seems to deflate rather than support the value of decoration, writing: “I take the ‘mereness’ of decoration to be intrinsic. . . . Decoration is ‘mere’ because it is intellectually vapid.” She goes on to specify that decoration “requires a low level of emotional involvement and the absence of psychological tension” and, further, that it is “conceptually bland . . . usually recognizable as an intellectual and visual cliché, inexpressive and unindividuated.” These remarks, oddly enough, are not disparaging, but a way of arguing for the principles of pattern and decoration, which serve perceptual experience and do not bear the burden of intrinsic meaning. The assertion bolsters her contention that there is something amiss, overly cerebral, in how we assign significance to art.

Here and elsewhere Susan Sontag’s early and largely ignored call for a renewed orientation to art comes to mind.

In the title essay of her 1966 book *Against Interpretation*, Sontag argued against the subordination of art to celebration, proclaiming: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." The tone, intellectual daring and much of the substance of Sontag's writing seem to have influenced Goldin.

This collection of 28 essays is so good that I would have welcomed more, along with some additional pictures (which range from snapshots of the author to reproductions of artworks, carpets and calligraphy). The bibliography lists many single-paragraph reviews and further essays published during Goldin's too short 15-year writing career. Had she not succumbed in 1978 to cancer at age 52, would she have delved

into other non-Western traditions, for example African or Far Eastern? Would she have taken an interest in contemporary non-Western art, which has since exploded onto the scene?

Along with Kushner's introductory essay, short appreciative pieces by Elizabeth Baker, Irving Sandler, Max Kozloff, Oleg Grabar, Michael Duncan, Emna Zghal, Holland Cotter and Joan Simon—an impressive roster with many *A.i.A.* links—are interspersed throughout the book, attesting in their various ways to Goldin's perspicacity, verbal brilliance and independence. Her writing should be widely read for its critical grace and acuity, and for the salutary and liberating effect it can have on young writers. ○