

ARTFORUM

“Who’s Afraid of Ornament?”

NURTUREART

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For the past hundred years or so, ever since Adolf Loos’s likening of its excess to crime, ornament has fared rather poorly. Even the more muted motifs of Art Deco became subordinated to the asceticism of International Style; later, the manly monstrosities of favored AbEx yielded to the cool maneuvers of Minimalism. Today, with Jeff Koons and celebrity bling excepted, ornament remains a kind of bugbear.

For this tight exhibition, though, curator Natasha Kurchanova has brought together a cross section of ten artists unafraid to embrace it. That Tsehai Johnson’s porcelain reliefs in *Field #11*, 2010, conjure Koons’s work does not seem altogether incidental. Their patterned sprawl across the gallery wall is, however, striking in its own right; the work is mesmerizing in its insouciant, playful blend of form and substance. Linda Ganjian’s *Avestan*, 2007, transposes an extinct Persian language into a three-dimensional cityscape, in which letters morph into sculptural abstractions. Emphatically wrought and delicate in equal measure, the piece literalizes the dance of language into a calligraphic presence. The plastic screenprints of ArdAn Özmenoglu’s *Things on My Mind*, 2009, rain down in a hanging cascade of color, each bearing a different ornamental motif reminiscent of carpets. The play between the organic and inorganic here—the stylized and synthetic patterns of plants, suspended like a tree or vine—evokes a lyrical field at once rich with cultural allusion and pleasurable in its superficiality.

The fact that every artist in the exhibition except one is a woman begs some further (if well-worn) questions about the rapports between ornament, gender, and craft. Despite the loosening of gendered pigeonholes in labor and life, it seems that women artists still scare less easily at the appearance of ornament. At the very least, the curator has made its presence the vibrant thread by which to unite a series of interesting works.

— Ara H. Merjian



ArdAn Özmenoglu, *Things on My Mind*, 2009, screen prints on transparent plastic sheets, dimensions variable. Installation view.

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