

ART

Opulent
Optimism

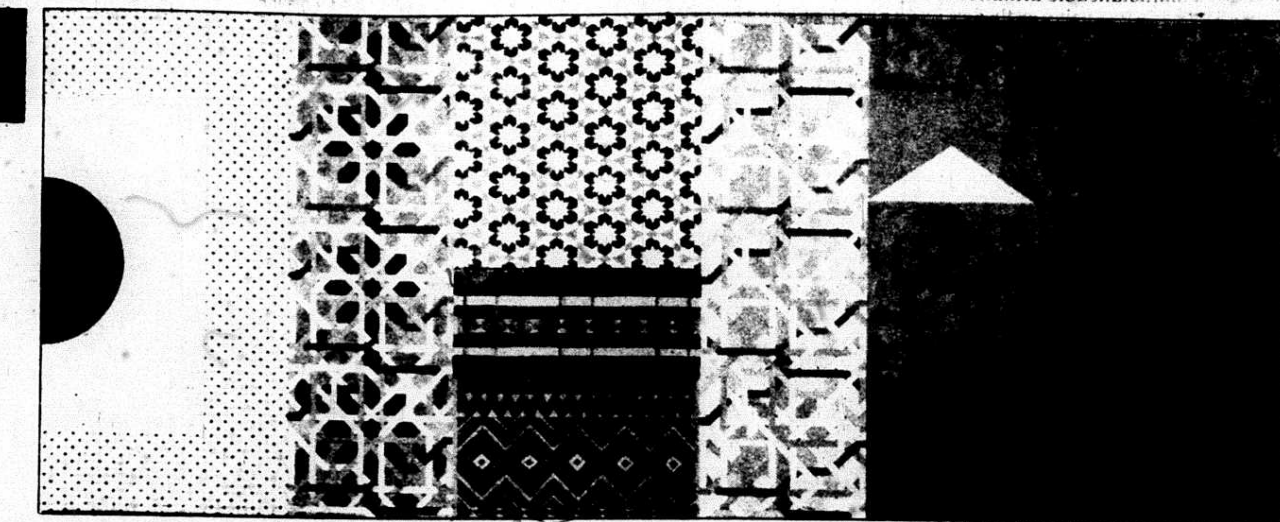
By April Kingsley

A pattern, a model to be used repeatedly, implies predictability, but paintings that utilize patterns don't have to be predictable. At least you won't find them so in the **PATTERN PAINTING** exhibition John Perreault has organized at P. S. 1 (26-01 46th Road, Long Island City, 233-1096, to December 5). The 26 artists differ markedly in approach, composition, colorism, paint handling, rhythm, and mode of patterning. What they have in common is active, all over opticality, opulence, and a spirit of optimism. Mental, as well as visual, gratification is readily available from these decorative paintings.

Each work is densely loaded with detail in which to immerse yourself. Whether screens, hand-painted upholstery, pseudo-wallpaper reliefs, or conventionally rectilinear canvases, their impacted surfaces are supercharged to exaggerate the difference between art and life. These art objects are clearly distinct from the real world. They offer the problem-free pleasures of artificial experience. In contrast, Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, despite its jazzy look, is not a pattern painting because it is internally relational (implying choices made and problems solved) and directly related to the world around it (from the white wall it hangs on, to the right angles of the room it's in, and of the person standing before it). One cares about the relationships in a Mondrian the way one cares about right and wrong, life and death.

Pattern paintings refer to crafts, like weaving and embroidery, to Native American, Oriental, Near and Far Eastern Art, to rugs, wallpaper, drapery, clothes, and all the material stuffs with which we decorate our environment and dress up our bodies. Because we use those things to cheer ourselves up, we expect patterned paintings to have a similar effect, and they do. We assume the colors will be bright and variegated and are naturally disappointed when they aren't. That only happens twice in this show—in Valerie Jaudon's dull gray geometrical patterns and in Mario Yrizarry's monochrome tromp l'oeil scarf squares.

Internal predictability need not be boring. Cynthia Carlson creates a lively Ma-



Joyce Kozloff: "Three Portals . . . pink triangle"

risseau environment with her acrylic-pigment squiggles affixed directly on a pale orchid wall. Columns of green, brown, and yellow calligraphy alternate to produce a sensuous optical flicker that raises the spirits and one's consciousness about new painterly alternatives. Jane Couch, Susan Fortgang, Gloria Klein, and Dee Shapiro work with repetition and thickened pigment—their paintings scintillate even when the colors aren't bright. The obsessiveness that characterizes the work of these artists also occurs in more thinly painted canvases, like those of Rosalind Hodgkins, Arlene Slavin, and Kendall Shaw. Hodgkins works meticulously in superrealist imagery and Slavin creates prismatically transparent geometrical abstractions, but both rely on the obsessive repeat.

When sensuous color, optically exciting patterns, varied surface textures, frontality and implied lateral extensibility, grand scale, and striking compositional format are all present in a single work—as they are in the paintings of Mary Gregoriadis, Joyce Kozloff, and Miriam Schapiro—the results are literally magnificent. Gregoriadis utilizes thick swaths of pigment directly on unsized linen in bordered, symmetrical compositions that have the jeweled glow of Byzantine icons. Kozloff and Schapiro work on a much larger scale with long, multi-panel paintings that provide varied experiences in sequence. Kozloff radically alters the internal scale and the style of patterning from one panel to the next, while Schapiro, who glues real pieces of patterned fabric on her painted surfaces, varies figure-ground relationships and the depth of pictorial space.

The fact that most of the work in the show—and all of the best work—has been done by women may mean more than that they are more sensitive than men to the possibilities inherent in "women's work," like weaving, quilting, and embroidery. (Women artists seem naturally disposed to recognize the warmth and pleasureableness of colorful decorative patterning, especially of the curvilinear kind, while the men seem to favor colder, more rigid, machined-looking rectilinear sorts of patterning.) If pattern painting is the dominant painting style right now—and I think a

strong case could be made for that notion, despite the general multiplicity of styles on view—then women have moved solidly into the avant-garde for the first time in art history. It is a style whose origins are as feminist as they are formal. One can't conceive of its emergence prior to the women's movement, any more than one can imagine its imminent demise, given the open-endedness of its aesthetic valence.

It should be noted that it took a sensitive non-museum person like Perreault, working in a non-museum situation like P. S. 1, to bring this show about. Any of the gallery-controlled museums might have shoe-horned in works by Jasper Johns, Al Jensen, Frank Stella, Robert Ryman, Sol Lewitt, Alan Shields, Ellsworth Kelly, or Gene Davis, whether they were truly pattern generated or not. Then, too, about a third of the artists Perreault has included are practically unknown, which is a feat no museum or museum-type institution I know of seems able to accomplish, and I also doubt they would have put 18 women out of 26 artists in the show. Even an art form so dominated by women as this one wouldn't have caused them to adjust their quotas that radically.

The sheer exuberance of pattern painting can be seen as a reaction to the coolness of minimal "grid" art so prevalent a short while ago. That style was one of its sources, since grids are basic to patterning. Patterns always seem to have been lifted from something in the real world and placed on a different plane through their new use; grids are abstractions from the real world that maintain their relationship to it. A grid is always serious and rational, no matter how lyrically it is handled. **MICHAEL LOEW** treats the grid so lovingly in his new soft-edged geometrical abstractions that you almost forget about references to architecture, computers, graph paper, et al, and just respond to his gentle nuancing. The paintings, at Marilyn Pearl (29 West 57th Street, to December 2) are much more painterly than the canvases he exhibited in his last few shows. They contain the traces of their making—pencil guidelines, half-brushed-out squares, pentimenti of previous decisions—which cause you to be

aware of the artists process as well as his results.

Loew, who was associated with the American Abstract Artists in the '40s, when Mondrian was its father figure, still adheres to many of the basic principles of neo-Plasticism, but he reflects it with surprising deviations from the rules and infuses it with a quiet poesy. Tiny units (squares or parts thereof), singly or in chains, vibrate in relation to one another across pale, pastel-colored grounds. The optical afterimage of the primaries produces a flicker of complementaries (the Perkinje effect) that enhances the atmospheric quality of his space. He doesn't restrict his color to the primaries, though, any more than he restricts his linear directions to those of the right angle. I still think these paintings would find a place in Mondrian's heart if for no other reason than their sparkling purity. After all, Mondrian was a sort of closet romantic himself, and he did sneak in the diagonal when he tipped his squares so that the canvas edges cut some planes into triangles.

The poetic aspect of Loew's style lies in his close-toned colorism. Suffused with a light that for some unfathomable reason seems to remind me of Watteau and waning 18th-century afternoons in the park, his paintings fairly blush with delicate feeling. Interestingly, many of the same things can be said of **PERLE FINE's** paintings at the Andre Zarre gallery (41 East 57th, to November 27). I never thought about them in conjunction before, though Fine also belonged to the American Abstract Artists in the '40s, because she seemed to have more in common with Agnes Martin, while Loew shared something with Fritz Glarner and Ilya Bolotowsky. Fine's grids are explicit while Loew's are generally implicit—even occasionally erratic—but they are both involved with delicate tonalism and palpable atmospheric light. Rhythmically alternating vertical bands of pale blue, beige, and pink, inflected with thin stripes of orange in one of Fine's *Accordment Series* paintings, combine to give off an ineffable luminosity. Some of the bands are loosely brushed, and subtle asymmetries also activate the surfaces, but the prevailing mood is quiet, warm, and reposeful. ■