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September 9 - October 7, 2000

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Montréal

LACE AND SATIN

Harlan Johnson, *Festoon*, Galerie Trois Points, Montréal.
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Festoon, an exhibition of Harlan Johnson's recent paintings was held at Galerie Trois Points in Montréal in the autumn of 2000. The gallery is located on the fifth floor of the Belgo building above Sainte-Catherine Street. Thus to visit the exhibition one had to traverse an active retail thoroughfare with its advertising panels and shop windows of electronic displays. Approaching the building that houses the gallery, one walked by a plethora of digitally reproduced imagery, through a visual environment of multiple copies. Walter Benjamin's effect of technological reproduction always comes to mind in these vibrant commercial settings, where the aura of any original idea has been watered down through endless processes of duplication.



Harlan Johnson, *Festoon 10*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 71 x 71 cm.

The role of the artist as painter in our age of digital reproduction is uncertain. There is an ideological as well as commercial desire for the painter to return the aura to the artwork, to produce, in the rarefied air of the artist's studio, original meaningful imagery detached from the metropolis of meaningless signs that surround us. Fortunately, Harlan Johnson subverts this desire by insisting on making work that refers to and uses this complex interplay of technologically reproduced signs that form our visual environment. *Festoon* is made up of a selection of square canvases varying in size from 24 to 71 centimetres across.

These works are hung in clusters of three or four respecting an invisible grid on the four walls of the gallery. Johnson, not insignificantly, chooses as his imagery the repeated floral patterns found on domestic textiles. The earliest processes of multiple image reproduction were in textile design; industrial looms developed early in the 19th century could be programmed to reproduce an infinite series of identical motifs and colours. The technological precursors for digital image reproduction are to be found in mechanised weaving processes of the Industrial Revolution. At first look, Johnson's paintings appear to be composed of colourful flower and leaf patterns stencilled in thick paint over chromatically contrasting painted surfaces. Upon closer inspection, we see that these "surfaces" are mostly made up of found fabrics, of patterned velour, curtain lace and satin. We also see that these paintings are composed of a multiplicity of interconnected layers. The bottom layer is the aforementioned fabric. The printed and embroidered patterns are visible in the interstices of a series of painted marks applied to them. Johnson has projected onto his found materials fragments of patterns from other found fabrics. He has painted in by hand enlarged details of these designs, the expanded scale distorting and altering the predominantly floral motifs giving them the abstract pixelated quality of digital imagery. Several of Johnson's pictures use a diaphanous nylon weave as a support allowing the paint to float above the translucent mesh. In *Palimpsest 10* the stretcher is visible through the translucent fabric, adding one more layer to Johnson's complex play of surfaces. A floral patterned lace curtain, another covering of transparent textured relief, is glued to this surface. Onto this second layer, Johnson has painted fragments of a floral motif, blown up to become a distorted checkerboard of white and blue pixels.

The overall effect of looking at one of Johnson's recent paintings is to find oneself peering into a profundity of overlapping patterns, layers upon layers that alternately rise to the surface and recede into the depths. Some marks rest on the uppermost crust of the painting's surface while others blend in with the patterns of the supporting fabrics. At times these blended marks take the form of a recognisable floral or leaf motif, at other times they are indistinct imprints, stains like those found on old patterned furniture.

The underlying structure of many of Johnson's paintings resembles a web or a network of filaments and patterns. With *Festoon 2* he has used a monochro-



Harlan Johnson, *Festoon 2*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 71 x 71 cm.

matic red satin with a raised floral pattern as his canvas. Johnson has applied orange paint to some of the negative spaces in the pattern to bring out the textured flowers. Over this he has painted, in an earthier tone of red, a trellis, a fragment of another borrowed pattern, crawling up the right side of the canvas. On top of this floats an almost menacing black floral form, a tightly knit pattern reminiscent of a spider's web.

With *Guise 6*, in an ironic take on Jasper John's art-as-object approach, Johnson has glued a pair of men's underpants to a square canvas. A floral pattern covers the pants and continues onto the canvas. It is as if the canvas and the underwear have been stained through a batik or tie-dye process. The saturated colours and the bold pattern partially camouflage the underclothing. Colour and decoration predominate, blending the clothing into a matrix of floral forms.

Johnson's patterns are the ubiquitous floral designs of contemporary popular home decor. If there is a nostalgic quality to the colour and form of Johnson's imagery it is because the source, and indeed elements, of his current paintings are discarded fabrics and old textile samples that he has collected. Fragments of past domestic interiors are recalled; we remember our grandmother's house and family rooms in old films and television shows.

As well as our personal associations with this imagery, an historical design ideology is also evoked. The floral and natural motifs seen in Johnson's paintings and so prevalent in late-Victorian interiors can be traced to the influence of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement of 19th century Britain.

William Morris preached a return to simplicity and practicality in architecture and design. He promoted, through his workshop, a return to traditional crafts

and techniques of weaving, dyeing and printing. He sought to reverse the dehumanising effects of the Industrial Revolution and proposed a society in which people could enjoy craftsmanship and simplicity of expression. Morris insisted that art and design should look first to nature for inspiration; floral patterns and leaf motifs prevailed in his wallpaper and textile design.

Arts and Crafts inspired patterns have to this day infiltrated many popular domestic interiors. Ironically, the ubiquitous floral motif wallpaper and curtains are mass produced derivatives of Morris' original patterns. The superficial effect of the Arts and Crafts movement is still very much among us but the substance of Morris' agenda, his desire to return to a more egalitarian and traditional way of making things has become redundant in a world of globalised mass production.

Harlan Johnson's testament to the failed Arts and Crafts ideal is a body of work that re-interprets re-interpreted natural motifs and celebrates, through Johnson's expertise with paint and brush, individual craftsmanship. And, while the paintings in *Festoon* may refer to centuries old ideals of beauty and craftsmanship, they at the same time address topical issues. The pixelated imagery, as well as the mass produced found elements, in this body of work speaks to the prevalence of visual stimuli in our culture. As we enter into Johnson's recent paintings we cannot escape the visual references to the web of mass-produced imagery, the forest of visual signifiers, which surround us in the digital age.

PAUL LONDON