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ART REVIEW

Attractive and Accessible, but Is That All There Is?

By [BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO](#)

Ornamental art is hard to resist. But you have to, for behind the casual facade of easy decoration is a theory of art's purpose that shuns complexity, even snubs its nose at it. It is a theory that says looking good is sufficient.

Unfortunately, in art, as in many other things, looking good is not enough. Artists who work with pattern and ornament need to bring ideas to the table, or else their work can easily become a dissolute version of wallpaper, or batik. So worried was the early-20th-century cultural theorist Adolf Loos about the encroachment of ornament into fine art that he wrote an influential essay titled "Ornament as Crime."

Crime is too strong a word to describe the tendency toward decoration in contemporary art. But it is nonetheless true that there is a lot of decorative work in art museums now that is, well, vapid. There is also a fair bit of it in "Ornamental Instincts," a colorful new show at Wave Hill designed to stave off winter chills.

The show is easy to view, for looking at repeating forms, patterns of color and light and ornamental flourishes on the walls of Wave Hill House is warming, comforting and even energizing. The 11 artists selected by Wennie Huang, the curator, to participate in this show are, if nothing else, very good at what they do.

Among them is Cristina de Gennaro, who of all the artists in this exhibition seems the most thoughtful, the most committed to making art that looks good and has something to say.

She has concocted a mixed-media sound installation for the foyer using battery-operated alarm clocks and wishbones. The pitter-patter of the clocks sounds like rain, while a female voice reads out a wish list. It is a work about seasonal rituals and the promise of renewal.

More strictly decorative work fills the tearoom, reception area and cafe. This is art that everyone can understand and appreciate, ranging from Rachel Selekman's collage of a roaring fire created from colorful, overlapping artificial leaves installed above an actual fireplace to Janet Koenig's dioramas of nature scenes that are installed in little recessed crescent spaces above the house doors.

The problem with this sort of ornamental art is that, not wanting to make enemies of visitors, it has trouble winning new friends. It is easy to look at but very difficult to like or even love.

It is a bit like a [Norman Rockwell](#) painting — you can smile at his cheesy visions of Americana, but you would probably never want to take one of them home. They are too bland.

Siona Benjamin's gold-framed lightbox (a backlit photographic image) installed on the wall of the gallery area is a bit more lively, combining aspects of traditional Indian and Persian miniature painting and references to the artist's bicultural Jewish and Hindu/Muslim background. Especially eye-catching in the picture are multiple self-portraits of the artist as a dancing, blindfolded figure.

The stairway provides the setting for another dramatic piece, Skowmon Hastanan's installation on the migratory practices of monarch butterflies, which are among the most common of all North American butterflies. A swarm of these colorful orange and black insects, symbolized by digital images of butterfly wings encased in crystal, hangs from a leafless branch suspended over the stairwell.

Though narrow in scope, this work is vivid in impact, inviting us to consider why these butterflies have not already migrated south for winter, as they have done for thousands of years. [Climate change](#) is the underlying theme, for altered migratory patterns of birds, insects and animals are often held up as evidence of global warming.

Ms. Hastanan's sweet-looking installation shows that working from an essentially decorative aesthetic matrix does not necessarily preclude making a statement about important social and political issues. The statement may not change anything, but at least it invites us to consider the idea.

"Ornamental Instincts," Wave Hill House, Wave Hill, 675 West 252nd Street, the Bronx, through Feb. 10. Information: (718) 549-3200 or www.wavehill.org

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