

HANDEYE

Foreign Affairs

BY SOPHIA MARISA LUCAS | DECEMBER 15, 2011



COURTESY OF BARBARA ELLMANN

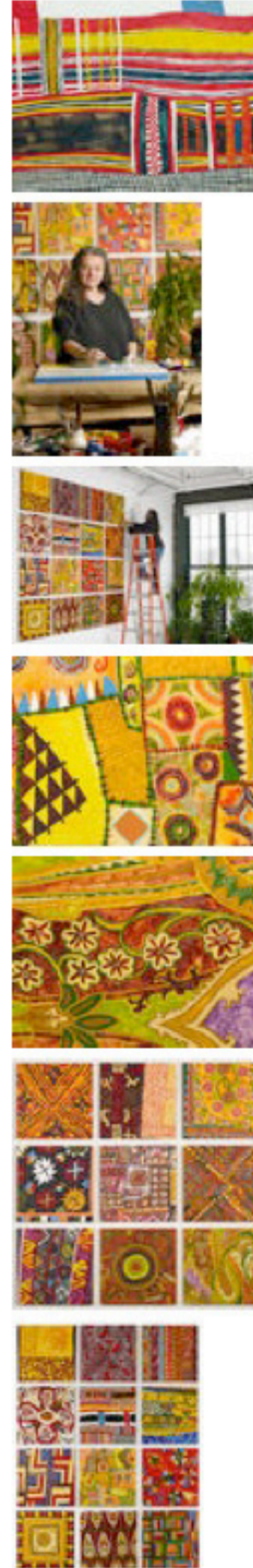
The Paintings of Barbara Ellmann

Originally trained as a dancer, Barbara Ellmann has been working as a visual artist for more than 30 years. While her work spans a range of subject matters and aesthetics, it is fundamentally imbued with the feminist ideals of community and sensuous knowledge. She works mainly in encaustic paintings, the style and medium of which are very much connected to her intimate understanding of the body in motion, and in orchestrated space. This sensibility allows her to stage what function as sites for a kind of subjective choreography of visual information in her multi-painting installations. These are then enacted by the viewer with the myriad visual associations that can be formed within and across Ellmann's groupings.

The conceptual framework for Ellmann's painting arrangements lies in the idea that while each painting is conceived of and completed independently, they are meant to function together. Each painting has its own interest and agency, but its resonance is completely contingent upon its relationship to the works that surround it. Both the paintings and the arrangements are named to reflect their simultaneous interdependence and autonomy, and each work can be included in any number of installations—this characteristic create a sense of fluidity that is important to Ellmann. The arrangements she makes are varied and dynamic—some harmonious elements and some discordant—and the viewer has the experience of connecting undulating patterns of color and form, which generate the sense of movement that Ellmann innately invests in them.

In 2005, Ellmann moved into a studio in the Silks building in

CLICK THUMBNAIL TO VIEW SLIDESHOW



RELATED

No related stories at this time.

Long Island City, New York. The third floor, she says, “was full of looms, and downstairs were silk screening tables for magnificent wallpapers.” The building was previously the Scalamandre Silks Building, a luxury silk manufacturer that occupied the building for over 75 years, and was known for providing the White House with textiles beginning under the Kennedy administration. The company moved to South Carolina in 2004 and the building was converted into studio and commercial spaces. It was quite a natural source of inspiration for Ellmann, especially as someone who had always been partial to elaborate patterning, and who had made a habit of collecting unique textile objects.

The body of work that emerged from her transfer to the Silks Building is called, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, and it indeed developed in part because of the history of the building, and also because of its location in Queens, the most ethnically diverse county of the country. In the end, Ellmann draws from a wide range of patterning and symbolism, seeking to create works that stimulate the viewer and harness pluralism that we experience in diverse environments. While in some works the origins of her influences are somewhat legible, the arrangement of the paintings in permutable installations is a choice to reveal the primary confluences of seemingly disparate aesthetics, so that cultural categories become porous.

In talking to Ellmann about her process, one easily senses the joy she finds in each step. She describes encaustic work as alchemical, where she takes the product from a solid to a liquid, which then of course returns to solid form as it adheres to her wooden panel surfaces. The properties of encaustic--an all-natural material made of pigment, wax and damar resin (sourced from petrified trees), make it more of a physical, almost sculptural form of painting. When Ellmann describes the ways she works with the medium, she at first begins to echo her interest in movement again; infusing the wax with heat of course is an energy-generating process, and the colors she layers onto her surface move around each other rather than blending as is characteristic of other painting mediums.

Working with encaustic itself, is so much a practice that is about texture and materiality. The surfaces can be rendered glossy or matte, depending on the chosen application of heat and Ellmann works in great detail into her layered colors through processes of digging in, or excavating and building up--it's quite physical. The works are quite luminous as well, a quality that can only be seen in person, because of the way wax holds light. In her FOREIGN AFFAIRS series this effect creates a sense of textiles that have come alive--radiating her passion for pattern and the handmade.

Works from Ellmann's FOREIGN AFFAIRS series will next be featured in Textility at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey from January 13th through April 1st, 2012. The opening reception will be held from 6-8pm on Friday, January 13th. More information on the exhibition may be found at <http://www.artcenternj.org/Home.aspx> and on Ellmann's website at <http://www.barbaraellmann.com/news.html>