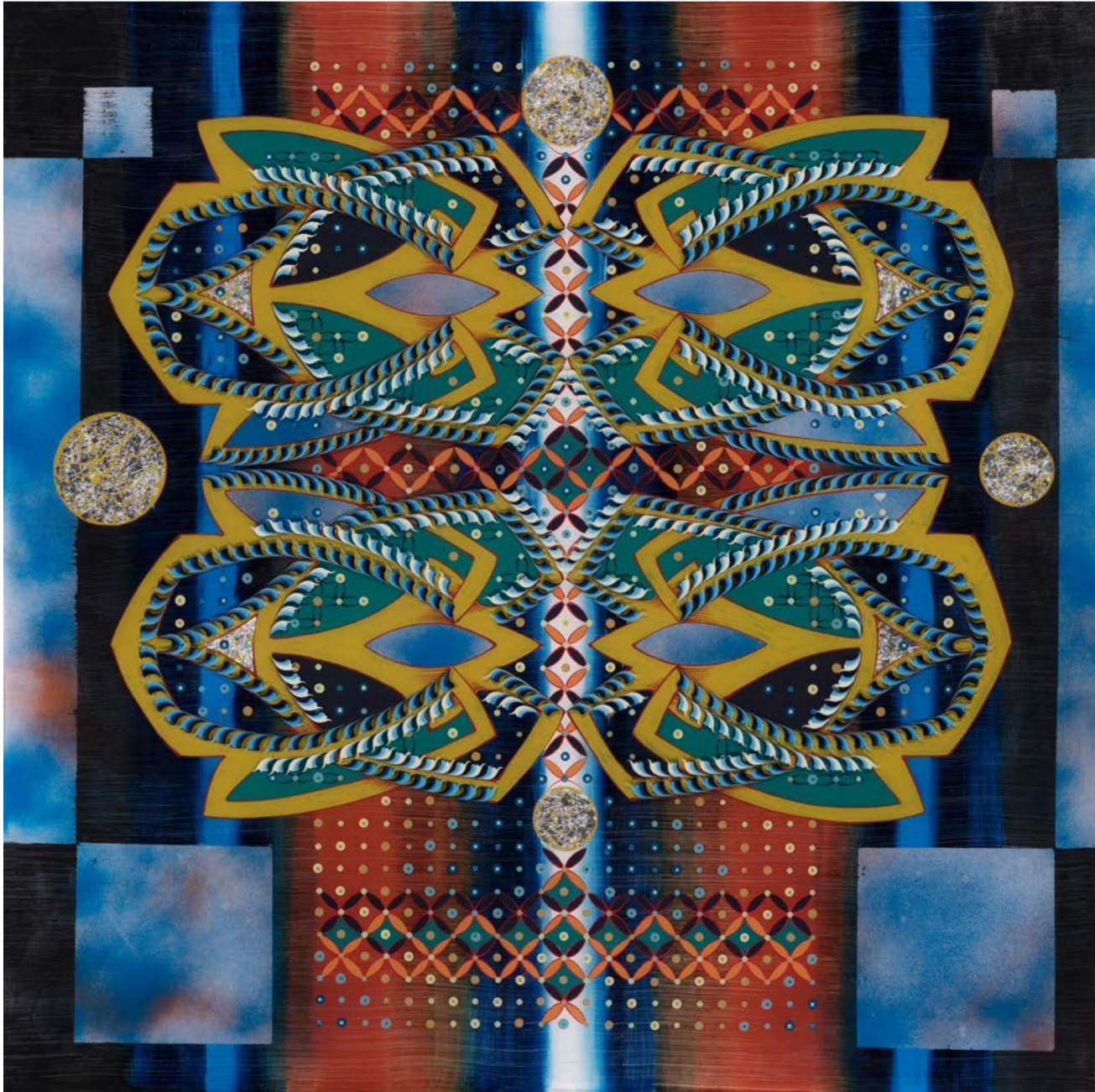


Tara Austin

BOREAL ORNAMENT III



On the many pleasures of pattern

BY WAYNE ROOSA

Tara Austin's big-scale pattern paintings, on display at Joseph Nease Gallery in Duluth, MN, are a triple threat. First, their impact dazzles the eyes with bold symmetrical designs that, despite their stability, are hyperactive with ornamental intricacies. The lively tensions between these stable symmetries and super active intricacies are echoed in her colors, where quiet, muted tones spark with electric, neon flashes of brilliance, as if a low-voltage charge hums through Norwegian rosemaling. The sheer retinal pleasure of these vibrant tensions holds our eyes long enough for a second level of impact to kick in. Now the mind, finding itself caught optically—partly in pleasure, partly in visual entanglement and partly in labyrinthine puzzles begging for decryption—engages.

For as the eye scans the paintings, trying to discern the organization of the patterns, decipher various motifs, and grasp color schemes, the mind begins to ask where these paintings are coming from. Are these patterns and motifs her inventions or are they an eclectic synthesis of many cultures and traditions? How are they constructed? And where exactly do these paintings belong on the spectrum from decorative craft to functional ware to the idea-based abstraction of contemporary so-called "high art."

Some of this requires explanation. If the first reward of painting comes by investing ourselves in the pure optical experience of the work, the second reward comes from the mind's deciphering of those optics. In Austin's paintings we began with the intricate, linear, hard-edged forms, the stylized flora, kaleidoscopic symmetries and repetitions, the subtle interlacing and heraldic compositions. We began with the color harmonies, muted earth tones, pastels, bright accents, near-psychedelic, electric neon oranges, reds and golds vibrating next to their color complements and acidic tertiaries. But soon the mind wants



"Dusty Turquoise Waters," acrylic and gold leaf on plexiglass, 48" x 72", 2017

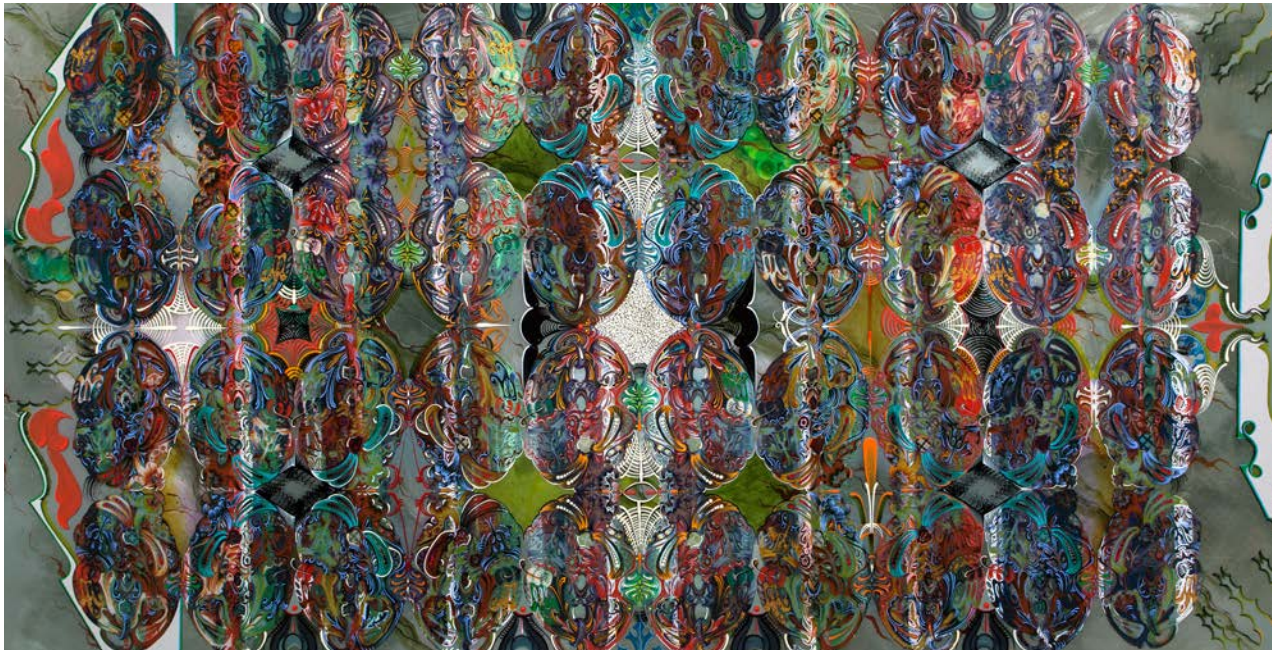
to know about meaning. Where are the various elements coming from? How were they invented? What is their relationship to what looks very much like borrowings from traditional crafts such as rosemaling, ancient design in Persian carpets, Islamic patterning, trippy 1970s design, and who knows what other sources? Not to mention that Austin's earning of an MFA in contemporary painting provides yet another tradition in abstract painting and screen printing. Each of these sources carries its own cultural tradition and social values, which are not always compatible. So, what are we to make of Austin's eclectic combinations?

In her own artist's statement, as well as in radio interviews, Austin says her work is grounded in growing up in Northern Minnesota, where "an appreciation of botany and keen observation of patterns in the natural environment" deeply impacted her with "a form of natural beauty."¹ In addition, the social community of that upbringing is also influential, especially the craft practiced collaborative-

ly by multiple generations of women sustaining the tradition of Norwegian rosemaling. This not only inspired her visually, but also served as a social bond between women of many generations creating within a meaningful culture and tradition.² A WTIP radio interview with Austin and several other women working at the North House Folk School in Grand Marais, Minnesota speaks to the multiple sources and cultural awareness involved. Talking about their craft, these women are fully aware that they are participating in ancient forms of ornament, craft and functional ware from multiple cultures. They reference sources ranging from the specific valley of their immigrant ancestors, the Valdres Valley in Norway, to Baroque

chinoiserie (which they point out is mostly Japanese), filtered through 17th and 18th century European trade routes, to the design permutations of French *rocaille*, to the designs of Iranian and Persian carpets influenced by Ancient Near Eastern culture and later revised by Islamic beliefs and values.

In Austin's art, these sources are extended by other influences loved by her generation, including traces of retro and trippy 1960's and 70s design and color. One need only consult the website photograph of Austin in her studio, dressed in slightly retro mod clothing, wearing one of the bright colored beaded necklaces she makes using



"Anaglypta," acrylic and egg shell on plexiglass, 48" x 96", 2017

¹ Artist Statement, www.taralynnaustindotcom.wordpress.com/about/

² Elements of Craft WTIP Radio-Rosemaling: <https://www.wtip.org/elements-craft-rosemaling-0>



"Stemline," oil, acrylic and gold leaf on plexiglass, 48" x 48", 2018



"WP #4", acrylic on plexiglass, 20" x 16", 2016

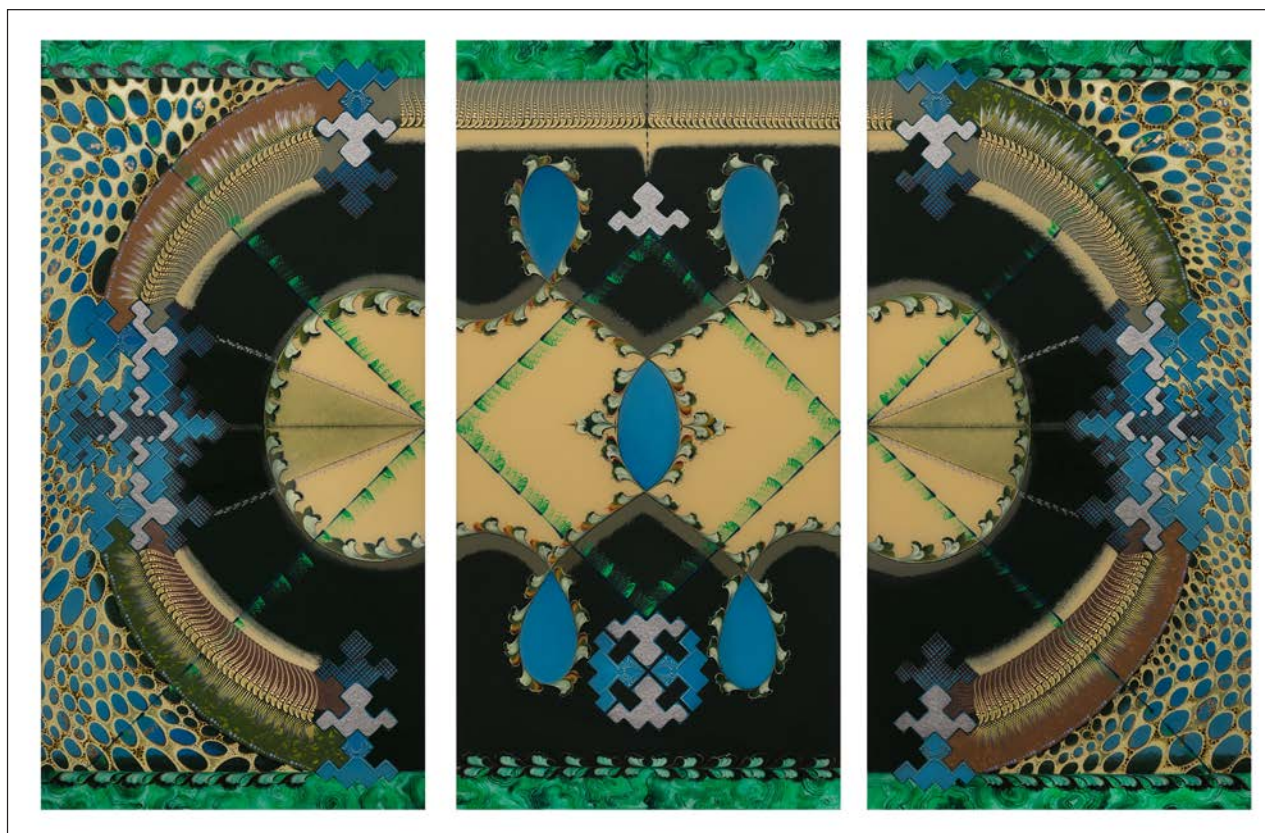
the same patterns and motifs as in her paintings, seated in a 1960s style white molded fiberglass chair with its hot chartreuse stand placed on a faux-Persian carpet, with many of her patterned paintings on the wall behind her.

But it seems to me that the richness and variety of these decorative sources, experienced within the more or less traditional Northern Minnesota community of women practicing rosemaling craft and functional ware is not the whole story. Clearly these elements in her work are not being used in the service of traditional functional ware and craft. Rather, these elements are lifted and transported—indeed, translated—into a highly elegant, abstract, formalized imagery as paintings belonging to the world of Postmodern contemporary art. For despite the distance both in miles and sensibility between Northern Minnesota and Contemporary Postmodernism, there is an important connection between these worlds. That connection is the common ground of women working collaboratively in community as creative makers. This is obvious enough in Austin's Grand Marais community with its Scandinavian immigrant roots. But her translation of this into contemporary art is possible because there is a counterpart in the community of women working within contemporary art.

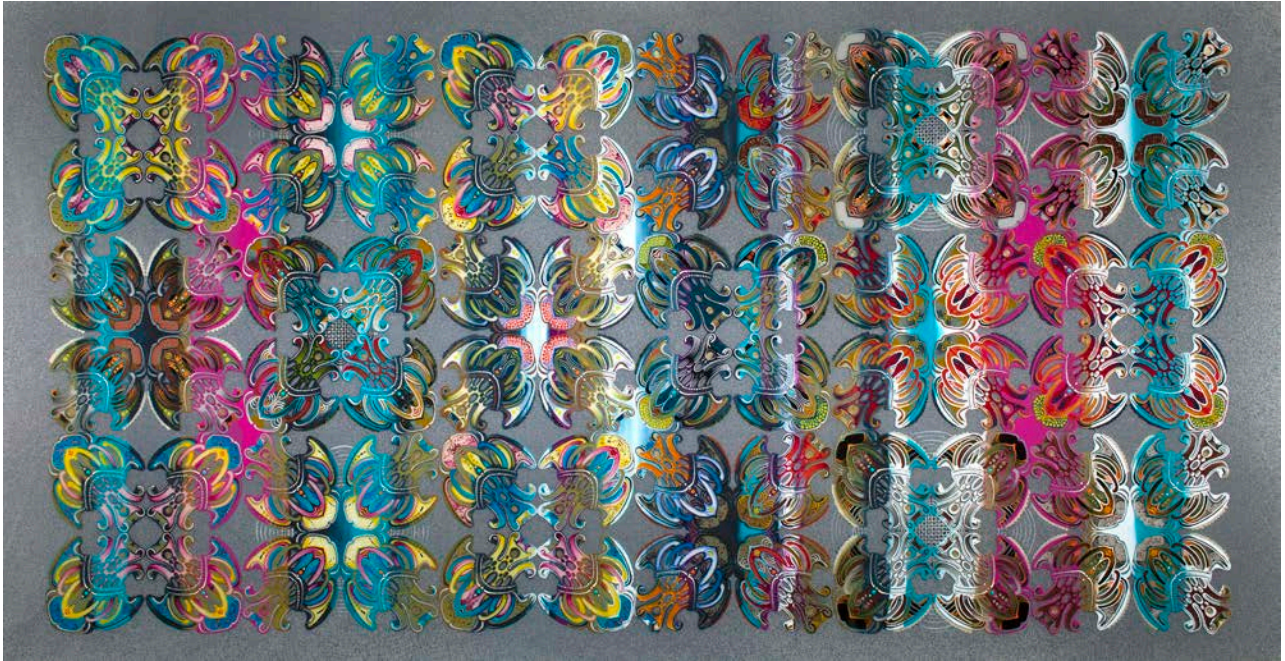
There is a lineage of feminist-inspired work and collaboration from Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, the women's collaborative project, *Womanhouse*, Miriam Schapiro's and Joyce Kozloff's "Pattern and Decoration Movement," as celebrated recently in the exhibition, *Surface/Depth: The Decorative After Miriam Schapiro*³ and others that is relevant to Austin's work. In this lineage, as women sought to carve out both a place and an imagery for women to create within the male-dominated context of modern art, female artists looked to what women had been making for thousands of years. Namely, functional art and craft richly decorated and patterned. They took that history and abstracted it, that is, translated its forms and imagery into the idioms of high art as painting, collage and sculpture. But they also looked to the collaborative community of making that women traditionally

formed, and adopted that social model and its values for their own. In this, they merged so-called “high” and “low” aesthetics, making new forms, and demonstrating the profundity of aesthetic making within the social context of human community, all while insisting that women are equals in making art as a discourse of ideas. With this move, pattern and decoration became both domestic ornament and philosophical image, both craft and discourse, thus changing the exclusivity of male High Modernism into the inclusivity of Relational Aesthetics and art as Social Practice performed within Postmodernism. Tara Austin’s works seem, at least to me, to belong quite unpretentiously to this lineage.

But there is a danger here of making her work too *politically savvy*. And in this lies the third of her triple threat power as an artist. While her works are aware, they do not feel political, ironic or polemical. Instead they feel engaging, lively and satisfying. I think this is because, consciously or unconsciously, their primary energy lies with the ancient and sustaining role that pattern and decoration have always played. For throughout that ancient history, these so-called “low forms” have played a crucial role for the human psyche. Namely, it is through the stylizing of natural phenomena (plant and animal life, natural cycles and patterns of the seasons and the stars) into abstract motifs and patterns that humans have organized



“Arborvitae”, oil, acrylic and gold leaf on plexiglass, triptych, 3 equal framed pieces, 48" x 72", 2018



"Bunchberry," acrylic and gold leaf on plexiglass, 48" x 96", 2016

sensory experience and made sense of life's patterns. By the power of design and patterning, we translate the randomness of our sensory experience into orderly motifs, and by organizing those motifs into patterns, we bring clarity out of complexity and predictable regularity out of frightening chance. Patterning promises us that life will repeat in cycles, rather than float off into unending

space and time. As with the linguistic power of naming, decoration and pattern subdue the world, regularizing randomness into repeatable sequences, bringing us order from chaos. And yet they leave room for humor, pleasure and accident. Pattern and decoration comfort us even as they delight us. Just so, Tara Austin's paintings delight, confuse, and resolve our eyes and mind.

Wayne Roosa is an art historian and artist in St. Paul, MN. He is Professor of Art History at Bethel University, former Chair of the New York Center for Art and Media Studies (NYCAMS) in New York City. He has written internationally on the American painter, Stuart Davis, as well as gallery notes and exhibition catalog essays for numerous contemporary artists. He has served as juror for the National Endowment for the Humanities, was a recipient of an NEH grant for work at Harvard on the papers of Stuart Davis, and was an Andrew Mellon Research Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He holds a BFA in painting and a BA in art history from the University of Colorado, Boulder, and an MA and PH.D in art history from Rutgers University in New Jersey.

The boreal forest and other influences

BY ANN KLEFSTAD

Boreal

Boreal forest is the largest terrestrial biome on earth. It reaches across North America, Europe, and Asia to the southern border of the arctic tundra. Boreal forest is where Tara Austin grew up, on Poplar Lake, north of Grand Marais, Minnesota. Boreal forest is adapted to vast ranges of temperature, quieting in winter, expanding into vivid life in spring and summer, enacting what can seem to a more southern sensibility a great tragedy in fall, but it is drama and not death. The visual effect of boreal forest is of a hypercomplex order that can seem chaotic. These paintings seize on that aspect: the symmetry and order of plants, branching and blooming and twining from biological pattern to nearly infinite variation.

Austin notes, "My upbringing in Northern Minnesota instilled an appreciation of botany and a keen observation of patterns in the natural environment . . . I incorporate techniques from scenic painting and faux finishing, the folk art of Norwegian rosemaling, and reverse painting on glass. Observing these customary processes became a way for me to develop a personal aesthetic based on the necessity of good craftsmanship. Their established authority of geometry, harmony, and beauty speaks vibrantly."¹

These are boreal traditions. People who have lived in northern places learned an appreciation for both complexity and order; and traditional artforms sought meaning in these patterns and in their explosive repetition. Austin's work inhabits the interface between natural profusion and human perceptions of meaning, but it also brings these practices into an absolutely contemporary practice, informed by painting traditions from both the center and the margins of modernist and postmodernist traditions. It is still, and maybe always will be, a radical act to become fascinated with what things look like, and with what that appearance means—not instrumentally,



"Boreal IV," acrylic and gold leaf on plexiglass, 36" x 24", 2016

not "what is this good for," but "what is this, in itself, for itself, what does it have to tell me that cannot be told in words?"

"Boreal" is incorporated into the name of this exhibition, and into the titles of several of its paintings.

¹ Tara Austin, interview with author, Nov. 12, 2019.

“Being a perceiving being, a being with a body.”

The boreal forest was the background and foreground of Tara Austin’s early memories. North shore forest is not like the fairytale forests of vast deciduous trees and clear understory, or like the vertical redwood forests of architectural trunks. You can’t stand back from it; it’s engulfing. It’s a tangled hypercomplex living world, in which you can sense order—but only at the limits of your vision, with help from your imagination, can you perceive it.

Austin was always a maker of things. Her mother re-created furniture, understood the transformations of repetition and pattern and ornament, taught her about finishes. Tara remembers making, as a child, a papier-mache wood duck, the most fancy of northern birds, a bird of wonderful, colorful excess. Artmaking has always been an important part of her life, “a natural decision.” She considered going to school for botany to be a botanical illustrator, but the art burst the bonds of the science. Other things were calling out to be made.

Her making in paint is audacious, ambitious. The paintings are crafted with the swift rhythms of a skater or a dancer. She has a disciplined, joyful relationship to physical movement and making, and this is the heart of her craft: the sport of it. Her painting is like moving thought, reeling in patterns over multiple planes.

But she keeps a relationship to the making of things, of objects, as well: she started making jewelry in 2014, a practice centered around what she calls “the little flowers”—bead matrixes that have all the obsessive pattern-drive that an actual flower does. A flower creates these colors, these forms, in order to live another year. It’s a drive that to humans can seem merely appealing, “pretty”—but to a flower it is life itself.

Austin came south to Duluth, attended the College of St. Scholastica (CSS), majored in art. For Austin art isn’t so much a study as a practice, committed to a very broad swathe of life in general, cutting down through art history but also through the history of private life; through human customs but also the habits of growth

of the plant world. “When I was in school I appreciated the time to really think about art,” she says. When she was studying at CSS she would also walk down to the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) and help at the Tweed Museum, handling art, which made artworks very real as humanly made objects. She worked with artist Ryuta Nakajima exhibiting cephalopod work with him. Deb Shubat, director of the greenhouse at UMD, was another valued contact.

The work that emerged from these experiences incorporated patterns, nets and balls, units that could grow in cellular fashion, a joining of abstraction and natural life.

Three years after graduating she traveled to Peru and Ecuador, and there, in high mountain ecosystems and orchids, found echoes of her home forests (which also have orchids, mostly tiny ones). She spent time “observing the culture and environment and looking for orchids, preferably in the wild.”² Most days were spent hiking, exploring museums and churches, shopping for fruit at markets and cooking, and finding transportation to the next stop (travel was taxi, bike, bus, river boat, and moto taxi). “The beauty was completely overwhelming! I painted almost every day in a field journal, mostly watercolors. These became the groundwork for my master’s thesis show.”³

These orchid sketches are both floral and intensely biological: they resemble human hearts, with flows and valves.



“Orchid sketches,” watercolor on paper, 9" x 11", 2015

^{2,3} Tara Austin, interview with author, Nov. 12, 2019.

Soon after her experiences in Peru and Ecuador she entered the MFA program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UWM), earning scholarships and awards. Her paintings there continued a strong drive toward botanical forms and the resonance of ornament.

While at UWM and in nearby Chicago she discovered other painters: Gerhard Richter fascinated her, for instance. “A big art experience for me was touring the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and seeing an exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute in 2011. I remember being surprised by Gerhard Richter’s painting, *Woman Descending the Stairs*, and although I have never been fond of portraits I enjoyed trying to decipher the sequence of events in the painting process.”⁴

Also in Chicago Tara found the work of Barbara Rossi, whose double-sided paintings on glass interested her. The shimmering volume that appeared between the two painted planes, and the need for both exquisite planning and improvisation, led her to adopt this complex and rewarding technique.

Both Richter and Rossi opened the door to complexities of structure that spoke to her—the idea of building a painting.

Other nudges happened at a conference on Scandinavian folk arts at UWM—photos of young Saami men knitting, evoking the net theme that was so strong in her work earlier, and the rosemaling (rose painting) technique that evolved in Scandinavia—also a hybrid of urban influences and rural practice. In 2017, on a travel grant from UWM, she visited Norway, where she met more rosemalers and other artists, while deeply observing its culture and environment.

Complex appearances: Influences and modes

“These things have been part of my lifestyle and ‘heritage’. . . . Rosemaling came up in many critiques at art school, and I believe it is how I approach my art making. I have an affinity for decorating and embellishing; rosemaling feels natural to me.”⁵ After graduate school Austin studied this style with a midwestern master of the technique.



“Orchidaceae,” acrylic on panel, 16” x 20”, 2015

Rosemaling is a country practice that incorporates larger European influences. The vogue for the lush acanthus carvings of baroque architecture and furnishings arrived in 18th century Norway. There, only a few could afford the lavish, curling acanthus motifs, carved in imported hardwoods, and ornamented with gold leaf. There arose painters’ guilds that adopted the baroque and rococo motifs to folk-painting means. They taught the rhythmic and formal style, to be applied to walls and furniture and vessels in bright colors, not gold. It was a way to invent wealth, to create spiritual and visual wealth out of perception alone.

These guild-trained artists traveled the country and over time created new styles of rosemaling. As access to industrially manufactured goods arose, the old decorative styles gradually became unfashionable. But when Norwegians came to America, the old styles got a new lease

^{4,5} Tara Austin, interview with author, Nov. 12, 2019.

on life: they evoked the traditions of the lost home, and defied the new American lessons of purchased wealth with a peasant tradition of handmade riches.

Orchids and Flowers

The orchid paintings that constituted Austin's thesis show at Madison arose from the orchids that she saw and painted in Ecuador and Peru. These were big, colorful lavish flowers; their name comes from the Latin for "testicles," though to us they can seem so feminine. They transcend and encompass genders and evoke their mingling. Austin's orchids, painted originally in oil on panel and evolving into acrylic with "pops of oil" on top, combine the colors of flesh with inorganic colors. Austin's play with the dualities inherent in her work gives it infinite interest, and great elasticity. These are not paintings that are here to show you a thing; they show you instead the secret lives and movements in our ideas of things. There is insistence on a dialectic. There is reference to botanical art but subversion of it.

The symmetry and repeated motifs refer to nature; they are not literal but are in relationship to the tendencies of the botanical world, and find in that world analogies to the forests of thought, to neural nets.

Reverse painting

Reverse painting is a craft, a tradition, that requires careful craftsmanship and planning but also spontaneity. Originating in 18th century France, but found also in China and India, these works are often done more as *objets de vertu* rather than "art" per se. But artists like Barbara Rossi also use this technique, painting on both sides of a sheet of glass, which creates a space between the two sets of marks—thin, but absolute. The painted marks shimmer against each other as our eyes struggle to make sense of their unity and separation. The glass creates a duality that the mind can play with.

Current work

This exhibition presents a confident body of work that has grown in complexity and range. Austin's journey through forms and symmetries, patterns and colors, has just begun. It will be wonderful to see where it goes next.

She says, when I ask what she sees herself doing in the next five years: "Painting and walking." I can't imagine anything richer.

Ann Klefstad is a writer and sculptor who lives in Duluth. She has written for a number of arts journals such as Visible Language and Sculpture magazine, and was the founding editor at martists.org. She is a sailor and kayaker, a hiker and camper. She has two grown children who have taught her most of what she knows. The dog Daisy always reminded her that every day is a good day.



"Boreal VII," acrylic on plexiglass, 24" x 24", 2020



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"Boreal VIII," acrylic on plexiglass, 24" x 24", 2020