ORNAMENT AND LANDSCAPE
On the Nature of Artifice

"Ornament: any decoration that has no referent outside of the object on which it is found."

OLEG GRABAR

"The landscape thinks itself in me."

CÉZANNE

"...with what intensity nature or a landscape can nagate us. At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky; the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise."

CAMUS

"A landscape as depicted by an artist is a manifestation -- such a work of the intellect assumes a higher rank than the mere natural landscape. For everything spiritual is better than anything natural."

HEGEL

"Like money landscape is a social hieroglyph that conceals the actual basis of its value. It does so by naturalizing its conventions and conventionalizing its nature."

W.J.T. MITCHELL

The work assembled here prompts the distinction, which is nonetheless obvious, between ornaments and landscapes. Yet these works not only sustain but also dissolve that distinction. The dissolution of that distinction is an event occurring between the works as well as a force residing within individual ones. In short, the exhibition enacts the continuity between the made and the made-to-resemble-nature.

March 20 - April 19, 1997

Ann Agee
Helen Bergruen
Robert Berlind
Richmond Burton
Vija Celmins
Peter Hristoff
Neil Jenney
Ellen K. Levy
Georgia Marsh
Doug Martin
Ann Messner
Alison Moritsugu
Michael Norton
Jules Olitski
Harriet Shorr
John Torreano

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Special thanks to Leonard Lobner, Greenberg/Vidov Gallery and
The Philip Morris Company.

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Landscape is less a thing and more an event, regardless whether it comes to appearance as vista, genre of depiction, or simply within the imagination alone. Landscape takes place as the act of fashioning nature into an expanded, as well as an expansive, thing. It was Cézanne who most fully recognized at what cost these expansions were fabricated. Cézanne recoiled from landscape's looking out upon it. His paintings embody space without distorting it, by finding the internal complement to an externalizing projection.

Ornaments are equally just such internal complements. So too do they take up space, however modestly, as well as taking up the project of space. Indeed, it is precisely in their modesty that their wealth resides, for ornaments are products, like Cézanne's landscapes, of a turn inward and away from projected space. Ornaments do not so much reject spatialization as they rather reproject the production of space. They are thus at once both critiques as well as enhancements of the primary tradition according to which space has been produced.

The techniques enacted by the works here, according to which the reprojecting and inhabiting of space take place, are those of adornment and decoration. Since ornamentation consists first and foremost not in the display of an object or a space but rather in the gesture of referring back only toward itself, ornaments are produced by the technique of an endless inward projecting. In this regard ornaments -- and especially those placed upon our bodies -- always move only toward us, perhaps as if they even begin already within us. Since ornaments inexorably point and refer only to themselves, it seems extremely odd that they point or refer at all. What impulse gives rise to ornament -- to ornament's insistency self-referencing -- and more particularly, what gives rise to the ornamenting of landscape?

Ornament itself provides an answer to these questions: the impulse arises from the absent experience of space. Rather than thing-like, let alone a mere thing, space is, like landscape, an event which requires conjuring up. The ornamental aspects of the work in this exhibition are not simply decorative appropriations of the genre of landscape. Unlike appropriation, an artistic technique which is but an ironic version of shopping, ornaments are instead hierarchic upon the body of landscape. These ornaments would have that body turn aside from all gestures away from itself, in order to return more directly to itself. Space without expense, breadth without vision, ornament promises the inhabitation of a space we haven't yet glimpsed. Ornaments look -- or rather feel -- like the return of pleasure.

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