

CINDY BERNARD

MS: What characteristics of the fabric and the security envelopes attracted you? How did you arrive at these objects as sources?

Cindy Bernard: I had been looking at fabrics that appeared, from a distance, to have an abstract print but upon close inspection revealed a pattern composed of elements with some kind of perverse ideological significance... like a shirt with a geometric design that was actually bombs or tools. While rummaging through this, I began to notice that a lot of fabric incorporated a painterly design that was not only gestural but seemed to refer to specific modes of abstraction. So, although the stylistic reference was painting, the actual source was mass-reproduced. This to me encapsulated certain issues such as the relevance of the original gesture and the use of pastiche as a critical practice. I was having difficulty accepting the arguments being proposed for some painting—that quoting past styles implied a discussion of the efficacy of painting as a critical practice. While looking for fabrics, I became conscious of other sources of abstract patterning that had filtered into some kind of common usage. Concurrently, I had an increasing desire to address my position as an artist and a bookkeeper for a gallery. I became fascinated by the patterns used by companies to hide the contents of an envelope from inspection. These are commonly called security envelopes. Because of where I worked, most of what I encountered dealt with art. I was amused that abstraction was being used to conceal that type of financial information.

MS: What differentiates this work from the current tendency to appropriate corporate logos and the critique that implies? How do you feel about that work?

CB: It's interesting that that work seems so pervasive; it's as though the slickness of the work makes it more visible. I don't think so many artists are using actual logos but there is an entire body of work that relies on the techniques of creating a corporate identity to pose some sort of critique of post-industrial society. Occasionally, logos are used in the envelopes, but I resisted the temptation to photograph them because I am not convinced that the displacement of corporate motifs into an art context allows for sufficient discussion of those practices.

MS: Much of your work appears gestural, spontaneous and very intimate, yet the source of the image is a mechanical reproduction. What is the purpose of this irony?

CB: I am intimating that there is a certain degree of calculation behind any gesture and that the degree of meaning attached to the artist's hand is overemphasized in terms of its emotional significance. With the fabric photos it is often difficult to distinguish the medium of the image—whether it is a photograph, a drawing, or a photograph of a painting. I choose the fabrics for qualities that evoke a response because we have been trained to equate gesture with a type of feeling or mood. I want the viewer to think about the assumptions underlying those tendencies.

MS: Do you see your work as political in any way? Doesn't the medium/process of photography have an almost inherently socio-political character to it in the way that it mediates reality?

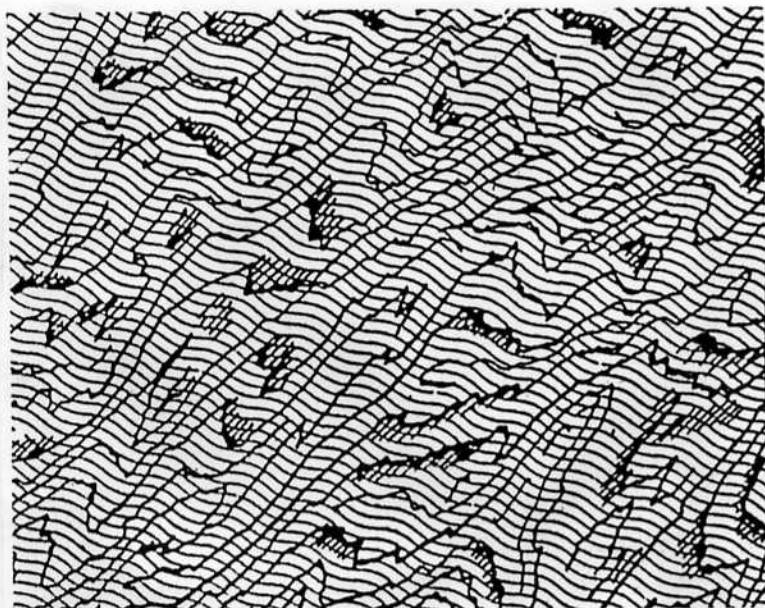
CB: Of course. But there is a degree of sophistication that must exist on the part of the viewer before there is an assumption of mediation. The traditions of photodocumentary or cinema verité are predicated on the insistence that the camera is objective. Obviously, what I am doing deviates from a traditional view of photographic practice. I almost render the relationship of the photograph to what is real an irrelevant question.

MS: Using photography carries with it a great deal of baggage in recent art history. I'm thinking of Richard Prince and other appropriators. Do you feel burdened by that?

CB: I think in general people are fairly jaded when it comes to certain types of appropriation, especially the use of media imagery. The word "simulation" engenders an immediate "not again." Unlike some others involved with "postmodern photographic practice," the material that I deal with is not already heavily encoded with the weight of culture in the way that media imagery is, so I don't feel that my work poses the same problems that appropriation now encounters by being accepted and used by the very institutions it tried to address.

MS: How important is it for the end product to be beautiful in the conventional sense, or at least to invoke a mood, to have the qualities and subtleties associated with conventional photography?

CB: I really want the fabric photos to be beautiful but not so sensuous as to distract from their source. That's why I've kept them small and uniform in size and framing. They are intended to mock paintings so it is important for them to have qualities that evoke a similar sense of visual pleasure. The envelopes are not so ambiguous and the quality of the image is very different. I blow them up on a xerox machine before I shoot them so that the photograph is a flat reproduction of relatively minimal patterns. The emphasis is not so much on the quality of the image itself but on the context in which it was discovered and the way it is ultimately used. Abstraction is camouflage.



CINDY BERNARD, SECURITY ENVELOPE: MERRILL LYNCH NO. 1, 1987.
B&W PHOTO MATTED & FRAMED, 12" x 14".

Note: Other artists were Jamey Bair, Nancy Barton, Tim Ebner, Mark Lere, Ann Preston, Stephen Prina and Charles Ray.