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Hybrid Forms: Architectural Ornament and Intercultural Dialogues

Queequeg's Coffin: A Conversation on Architecture and Ornament

Claire Zimmerman, with Jim Cogswell

Abstract

Using digital imaging tools to ornament architecture, Jim Cogswell reframes two museum collections in his site-specific work *Cosmogonic Tattoos* (2017). By tattooing the glass surfaces of two museum buildings in a commissioned installation project, Cogswell repositions past and present in a complex array of hybridized images drawn off the collections. The iconography of the surface ornament derives from the contents of the buildings and the rhetorical space of their galleries. Valued holdings leach through to building surfaces in improbable scalar and iconographic combinations that juxtapose divergent artistic traditions from distant places. A visual essay and interview between the artist and architectural historian Claire Zimmerman, whose research has focused on the interpellation of architecture and images, this piece focuses on Cogswell's combinatory analog and digital processes, and the de- and reconstruction of western institutions that his work undertakes.

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Queequeg's Coffin: A Conversation on Architecture and Ornament

Claire Zimmerman, with Jim Cogswell
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> With a wild whimsiness, [Queequeg] now used his coffin for a sea-chest….Many spare hours he spent, in carving the lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seemed that hereby he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted tattooing on his body. And this tattooing, had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last.
>
> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851)

An image appeared recently on the window wall of The Commons, a multi-purpose space at a university art museum in the Midwestern United States. The image, seemingly as indecipherable as Queequeg's tattoos, depicts an electrical tower standing on four crescent moon feet. From its summit, one of three loudspeakers that resemble ancient classical pots emits a blanket of sound wafting off to the right, a blanket that soon resolves itself into pictographs, something like an undulating plane of cuneiform script. Next to the electrical tower stands a human figure with an animal's head wearing ancient battle dress—at least, the figure's calves are sheathed in classical greaves, and it wears a headdress that recalls mythical forebears. This image adheres to an intermittently frosted glass surface and is not alone. The exterior of The Commons, like a nearby archaeological museum, is a collage of strange mash-ups that include recognizable fragments of known or almost-known objects, but together cause an experience of cognitive dissonance that calls the viewer to attention. The array is an exercise in summoning a captive yet transitory audience of passersby inside, through ornamental appliqué.

Artist Jim Cogswell thus marks the university bicentennial, celebrating two hundred years since its curators and archaeologists began collecting artifacts from across the globe. Cogswell began the temporary installation, entitled *Cosmogonic Tattoos* (2017) with sketches and paintings of

objects from both museum collections. He then scanned, dismembered, catalogued, and recombined them with imaging software. Recomposed vinyl icons now "tattoo" the museums' glass walls like the advertising found on plate glass windows at car dealerships and on commercial strips throughout the world. Their iconography derives from objects in the collections interpreted through the rhetorical spaces of the Western museum, spaces that reflect global exploration and colonization. Images appear as if they have seeped from the interior, adorning glass exteriors with improbable combinations that hybridize divergent artistic traditions and distant places. The images invoke Surrealism and Dada, monuments of Western culture, the Beatles' iconic *Yellow Submarine*, the graphic genius of Peter Max, and Terry Gilliam's Monty Python animations, ranging across time and space in accordance with the artist's imaginative will. Grafting Peter Max onto Max Ernst, modern onto antique, Western onto non-Western, Cogswell also inverts the relationship between architecture and ornament, representing the museum's contents and history on its large fields of glass, much as car dealers emphasize the merchandise they sell. Architectural ornament has long been used to designate a building's function; yet modern architecture undermined such specificity, using Adolf Loos's famous *bon mot* that accused ornament of being a crime. Was this purist approach really intended to make it easier for uses to change, and not for the sake of abstraction itself? Using the glass surfaces of modern architecture against the project of modernist purity, Cogswell makes transparent surfaces into screens on which to project a provocative narrative about curatorial practices, even as his glass tattoos also promote the museum's collections through playful image-banter tempting students to come inside and have a look.

Fig. 1
Jim Cogswell, *Cosmogonic Tattoos*, vinyl on glass, University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2017. (Photography: Patrick Young, Michigan Imaging)

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Fig. 2
Jim Cogswell, *Cosmogonic Tattoos* (detail), vinyl on glass, University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2017. (Photography: Patrick Young, Michigan Imaging)

Cosmogonic Tattoos underscores the context change inherent in museum collecting. Museum objects implicitly narrate displacement, decontextualization, and recontextualization; audiences alternately absorb or reject what they see. The Western "canon," formed as European and North American institutions configured their relations with other societies throughout the previous half millennium, adopted and transformed disparate traditions and modes of artistic communication, taking ownership of some and proliferating them across time and space, yet rejecting others. Cogswell unfurls this narrative by exaggerating hybridities and combinations that are latent in museum collections—a kind of reification of the museum itself in imaginary renditions of its practices, enacted through a set of imaginary objects. Recasting images of a building's contents on its glass walls destabilizes their meaning by translating them from artifact to image; the point acquires force here, in part through play. The flattened objects, views between and through them, and reflections on the glass

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Fig. 3
Jim Cogswell, *Cosmogonic Tattoos* (detail), vinyl on glass, University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2017. (Photography: Patrick Young, Michigan Imaging)

all interfere with close observation. Visual relationships metamorphose as viewers walk by and light shifts. The echo between object and vinyl rendition, and the presence of architectural context (muted in interior gallery spaces) all create a viewing experience notably different from that typically fostered by museums. By replacing one sort of meaning-making with a very different one, Cogswell aims to evoke contingency and relationship in the midst of Western canons.

Cogswell compares his complex pictographs to the ancient practice of repurposing *spolia*. Ancient recycled stone fragments are here seamless colored vinyl surfaces. Building stone and ornamental sculpture reappear in two-dimensional new "constructions," but the ornamentation of the objects depicted is now indistinguishable from form or structure—just as ornamental fragments reused in a house wall have lost the rationale behind their original figuration. Object, ornament, and substrate (glass walls) are equal partners in a project meant to confront us with the illusory stability of cultural myths that constructed Western modernity. Dada-like, the project suggests that ornamental practices have radical potential—at least in their capacity to creep up on us in a cognitive sense. Vinyl murals "ornament" the walls of these two museums, and solid objects from the collection re-appear, ghost-like, as purely ornamental devices.

Tattoos recall nineteenth-century debates about industrialization and modernization, at least for architectural historians. Gottfried Semper and Alois Riegl both studied the ornament of tattoos. Semper considered them in his unfinished *Der Stil* (1860/63); Riegl's subsequent critique in *Stilfragen* included an illustration of Maori facial tattooing.[1] Similarly, tattoos conveying "a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mys-

[1] Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder, Praktische Aesthetik* Bd. 1 (Frankfurt a.M., 1860/1863); Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen für eine Geschichte der Ornamentik* (Berlin: 1893).

tical treatise on the art of attaining truth" on the body of Queequeg (celebrated in the title of the installation) animate Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). In "Ornament and Crime" (1908), Loos took Riegl's image (or Melville's), as a "symptom of degeneracy in the modern adult," and a sign that applied ornament should disappear from architecture and objects of industrial design.[2] Loos's proscription, central to modernist practices, rejected late nineteenth-century ornamentalism in applied art practices. Yet ornament was not eliminated in the wake of Loos's writing. No longer *applied* to objects, ornament became a quality *intrinsic* to materials; as Irina Davidovici has noted, it later became form itself.[3] Loos used exotic woods and vividly patterned marble, surfaces smoothly machined to reveal the psychedelic patterning of material itself—marble as if limestone tattooed throughout its full depth. Modernist ambivalence about where and what to ornament was repurposed as a way to verify authenticity, ultimately giving rise to a core modernist practice known as "truth to materials."

Cogswell's *Tattoos* also don't reflect the classical hierarchy between architecture (essential, structural) and ornament (inessential, supplemental). Indeed, such hierarchy has been challenged as often as it has been reinstated—long ago by Gothic architects and builders, more recently by digital fabrication.[4] Instead of robotics, Cogswell relies on Photoshop and Illustrator. His image complexes are idiomatic, reflecting a new way of telling stories. He mimics Queequeg, transferring figuration from one formal envelope to another. For Cogswell, the cognitive operation here is crucial—the center has migrated to the periphery, from the discrete object to the external shell of the institution, where it can beckon passersby. The capacity of virtual space: objects rise from their pedestals, float through the museum's corridors as if by invisible force, and leave their silhouette on the glass as they exit the building. The essentialism of "truth to materials" having been defeated at the outset, what is then the materiality of vinyl, conceived within the space of Illustrator? With these strategies, Cogswell rejects hierarchies of structure-to-ornament by inverting them. What is a museum, after all, but its collection? What is a building but the envelope for its uses and users?

The architectural proposition of *Tattoos* is temporal inversion, whereby building ornamentation emerges from use over time, along with the socio-cultural terrain it demarcates. Turning the buildings' contents into external signage is in itself interesting. But the cognitive operations that follow flattening, cutting, and reassembling museum objects produce something one can't possibly imagine. In one instance, a series of clustered, flock-like lines waft across five floor-to-ceiling glass panels, accompanied by a trio of three helicopters that flank a complex structure topped with two classical columns. Beneath these columns a layered construction of objects is interspersed with nothing but air. The helicopters are, in fact, caryatids with spirals where their heads might appear. You can't make this stuff up. Yet Cogswell's point, or one of them, is that this is exactly what the Western canon is: a fantastical story that merits

[2] On Loos and tattooing, see Jimena Canales and Andrew Herscher, „Criminal Skins: Tattoos and Modern Architecture in the Work of Adolf Loos." *Architectural History* 48 (2005): 235-56.

[3] Irina Davidovici, "The dilemma of authenticity in recent German Swiss architecture," 2006, unpublished ms., courtesy of author.

[4] For a survey of recent research, see G. Necipoglu and A. Payne, *Histories of Ornament from Local to Global* (Princeton, 2016); a useful anthology of original sources is I. Frank, *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings, 1750-1940* (New Haven, 2000). Lars Spuybroek animates connections between John Ruskin, Gothic architecture, and digital fabrication in *The Sympathy of Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016 [2011]).

our full attention. The installation gestures to museum display as a picture plane through which we view history panoramically, and the museum as a space built on coincidences and personal narratives, power relationships and politics, the chance layering of artifacts subject to the reflections and curiosities of viewers, and short-lived obsessions local to collection or commission.[5] In rendering the Western canon as a contingent projection, the exhibition does subtle political work, suggesting that museum collections are sites where cultural hierarchies are enacted through repression, discrimination, prejudice, and endorsement. Cogswell claims that the installation is about migration and exile, loss and longing, and about objects that were plundered, exchanged, and destroyed in the movement of peoples through history. His thoughts unfolded in conversation in June 2017:

[5] For example, see the tale of another UM collection: Carla M. Sinopoli, *The Himalayan Journey of Walter N. Koelz: The University of Michigan Himalayan Expedition, 1932–1934* (Ann Arbor: Anthropological Papers, 2013)

CZ: Jim, can you describe the relationship between your installation piece and the buildings it covers? How do you see the connection between the architecture and the images you've put on it?

JC: I came to this as a site-specific installation that deals with particular places and qualities that define those places, beginning with windows and their relation to specific aspects of the buildings. I think about window dimensions, the mullions between them, how to emphasize their borders and abutments, what you see through them or reflected in them, but also what's around them. I think about the building's use as a social space, how people occupy and move through the spaces around the windows. I am particularly conscious of their function in housing and displaying collections of objects, and what the buildings represent as institutions on a campus. Both of these buildings have weight and presence. I'm putting something on them that will alter the way that they're perceived, but also comment on why they are there.
I have an advantage over the architect because I have been able to inhabit both buildings, to move through them, watch the way they are used. The architect could only anticipate this. What I put on them reflects what's actually happening after construction is finished.

CZ: In other words, you're not talking solely about form or materials, but about the life of the building over time. The process of abstraction that architects are compelled to accept in order to design buildings—anticipating something that doesn't yet exist—works inversely here. The building—understood as a complex—gives rise to its own ornamental program.
The rationalist idea that buildings should display a clear hierarchy, with structural elements unsculpted or minimally decorated, and infill elements hosting ornament, sometimes extravagantly, shows up in a building in Paris by Auguste Perret. What you think about such hierarchy in architecture?

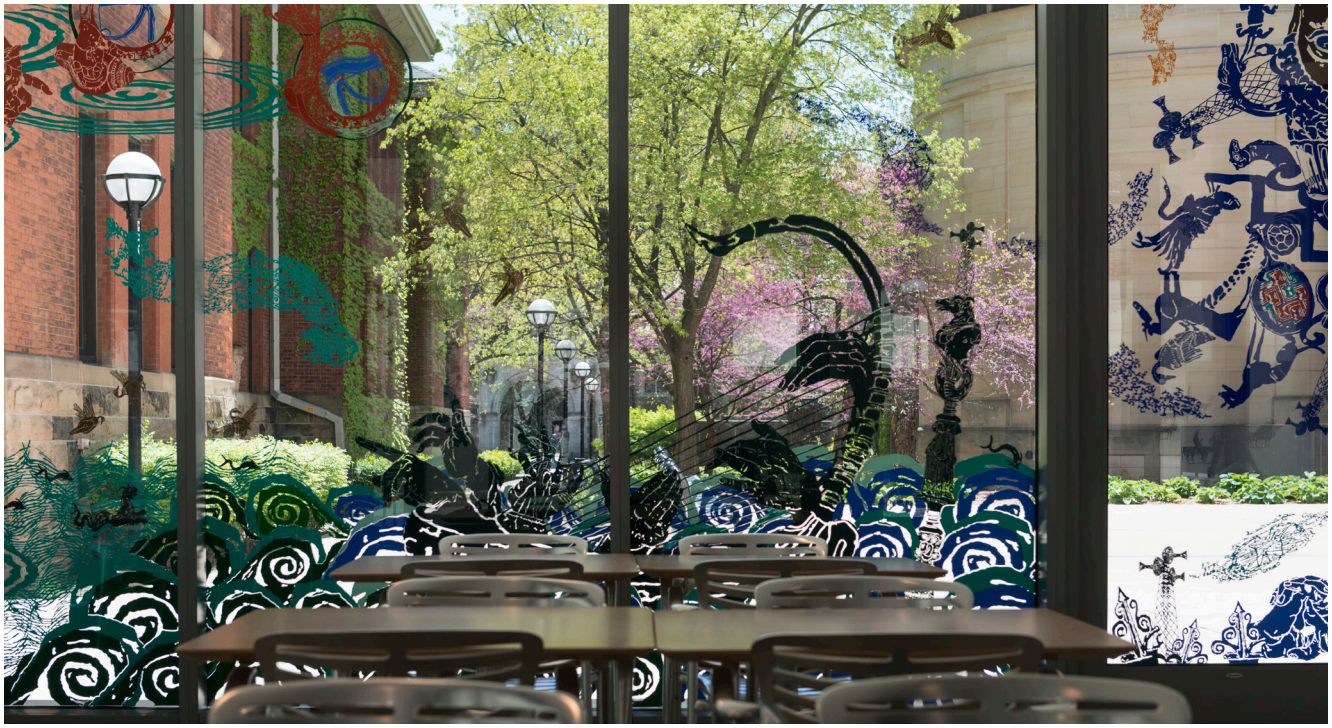

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Fig. 4
Jim Cogswell, *Cosmogonic Tattoos* (detail), vinyl on glass, University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2017. (Photography: Patrick Young, Michigan Imaging)

JC: I've thought a lot about that issue. When I first began looking at the archaeological collection I came across vases that I found very moving, I wasn't quite sure why. They were embellished with basic geometric designs that seemed to articulate on the surface what the form was doing, almost like mapping. It was a map *on* the surface that could have been a map *exploring* the surface. Put it this way—I have an awareness that what ornament does is *measure*. And measuring is a form of mapping. You do something across the belly of a vase, you do something around the neck of a vase, around the base, but you don't do the same thing because it's not in the same place. In a sense you're bringing the form of that vase to life. So you might say that one is necessarily prior, in the sense that you can't embellish a vacuum, you've got to have form. On the other hand, what you bring to the surface realizes the form. The realization that marks on a surface not only respond to form but also describe it gave me a new respect for the importance of ornament for human imagination. Another association that your question raises is a gendered one. Pattern and ornamentation are strongly gendered in our contemporary western world. I thought of the structure as being the guys in blue suits. . . and then I thought, that's a really sad world to live in.

CZ: That's an old association. Structure is masculine because it does work and ornamentation is feminine because it's supplemental and delicate and so forth. You're undoing that association by showing how ornament *indexes* form without saying anything about structure. And yet you've been constrained to total flatness in the murals.

JC: You can't separate the form from the materials. Flat glass is not the same as flat marble, flat concrete, flat steel. Its location and its function

as a window—its transparency and reflectivity—actively engage the surroundings so that it takes on an optically and spatially complex life, all of which is incorporated into the experience of the ornamentation that it bears. Besides, the hierarchical way of looking at structure, form, and ornament is heavily biased toward a particular Western tradition. When I think about the relationship of structural necessity to ornament, examples of monumental Hindu temples immediately come to mind. These are basically mountains of stone that have been carved. If you took away the carving there would be no temple. So how do you divide ornament from structure in a case like that? I grew up in Japan. The architectural tradition we associate with Japan has a minimalist beauty lacking in exterior ornamentation. Yet the elaborate roof brackets in traditional temples and shrines have evolved into ornamental and symbolic devices. They are clearly functional, necessary to support heavy roofs and deep overhangs, but they also introduce rhythmic complexity across the middle of the building elevation, or at the top of your field of vision when you are underneath. They are dazzling to look at in their intricacy and power.
Interior architectural ornament appears on elaborate ornamental screens, paintings on multiple panels that function as room dividers. Those screens, called *byobu*, have exerted a very powerful influence on my practice. The way an image spills across the panels, joins the panels, which are proportional to the *tatami* mats and the doors. The screens divide the space of the room, and can articulate it in a fluid way. For any strict division between this interior ornament and the structure of a Japanese home, the modular unit also binds them together—as a form of measure.

CZ: Did you grow up in Japan because your father was a missionary?

JC: Yes. My parents had a socially progressive, ecumenical approach to their calling, which left the door open for my own interest in cultural migration. They went to Japan immediately after the Second World War to assist a world trying to rebuild from traumatic destruction and social collapse. I grew up seeing what happens in global conflict, witnessing the displacement of people and the ways we injure one another.

CZ: It's true that we've been talking of Western dominance. Your installations dispense with that idea. The Indian and Japanese examples are much more useful in understanding what you've done, with no division between essential and supplemental. We could also look to Gothic ornamentation for an integration of design, ornament, and structure, where together they constitute the "essence" of Gothic building, at least to those who discovered it later, like John Ruskin.

JC: The whole question of what is essential fascinates me. I have a habit of doubt, which comes out in a string of epistemological inquiries that lead us to Queequeg, among other things.

CZ: So tell us about Queequeg.

JC: In *Moby Dick* Queequeg was the tattooed harpoonist from an unspecified South Sea island. The part of his story that is most compelling for me is when he becomes deathly sick and takes charge of constructing his own coffin, transferring his tattoos to the surface of the coffin itself. The tattoos on his skin are migrating to the surface that will become an enveloping, almost architectural structure for his body. A coffin, a box to house his remains. The tattoos inscribed on Queequeg's body embody all the secrets of heaven and earth, though Queequeg himself can't read them. The inability to understand that which is immediately evident, even that which is closest to us, permeates Melville's book and is part of its deep appeal for me.
At the time I encountered this passage, I had just created an anthropomorphic alphabet that I was using as a generative device for painting. It had left its phonetic references behind to the point where it was unreadable, but that didn't matter. I was thinking about hieroglyphics and the fact that in Queequeg's story, he himself could not read the figures on his own body.

CZ: That reminds me of photographs.

JC: Do tell, please.

CZ: If you're trying to understand the "language" of photography, you're working with a kind of indeterminate or unreadable text that is decoded by individuals differently. When people talk about photographic language I always ask: is a photograph a letter, a word, a paragraph, a text, or is it all of those things at once? Are pictographic scripts actually easier to compare to photography than phonetic script, which really doesn't mean anything by itself? So as you were speaking I was thinking about the way photographic images convey meaning. They mean something, but you're not always sure what.

JC: Spoken and written language depends on grammar. Without grammar it's incomprehensible. What is the grammar of visuality? Is there one? I think that's what innovators, architectural innovators, seem to want to define—grammar and syntax.

CZ: The "aesthetic" here is part Max Ernst, part Peter Max, a graphic artist who embodied 1960s counter-culture and 1970s commercial pop art. Ernst is a "canonical" avant-garde figure, in spite of his address. But Peter Max hasn't yet been absorbed by art history, and the references seem much fresher and more interesting, only partly for that reason. I've never seen anything that combined Max Ernst and Peter Max but you seem to have done it. The sheer zaniness of your work also recalls *The Yellow Submarine*, with its comical malevolence and emphasis on fingers and hands, which are so important for these installations in particular.[6]

JC: Sure I grew up in an age when Peter Max hit popular culture. But embarrasingly, more literary and art historical influences come to mind as

[6] Spuybroek, like Cogswell, is interested in hands: "not only Ruskin's workman's hands chiseling stone and the craftsman's hands of Sennett's Chinese butcher Chuang Tzu, but angels' ethereal hands, and little girls holding hands during a dance, and a master mason's hands scissoring compasses, and robot hands operating with magical dexterity, and even objects taking matters into their own hands, literally self-assembling." Spuybroek could almost be describing Cogswell's project. See *The Sympathy of Things*, 6.

precedents, perhaps also to Max himself because they are so embedded in European culture. I think of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* as a source for the imagination of hybridity. And Raphael's ornamentation for the Vatican Loggias, based on designs unearthed from the buried ruins of Nero's palace in his day, in "grottos". The ancient frescos were based on fantasies and anatomical impossibilities not familiar in the Renaissance. Raphael's interpretations came to define the grotesque in Western art (grotto-esque), particularly in European interior architectural ornament. The grotesque hybridizes identities and in doing so challenges the way we sort the world into categories in order to deal with its complexity. It's an epistemological puzzle. I think what hybridity and the grotesque do is to materialize boundary-defying moments. As in Ovid's stories, for example when Daphne is still part tree part lovely girl, we were forced to dwell at length on the impossible moment of transition, not the before or the after. Its fascination for us lies in its impossibility. Bernini's genius in his treatment of that transformation is to take us through the metamorphosis in successive moments as they are revealed in walking around the sculpture.
I am fascinated by the fit between ornamentation and the grotesque. Ornamentation requires a certain flattening to be effective. To inhabit an architectural surface, like a wall either straight or curved, it has to measure and describe the extension of the wall. And the grotesque, I think, operates best when it doesn't try to become too specifically naturalistic, when we are allowed to imagine the impossible moment. Back to Peter Max—the flatness of graphic representation allows the imagination to run free without contradicting itself.

CZ: Can you talk about other image-making practices latent in the *Tattoos* project?

JC: In addition to Max Ernst I would say Hannah Höch, who used photomontage to do grotesque mash-ups. They are strong political statements, particularly about gender identity, done through photographic montages

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Fig. 5
Jim Cogswell, *Cosmogonic Tattoos* (detail), vinyl on glass, University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2017. (Photography: Patrick Young, Michigan Imaging)

of cyborgs and androgynous figures. Höch emphasizes the geometry of the cut photo, so we are never in doubt that these images are the result of an act of assembly on a flat surface. That way she negotiates associations with photography as "real," along with the peculiar power of the abstract construction. She invents a hybrid form that never lets us forget its hybridity.

CZ: It's true for her particularly—I think there's a strong political critique in your project that recalls photomontage.

JC: I find her work very moving.

CZ: It has a pointed sensibility behind it. It's not intentionally incomprehensible. Höch's work has a complex iconography. We try to figure it out because there's something to figure out, or maybe many things to figure out.

JC: In *Cosmogonic Tattoos* I was consciously combining images in such a way that their origins remained recognizable. I wanted a collision of identities so one always understood that these elements didn't really belong together, to maintain the tension between hybridized identities.

CZ: You're using a montage technique within the space of the computer. If you were a photomonteur you would have gone into the museum with your camera, you'd have taken photographs and cut them up and combined them. There were many reasons you didn't do that, not the least that the output that you were looking for was inherently figure ground. We don't see traces in the final product, but in terms of process, you're actually doing montage, no?

JC: I think so, yes. Three-dimensional objects were re-materialized through hand painting techniques onto a flat surface before being digitized. That step is very important. It gives the translation into digital form an added life. A history of the translation of the artifact becomes embedded in the images on the windows.

CZ: My next question is about Adolf Loos. Was "Ornament and Crime" in your mind as you crafted this piece?

JC: I've been thinking about Loos since I first came across Queequeg. What he says about ornament as suitable for children and Papuan natives directly contradicts the appeal of Queequeg's coffin. His is a story about the incomprehensible, while Loos targets tattooing with a kind of epistemological tyranny, an absolute certainty that sets my teeth on edge, I don't think his stance is a product simply of Loos's time and place. I know people like that. I have never experienced that kind of certainty about anything, and I'm very suspicious of it.

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Fig. 6
Jim Cogswell, *Cosmogonic Tattoos* (detail), vinyl on glass, Kelsey Museum of, 2017. (Photography: Patrick Young, Michigan Imaging)

CZ: Loos was very categorical, a polemicist, and something of a cultural extremist. He looked for a position and held it up as the only one.

JC: I became aware of Loos when I first became fascinated by ornament. His proscriptions describe the modernist environments I inhabited in this country, so different from the streets of tile roofed wooden homes where I grew up in Japan. I felt an aversion to its sterility and needed to be convinced. So after I read his essay I began looking at his architecture, and decided that "Ornament and Crime" contained a lot of hot air. He's sort of doing it and sort of not, but mostly he's just being declarative. We have moved into a world of visual austerity that he probably never dreamed of.

CZ: In modernism, ornament doesn't index form. It comes from material essence, which is different from making form apparent. The notion of ornament as a byproduct of material processes signifies by complete correspondence or transparency between how you make something and how you see it. Applied ornament does just the opposite—its ingenuity and difficulty of facture constitute part of its strength.

JC: In the past that's been so, but imaging software enables extravagant degrees of repetition, rotation, translation, reflection, inversion-processes essential to the creation of patterns in most ornament. The ease of facture can neutralize its allure and leave us longing for something more. The introduction of narrative and critical content can offset this facility of facture, reinvigorating it. My argument with Loos is the same as with Greenberg, whose definitions of painting were dominant when I was an impressionable art student. I felt pressure as a young artist to accommodate the values that Greenberg promulgated, which in both painting and sculpture index truth to materials. I'm very grateful I was marched through all that, but it was so reductive. It stripped away many parts of myself and what I valued most, and I was in a state of denial for several decades, trying to accommodate myself to its values. That may be one reason why I resented Loos so much.

CZ: Do you know the school library in Eberswalde (Germany) that Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron built in 1999?

JC: I've never visited it, but it was featured in a show in Chicago that Joe Rosa curated. I was fascinated and I thought a lot about how to unpack it. The building itself is so spare; it becomes a flat surface for photo-etching. Ornament is associated with pattern and repetition—if I take a symbol and repeat it enough times and interlock the forms I can get away with anything on a surface because I've neutralized the individual image. It seems like a very low, micro-low relief, so light catches it, creating movement across the grid structure that I find interesting and somewhat akin to what happens with the vinyl. It's not the vinyl itself that's interesting, it's looking through it, it's the way the light hits it, it's the way it changes.

CZ: And a British group of architects who used to call themselves FAT (Fashion Architecture Technology)—have you looked at their gingerbread "church", for example?[7]

JC: I'm delighted with it and I'm amazed that they can get away with it. What makes something playful? Why do we see some things as playful? What are the qualities that we see as playful? I know that there is playfulness in what I do. Strange scale is a big part of what I can see in the reproductions of their work....

CZ: There's a shared mission! I think you should meet them.

JC: I'd love to. But playfulness and humor—I know you're interested in humor and I think a lot about humor. I don't consider myself a funny person, but this does circle back to the grotesque and hybridity. What humor does is hold contradictory impulses simultaneously. For a moment we have an experience of release from separate categories. People who are funny bring you into that contradiction so that you understand that these two parts don't belong together. Yet some new meaning has emerged from holding them together simultaneously. In some small way that is what gave me greatest delight in doing this project; I didn't want to obscure the identities of these objects from inside the building. What would I gain by obscuring them? Nothing. I have everything to gain by keeping their identities clear, but I have to transform their identities or I've only created a catalog on the surface. So the best way to transform their identities is to put their images into unexpected relationships with each other. That unexpectedness we somehow interpret as playful.

CZ: Is there a permanent installation that you'd like to do?

JC: I'm intrigued by the prospect of tile and mosaic. I've visited Ravenna and was blown away by the mosaics there. Afterwards, I used cut paper plates as a form of mosaic. Mosaic has a fractured permanence that offers many possibilities. Good mosaic's not flat. The pieces are tilted to catch light along the surface so that it responds to the movement of viewers and the changing light. But what happens to playfulness when it becomes fixed and permanent? I was thinking about Claus Oldenburg. . . .

CZ: ....Think about Antoni Gaudí—

JC: Oh my gosh yes, the mosaic work on the terraces in Park Güell in Barcelona, from around 1914.

CZ: That brings up another big question: Do you look much at Islamic ornament?

JC: To be enveloped in a space, defined by it, is transporting. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem was a profoundly moving experience for me. The brilliant light in that space is what I remember, intricate tracery artic-

[7] Actually a holiday house in Essex, with Grayson Perry: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2013/dec/17/fat-architecture-break-up

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Fig. 7
Jim Cogswell, Studies for *Cosmogonic Tattoos*, mixed media on paper, 2015-2016. (Photography: Patrick Young, Michigan Imaging)

ulating visual complexity and intellectual clarity. Islamic tile measures and transforms surfaces in a manner that has been quite influential for me, especially in that I came to my vinyl installations from a period of working in ceramic tile.

CZ: What about politics?

JC: I've never set out to be polemical in anything I've done because I find that it doesn't age well. And I hate being preached at. But anyone of moderate intelligence soon discovers that everything has political implications. For me, the experience of art is one of trying to come to grips with what a thing is, how it came to be, and my relationship to it. So polemic goes completely against what draws me to art.
I went into the project to do something based on objects. But objects are parts of collections, collections are parts of institutions, and institutions have faces that are often hidden from us. Which artist wouldn't want to be associated with a museum? But there are problems with museum collections. The more you start to think about the way a museum alters your perception of an object, the more you realize that it involves shaping cultural identities. Because I was spanning two separate museums, the project relates how things get from one place to another. The mutability of objects and meanings is what made me aware of the ways we struggle to fix them in place for particular purposes.

If objects go from one place to another, how do they get there? They don't get up and walk! They go with people, and people have power relationships, and exchanges are not always equal. Anytime you think about power you're talking politics. Exchange of goods and cultural assets are more than petty commerce. You can't think of the movements of people without being painfully aware of what's going on in the world right now, the desperation of people to survive and find meaning in their lives, fixated on getting from the place they are to a place that seems to hold promise, no matter how flawed or unwelcoming that place might be—like the West today.

CZ: And yet, Jim, you seem to feel that the museum—Queequeg's coffin—has potential to transport artifacts and memorialize the dead, the neglected, the oppressed—in a sense, that museums can make us aware. If so, your image-riddles on the outside gesture to riddles on the inside, and suggest that we not seek full clarity or cohesive representation, but that we remain conscious of the complexities and frictions of cultural encounters, and of cultural production itself—in other words, that we don't seek to understand, just to absorb and be mindful. By reproducing the processes of collection, processing, installation, and combination that are intrinsic to museums, you repeat the gesture, like satire—but restrained. I read your murals as intentionally circumscribed by the limits of their material—vinyl—and their format—flatness—and take them as invitations.

JC: Constraints are inescapable and intrinsic to all knowledge and meaning making. Seeking clarity, certainly. Becoming fixated on singular meanings, no. My goal is not to provide fixed meanings but to stimulate awareness of our own perceptions and assumptions. Paying attention is a form of knowledge production. Pay attention to how repeating a gesture changes its meaning. Repetition is a form of displacement, not unlike the displacement of objects and images, which alters their meanings, whether it's displacement from one culture to another, from interior collections to exterior windows, or from skin to coffin. In a world where nothing seems fixed in place, where does that leave us? Let Melville have the last word in what he said about Queequeg, "A wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them."[8] Maybe also *because* his own live heart beat against them.

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[8] Hermann Melville, *Moby Dick* (NY: Library of America, 1983 [orig. pub. 1851]), 1307.