

## Performing Psychogeographical Tessellation

by Laurie Barron

In a *dérive* one or more persons drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. The element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the *dérive* point of view, cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortices.<sup>1</sup>

In the layered and theatrical worlds that Hannah Tilson constructs, diverse motifs abound: residential architecture, cars, commercial logos, clothing, and self-portraits. Leafing through this publication, one might feel as if moving through the city, noticing the chaos of the streets flash past like storyboards. However, the range of phenomena are connected to Tilson's signature fascination with – and use of – patterns, where painted lines collide and clash in chequerboards, flames, gingham and tweed.

For Tilson, colour brings such phenomena together. "I spend a lot of my time making and processing colours; colour often comes even before content."<sup>2</sup> To this aim, Tilson has started working with homemade paints and rabbit-skin glue. This process of creating colour – controlling both transparency and texture – has accompanied a more recent series of portraits, marking a perhaps more introspective turn in Tilson's work.

Performing Psychogeographical Tessellation considers Tilson's works up until now, from 2014 to 2023, through notions of 'Theatre', 'Fabric as Foundation' and 'Pattern of Portraits'.

Researching Tilson's work, an early painting titled *Psychogeography* (2014) caught my attention for its conceptual and aesthetic links with the artist's evolving project. The work takes its name from philosopher Guy Debord and his group the Situationists, who coined the term 'psychogeography'. At the intersection of psychology and geography, psychogeography is defined as "the study of the effects of geographical settings, consciously managed or not, acting directly on the mood and behaviour of the individual."<sup>3</sup>

The monumental painting depicts three ambiguous architectures in monochrome, bursting beyond the boundary lines of the canvas' stretcher. The dizzying, contorted effect is evocative of the mood conjured in *The Wizard of Oz* as Dorothy's house is sucked into the air by a vortex – an imagined moment rooted in our subconscious. What if our lives were to be suddenly uprooted? How might one distil the changing settings – both domestic and intimate, external and expansive that tacitly steal our attention?

## Theatre

This art of staging continuously evolves in Tilson's works, often placing visitors in a position of participation. For example, the artist's BA degree show at Slade School of Fine Art, titled *Glamorous Approach* (2018), invited viewers to navigate a fragmented space. Four large panels in a psychedelic red-blue pattern surrounded spectators, while hanging, headless figures – one in Americana racing clothes, the other in saccharine pink cowboy boots – floated in the space like life-size paper doll clothing. Closer inspection reveals the contrasting pattern to be a modified image of a chequerboard bathroom that caught Tilson's attention during a trip to Venice. Dressed in *Borrowed Glories* (2023), one of the artist's most recent works, makes direct visual reference to earlier *Glamorous Approach*. Like a portal, or perhaps a glitch, an overlaid section of Lino print-produced pattern on the surface marks a knowing wink to the importance of her own past. Transferring one seemingly ephemeral experience into a new setting, Tilson seeks to mimic the possibilities of theatre: from one window, straight into another.

Other works, as well as the immersive ways that Tilson chooses to exhibit them, recall Sianne Ngai's concept of the zany. According to Ngai, zaniness is both physical and affective, a "seemingly lighthearted but strikingly vehement aesthetic, most sharply visible in the arts of live and recorded performance – dance, happenings, walkabouts, reenactments, game shows, video games – and in the arts of rhythm and movement in particular."<sup>4</sup> *Second Life* (2022), for instance, shows a constricted figure that could easily be imagined on a retro racing game. *Encircle* (2021), shown in *Swoosh*, the artist's solo exhibition at Well Projects, Margate (2021), was contrasted with a hallucinating linoleum floor that paradoxically appeared somewhere between a children's play zone and an adult nightclub.

The zany "calls up the character of a worker whose particularity lies paradoxically in the increasingly dedifferentiated nature of his or her labour," further explains Ngai. In other words, zaniness can be understood as the performative ways we respond to everyday life's heterogeneous parts that confront us. As an artist, Tilson's complex – sometimes intentionally ambiguous – project deals with contradictions surrounding creative practice today, bridging together popular culture with avant-garde thinking and techniques.

In *Glamorous Approach* (2018), we might ask whether the work's cut-and-stitch style alludes to the precarious role artists play as 'creative producers'. Does the colour, clothing and pattern design postulate on gendered associations? Or, is the stage-set design a knowing nod to the performative nature of the degree show itself? To this point, Tilson utilised the trompe-l'œil effect, a technique prevalent in her work, treating the degree show as a window into a window.

*Howdy* (2018) also deploys deception. Made while Tilson was studying on exchange at the New York Studio School, this was among the first of Tilson's 'ghost figure' paintings, where figures appear in only their clothing. An anonymous figure in a handsome gingham getup stands proudly in the painting, while his arm appears to rest on, and bend around, the canvas stretcher itself. It is as if the translucent muslin canvas is a portal to the character's world, humorously conceding, nonetheless, that a painting can only ever be a representation.

Other paintings such as *JPG* (2018) are equally ambiguous. Writing on the work, Olivia Paterson noted, "it's a complex and sophisticated composition, which does have a uniquely 'Pop' feel to it", musing "I love the ambiguity." She asks, "Is it a hand holding a compact mirror, or is it a reflected pair of lips?"<sup>5</sup>

In more recent works, painting also takes place from behind, a technique traditionally used by sign-makers to create bold, graphic advertising imagery on windows. With this method,

light beams from behind the painting towards the onlooker. The origins of this technique also reference Tilson's penchant for the Chicago Imagists, both their "interest in commercial culture" and the "rawness of their work and their love of materials."<sup>6</sup>

*Lonely City* (2023), a different work employing this technique, is made with homemade glue paint on muslin. On the surface, a patch of repeating camouflage resembling bristling flora and fauna was produced with Lino printing – a technique newly utilised by Tilson in this way because of its unique ability to 'confuse notions of the handmade and the mechanical'. Deliberately subverting the rigid and precise possibilities of printing, Tilson uses soft, liquid-like pigment that resists fastidiousness. With layers moving from translucent to almost opaque, the painting holds an ethereal glow, an effect that complicates where the representative ends and the abstract might begin. Celestial blue and white tones evoke the experience of looking for familiar shapes in a clouded sky; or perhaps also, the anticipation of watching a theatre set evolve as a production unfolds.

## **Fabric as Foundation**

Those close to Tilson know that her fondness for making extends beyond the gallery. Tertiary details – postcards, invitations, even placemats – carry her meticulous attention to detail, forming a distinctive and honed identity. As part of this, Tilson dons customised clothing at opening events. Sourcing vintage suits from markets

and charity shops, Tilson handpaints, Lino prints and screenprints garments with unique imagery or iconography. One suit bears the iconic Louis Vuitton Monogram print; another, is tiled with her own bespoke 'HT' insignia; while a flamingo pink two-piece, was adorned with personalised flowers redolent of Warhol's influential Flowers series. More recently, Tilson has directly introduced her paintings into her customised garments. A thrifted three-piece skirt suit (p.61) bares a repeating motif also found in her painting *Dressed in Borrowed Glories* (2023).

Such outfits also move from the exhibition space to the music stage where Tilson moonlights as a vocalist in *This Is The Deep* across London venues. Her interdisciplinary attitude recalls Sophie Taeuber-Arp's performances at the Cabaret Dada in 1930s Zurich or Keith Haring's at the Mudd Club in 1970s New York. See, for instance, Tilson with performers Chloée Maugile and Tom Hardwick-Allan at *The Pink Panther Show* (2018), where she roamed the venue, weaving between the audience while playing the trombone (p.59). In an interview, Tilson described fabric's foundational role to her practice: "the clashing of patterns, the potential overload of information and the unlimited options that clothes give you."<sup>7</sup> This interest in textiles is abundant in her painting and drawing.

*Hama T* (2019) features camouflage painted onto stretched denim, appliquéd with a contrasting camouflage patch, hand-embroidered by Tilson. Depicting a yellow humvee, the patch is at once kitsch and macho, troubling the feminine stereotype of embroidery. On top of these, Tilson layers her signature with ironed HAMA beads in a virtuous daisy pattern, further adding to the work's gently provoking mystique. Exemplary of her multidisciplinary approach, the work combines traditional and contemporary craft techniques.

Another work from the same year, *Untitled (Denim Bin Bag)* (2019), references workwear's masculine connotations. The positioning of the embroidered back pocket gives the impression the whole canvas is a cropped human behind. A surreptitiously painted bin bag in acid-yellow stripes loses its domestic air, taking on the aesthetic of Ben Kelly's *Hacienda* nightclub.

Back to fabric. Ask yourself: where on the body do most garments cross? Likely, the torso. Looking at Tilson's work, this bodily section appears in many guises *A(r)mour* (2021), *Morgan De Toi* (2016), *Soft Striped* (2021). In all these works, Tilson shows textures at their busiest.

Clothing is most recognisable in the torso area, despite the paintings' cropped focus and relatively small surface area. In fact, the exuberant fabrics, despite their excess, tessellate amongst each other, "filling the specified region completely, without leaving gaps,"<sup>8</sup> much like a mosaic.

Other works utilise weaving on a loom. Tilson has previously noted how patterns come from photographs she has taken and things that she encounters on a day-to-day basis.<sup>9</sup> Works such as *Warren Street Weaving* (2015) appear to be a woven interpretation of London's distinctive patterned tube tiles, which keen observers will notice change between stations.<sup>10</sup>

Tilson interprets fabrics and their historical associations with playful subversion, broadening categories of art and situating her work in a canon of artists interested in handicrafts' overlooked role. Here, she joins the likes of Marc Camille Chaimowitz, Betty Woodman, Sonia Delaunay and Lucy Mckenzie. Taking this further, Tilson links handicrafts with toys that 'replicate' the adult world in miniature, from Playmobil supermarkets and the virtual Sims metaverse to racing cars and Polly Pockets. Some of these culminate in artworks, while some serve no purpose other than haptic studio play.

## Spot The Difference: A Pattern of Portraits

“I’m interested in pattern, colour and entanglement. Drawing and painting self-portraits made with homemade paint, placing myself in a vibrating space filled with patterns. It is important for me to make my own paint, my colours feel raw and pure, and I am able to control the translucency and opacity of it while keeping the intensity of colour. I am viewing my body and the pattern I am encompassed in as a landscape / patternscape; the figure is masked and ambiguous, but there is something left for you to hold onto. I want viewers to question what they see and live in this fast-moving, turbulent space.”<sup>11</sup>

Hannah Tilson, 2023.

The national lockdown of 2020 changed the course of Tilson’s practice when she began an introspective series of self-portraits. A natural next step, the series utilised Tilson’s studies at London’s Royal Drawing School, extending also to drawing classes taken at New York Studio School, a traditional life-drawing school, where Tilson studied under Ophrah Shemesh.

Paper-based works such as *Cowmouflage* (2020) and *Pattern Portrait.. hold up?*, (2021) depict Tilson locked down indoors. Yet, while domestic, these interiors are constructed, more like the dens we make in our youth. Fabric cascades around the artist enveloping the frame, brightly ricocheting against Tilson’s equally patterned clothing. For this series, Tilson would stage indoor self-portraits using continuous videos. Later, she would then take image stills from the resulting clips – a technique of remembrance many of us are familiar with when capturing and sharing moving social media images – later editing them with Photoshop’s Warp tool and painting the resulting images while sitting amongst the fabric. Importantly, these self-portraits are unusual in their depiction of the whole body, and not just the face, as is most common, explaining her intention to show a “human figure not yet fully formed.”<sup>12</sup>

Tilson’s staging of pose and poise interrogates how our lives external to home demand performances of confidence, modesty, humility and gender: a game for a child, the reality of our adult lives. Other works from the series, such as *Feeling Blue* (2020) and *Concealer* (2020), could perhaps reference thermodynamic temperature scales, utilising opals, midnight blues and blushing cadmium reds to indicate emotions and moods. Remarking on this recent and ongoing series, such as paintings like *Her Body Thrummed* (2023) and *Vivacity* (2022), Tilson notes how she enjoys “treating both the body and the pattern as landscapes,”<sup>13</sup> while referencing earlier works that depict cropped torsos at once representative and abstract. The way shapes react with each other in *Pattern Portrait Leaning In* (2021) and *Pattern Portrait 1* (2020) Tilson has named ‘synthetic camouflage’.

‘Synthetic camouflage’, the invention of patterns and the resulting visual effect of placing them against one another, takes us back to psychogeography: the intersecting relationship of psychology and geography. There is an ambiguity in the use of camouflage. As Calum Bowden described in an essay, “There are two ways in which camouflage can function. The first, and most obvious, is allowing the user to blend into its own surroundings, mimicking the survival instincts of animals such as the stonefish or leaf insect, which possess the ability to alter their appearance in order to avoid predators. The other is to dazzle: not so much hiding in plain sight, but rather disorientating a would-be predator by offering some sort of sensory overload... Camouflage is malleable, both visually and conceptually... It’s used to denote an outsider sensibility.”<sup>14</sup>

The tessellation between camouflage on camouflage has been of interest to several significant artists, from English surrealist Roland Penrose to French artist and naval camoufleur Pierre Gautier – and even American artist Andy Warhol. Tilson’s portraits employ this dazzling technique; she is camouflaged into her own patterns: an overload of information like the artist falling into their own Mondrian Boogie Woogie. “When my eyes are hurting from clashing information or patterns, that’s when I know I’m doing something right,” Tilson laughs.

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A flâneur of pattern, a creator of camouflage and a vehement advocate for colour, Tilson lives her work. There is never a simple conclusion at the frame's edge or wall's boundary. Paintings flow into drawings, found objects are woven together, and graphic patterns double up as stage costumes. Continually staging images, moving frames, making artworks move, be moved and be moving, Tilson relished in pushing her practice into exciting, ebullient, and unexpected possibilities. As theorist José Esteban Muñoz has noted, "Performance, seen as a utopian performativity, is imbued with a sense of potentiality."<sup>15</sup> Tilson's performative practice, made up of earnest interventions and interrogations into life's tessellations, patterns and psychogeographies, invites us as viewers to notice, question, play, stage, wonder, *dérive*.

## Footnotes

1. Guy Debord, *Internationale Situationniste*, No.2, December 1958. <https://0-www-oed-com.catalogue.librari.es.london.ac.uk/view/Entry/199664> (accessed 15 September 2021).
2. Hannah Tilson in conversation with Laurie Barron, July 2023.
3. Simon Parker, 'Power to The Psychogeographers', *The Guardian*, 22 February 2002.
4. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, p.7.
5. Olivia Paterson, 'Curated Collections', Seam Agency, February 2021.
6. Hannah Tilson in conversation with Laurie Barron, July 2023.
7. Hannah Tilson - <https://artonapostcard.com/blogs/artist-interviews/meet-hannah-tilson> Art on a Postcard 'Meet Hannah Tilson' 2018.
8. "tessellate, v.". OED Online. September 2021. Oxford University Press.
9. Hannah Tilson interview with Jan Sharma. 10. <https://www.instagram.com/tube.tiles/?hl=en-gb>.
11. Hannah Tilson, 2023.
12. Hannah Tilson in conversation with Laurie Barron, July 2023.
13. Hannah Tilson in conversation with Laurie Barron, July 2023.
14. Gordon, Calum. 'Notes on Camo'. *KALEIDOSCOPE*, SS2021, p.190.
15. Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 10th Anniversary Edition. *Sexual Cultures*. New York: New York University Press, 2019, p.99.