

## THE SECOND SKIN [ LA SECONDA PELLE ]

MARK COTTLE  
GALLERIA BONGIOVANNI / BOLOGNA  
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### DOCILE ENIGMAS

I met Mark Cottle more than twenty years ago, when he was a young architect on a fellowship in Italy. His work as an artist began later, but, during his visits in Italy, I came to recognize his way of looking at things. He was always attentive to the physicality of form, material, and detail. Contemplating an architectural episode with him would leave two impressions: the consistency of matter and the importance of detail – each transformed by its relation to light. I watched him “feel” the texture of a distant building, or sense a previously unrecognized pattern on its surface.

I remember that when he showed me his first installations, he stressed the amount of labor involved, the quantity of small pieces, and the support received from friends. His bead curtains. Fragile and imposing. We need to hear, he suggested, their sounds: the rustling of the paper and the soft metallic clicking of the paperclips – even perhaps the humming in the background of a dressmaker’s atelier.

There is in his art an obsession for order. But the rigorous repetition of motifs and the delirium of geometry open to a tender, even amusing, exaltation of ephemera [tickets, receipts, schedules, votives] and images from the popular imagination and mass media.

Tall and thin like theatrical hangings, but also highly-wrought and authoritative like medieval tapestries, the bead installations have nevertheless the charm of those curtains marking the entrances of small Italian grocery stores in the fifties. By definition untraversable, they retain the rustling and clicking sounds of passage – because they remain, intimately and irremediably, thresholds.

The drawings. Here also prevail diagrams, geometrical grills, swarming patterns, rhythmic multiplications – figures that become all the more enigmatic the more they melt into the field of perception, in docile and familiar epiphanies [the network of an electrical system, the cells of a beehive, the map of a town].

The bead curtains are available like the rosary, like drops of sweat, rain, vapor, like pearls. All these tactile elements, falling or yielding or hanging in sequence, divide us from the shadows with which we perhaps yearn to be rejoined.

On the other hand the geometric figures of the drawings are dilated, expanded, distended, presume growth that the room itself cannot contain, allude to something from which we cannot be detached, pain perhaps, or a fall from sense. But it is precisely then that Mark Cottle ignites signs of an incredulous grace, of smiling pietas. And the work offers to preserve us by not taking too much too seriously.

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### ECLECTIC PATTERNS

If patterns are used to distil contemporary culture, or, rather, the experience of a well-traveled contemporary American architect, what kinds of figures will emerge? If an amorphous mass excavated by someone avidly devoted to learning and to a postmodern archaeology of beauty is sifted, what precious elements will be found?

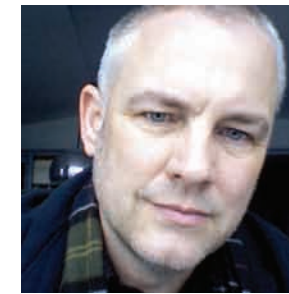
In Thomas Cole’s painting “The Dream of the Architect” [1840], the architect is immersed in, and sustained by, a vision of a world that has become a catalogue of patterns and styles. It is a generous, submissive world, and the architect’s position in it is elevated and effortless in its uncontested dominance. It is a balanced, harmonious world, a perfect expression of human and architectural decorum.

In Mark Cottle’s drawings, the architect is no longer visible, and the endless possibilities provided by the world as pattern book have become the motivation for a spiraling, questioning search. It is a dream of discovery and experimentation not unlike that of Cole, but it develops at a very different tempo, while the positioning of the architect in relation to the object of contemplation has become considerably more centrifugal than in Cole’s painting. Despite the spin, however, Cottle’s personal filter and the synthesizing capacity of drafting software manage to fuse. And one might argue that they form the underlying theme of his recent body of work.

Cole and Cottle share a similar aspiration to encyclopedic eclecticism, but the obvious difference in their approaches reveals the extraordinary distance traveled between 1840 and the early twenty-first century. Cottle is the current runner in a race that not even Cole himself started, a race that acts as an ever-changing mirror projecting ever-changing reflections.

In Cottle’s “curtain” works, the focus is on the optical disruption of banalized emblems of the exotic, the inaccessible, or of the imagery that accompanies contemporary voyages of discovery. The impossibility of maintaining a visual or semantic unity speaks of the limits of Cottle’s quest. In Cole’s painting the disruption was presented in the form of a dignified assembly of disparate styles. With Cottle’s work it appears as the impossibility of creating seamless surfaces. In the curtains the original surface is methodically and manually upset, while in the drawings a labyrinthine throbbing creates the illusion of an equally disruptive screen.

In the end, what becomes manifest is the tremendous resilience of beauty, capable of surviving the most rigorous of questionings. Does that come as a surprise, however, when the questioner himself is so devoted to the cult of beauty?



### THE SECOND SKIN

My work investigates architecture’s first gesture – enclosure – working from the basic motif of the textile: the drape that covers and comforts the human body, the carpets that clad Semper’s primitive hut, and “the cloths of heaven” – “the draped universe” of medieval Christian and Muslim cosmology.

THE SECOND SKIN explores the border zone, where patterns of geometry and growth encounter and interfere with each other – an efflorescence – where the crystalline and cellular structures within the material “blossom” onto its surface.

Further, I am interested in the culture of geometry. The drawings in the CDG series start from three simple mathematical tiling patterns: an Archimedean tessellation of squares and triangles, a double hexagonal grid [which produces pentagons] from Cairo, and a basket-weave from the French Renaissance – overlapping, scaling, and morphing into each other to develop fluid figures across the surface of the wall.

The drawings do not expect geometry to order, explain, or represent the material world. Rather, in their fugitive figurations they test it as an instrument of perception. They question the interpretation of ornament, exaggerating repetition and variation in order to encourage an oscillation between the decorative and the incantatory.

**MARK COTTLE** was born in Washington, DC, and raised in Alexandria, Virginia, and Contoocook, New Hampshire. He studied English literature and music theory and composition at Clemson University, architecture and painting at Rice University, and contemporary theory and criticism at Harvard University.

He has won the Steedman Fellowship in Architecture and the Dinkeloo Fellowship to the American Academy in Rome, as well as a number of national design awards.

He has taught at the Rhode Island School of Design and the University of Hawai'i and is currently associate professor with tenure on the faculty of the College of Architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology, where he teaches design studios, theory courses, and a seminar on the detail.

Recent exhibitions include “Amy Landesberg and Mark Cottle: On the Surface” at Georgia State University and “Patterns of Perception” at the École Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Paris La Villette.

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