

THESIS

DESIGNING ORNAMENT: THE PLIC PLAC SERIES

Submitted by

Whitney Crutchfield

Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall 2010

Master's Committee:

Department Chair: Gary Voss

Advisor: Thomas Lundberg

Patricia Coronel

Sanam Emami

Mary Littrell

Copyright by Whitney Crutchfield

All Rights Reserved 2010

ABSTRACT

DESIGNING ORNAMENT: THE PLIC PLAC SERIES

Ornament, “something that lends grace or beauty,”¹ and decoration, “something that adorns or enriches,”² are by no means new elements within the human experience. Humans have been adorning their dwellings and possessions as early as 30,000 B.C., as seen in the Grotte Chauvet in present-day France, where inhabitants decorated their caves with paintings of horses.³ Ornamentation has continued throughout history and within every known culture, as demonstrated by a range of objects and environments, from Paleolithic carved antlers⁴ to the interiors of the palace at Versailles. Despite this ubiquity, the terms *ornament* and *decoration* often seem unwelcome in the traditional art canon. Recent history has seen a serious attempt at the eradication of ornament, founded upon perceived associations of ornament with otherness, irrationality, weakness, and barbarism. For many practitioners of art movements during the last one hundred years, ornament and its color and complexities represented a threat to their core artistic values. Especially within the contexts of modernism and minimalism of the last century, these words appear

¹“ornament.” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2010, (accessed 3 October 2010).
<<http://www.merriam-webster.com>.>

²“decoration.” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2010, (accessed 3 October 2010).
<<http://www.merriam-webster.com>.>

³ Jean Clottes, *Chauvet Cave: The Art of Earliest Times* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2003), 33.

⁴ James Trilling, *The Language of Ornament* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 90.

to be reserved for those objects and ideas undeserving of the high praise given to the traditional arts, and they often provoke scoffs and disregard from art professionals and critics. This disregard comes at a cost, that being the nearly total rejection of our visual histories. While a majority of art and design movements of the last century have attempted to diminish the importance of ornament within our daily lives, it is my goal to contribute to the re-introduction of ornament that can be seen today in a number of different design and art movements focusing on the revival and celebration of ornament.

This ongoing re-introduction of ornament first requires a thorough understanding of ornament and its implications. Ornament and decoration have served a multitude of purposes throughout history, though, according to theorist James Trilling, “they are subordinate to its one great purpose: to give pleasure.”⁵ Traditionally, ornament has been “the art we add to art,”⁶ a non-functional additive element of works of art and design. This non-functional nature of ornament allows it to rely almost completely on its potential for visual interest. The harmonies of color, pattern, shape, and rhythm provide visual interest and invite a viewer to spend time with ornament—to become familiar with it. Bilateral symmetry, a structure upon which an abundance of ornamental and decorative elements are built, provides a comfortable point of entry for the viewer. Related to physiology, symmetry is most easily perceived across a vertical axis because of the gravitational groundedness in our bipedal, upright stance. In fact, the development and mastery of early motor skills in infants correlates with the perception of vertical or bilateral symmetry. Furthermore, bilateral symmetry characterizes many human sociological structures.

⁵ James Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), xvi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

Interpersonal relationships appear to develop according to a form a bilateral symmetry. According to Washburn and Crowe, some cultures organize themselves around a symmetrical structure, allowing them to sustain environmental and sociopolitical change.⁷ When ornamental elements are similarly organized around bilateral symmetry or any other symmetry, viewers are able to find a familiar, relatable form, heightened visual interest, and, thus, a sense of pleasure within the ornament.

Pleasure, as the primary purpose of ornament and decoration, has allowed these elements to persist throughout history and cultures. Also inherent in the creation and dissemination of ornament is the potential for communication and documentation. Ornament often has the ability to tell a story, to communicate wealth and power, to profess loyalty. As a visual and often persistent element of any society, it also has the ability to serve as documentation, whether as a record of historical events or as a visual lineage of an image or motif.

The historical persistence of ornament figures prominently in the development of my own work. As Trilling asserts, “An ornamental form is the product of a thousand different choices, institutions, and accidents.”⁸ As I create my own ornamental forms, I relish the idea that such forms are rooted in a rich and vast artistic tradition, that my choices are innately affected by all of those who have found their own pleasures in these forms before me.

Pleasure, in fact, has become the single most important element in my own artistic practice. As a maker and artist working in the wake of a century-long abolishment of pleasure by way of ornament, I question why we are so often taught to deny the innate

⁷ Dorothy K. Washburn and Donald W. Crowe., *Symmetry Comes of Age: The Role of Pattern in Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), xiii.

⁸ Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*, 224.

pursuit of pleasure. And so I choose to indulge the pursuit of pleasure by addressing three specific types of pleasure in my work: visual, emotional, and intellectual. Exploration of generic interior spaces, such as the living room, bedroom, or parlor, has prompted me to consider the human interactions that occur within these spaces, and subsequently, the pleasures that can be derived from those interactions as well as the elements of the spaces in which they occur. Visual pleasure can be understood in a number of different ways. One may experience a great deal of visual pleasure in an arresting moment of discovery during which a visual element of one's surroundings takes hold and vastly alters one's general experience. Visual pleasure may also occur on a more mundane level, present in simple situations that may be enjoyed in passing. No matter the definition, a great deal of visual pleasure can be found in our surroundings. From the simplest textural detail on a windowpane to the bold and intricate painted mural on a wall, visual pleasure exists in nearly everything that contains us. In my own work, visual pleasure may be discovered through a set of juxtaposed elements: tough, mechanical hardware and bright, inviting patterns.

Emotional pleasure can also be found in our surroundings, particularly within the ornament of our surroundings. Oscar Wilde, in *The Artist as Critic*, eloquently describes such ornament: "Still, the art that is frankly decorative is the art to live with. It is, of all our visible arts, the one art that creates in us both mood and temperament."⁹ I have found that the creation of such art, that which creates mood and temperament, grows out of my optimistic nature, and that I find pleasure in giving visual form to my own ideas of vitality and anticipation.

⁹ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *The Best of Oscar Wilde: Selected Plays and Literary Criticism*, comp. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Signet Classic, 2004), 369.

Emotional pleasure is closely tied to the third type of pleasure that is critical to my artistic practice: intellectual pleasure. I understand this kind of pleasure as that which is provoked by the mindful discovery of a perceptual challenge or a solution to an apparent problem. For instance, in my own work, I find intellectual pleasure in the development of a pattern, in the inquiry into the ways in which one single shape can take multiple forms. I also find this type of pleasure in the attempt to imply three-dimensional movement using a static, two-dimensional surface, such as a textile. The perceptual relationships between the two-dimensional surface and the three-dimensional object grow stronger through layering and overlapping of color. Multiplicity in my work also presents the potential for intellectual pleasure. Multiple similar forms are quite apparent in the physical, visual experience of the finished works. Through these physical multiples, one may also begin to understand process-related multiplicity. Whether made with a sewing machine, computerized mill, or a pair of scissors, these forms tell a story of problem solving through their physicality. While I strive to find intellectual pleasure in my own design process, I also intend to evoke a sense of intellectual pleasure in a viewer. By allowing mathematical sequences and thought patterns to emerge from what seems to be a purely ornamental textile, I intend to encourage intellectual pleasure through imagination and discovery.

My pursuit of pleasure closely corresponds to the formal elements I choose to emphasize in my work. I most often work with three driving formal forces. The first of these is pattern. A successful pattern depends upon a careful blending of structure, scale, and coverage.¹⁰ As I build a pattern, I find the repetition of objects and images both soothing and exciting, the required calculations both calming and energizing. It is in this

¹⁰ William Justema, *The Pleasures of Pattern* (New York: Reinhold Book Corp., 1968), 29.

duality of the pattern that I find the most pleasure. It offers simultaneous rest and stimulation. Repetition of motifs provides visual consistency, while the presence of the hand, seen in small and unexpected anomalies, allows for discovery and variety in the visual appearance of a pattern. Such visual repetition is not only a product of the design, but also of the process of making. Process-related repetition is common among art disciplines, from the ever-recurring brushstroke in painting to the incessant chiseling in sculpture. Textile processes, though, are particularly connected to repetition. Many techniques including weaving, knitting, stitching, and screenprinting rely on the outcomes of repetitive motions and actions. The physical repetition of screenprinting requires me to work with its media and materials and to interact with them over and over again. Because of this very physical process, pattern and rhythm play integral roles in both the making and the viewing of my work.

Shape and color are the other two formal elements that feature prominently in my work. Many of my designs and patterns originate from very simple, flat shapes. In using such forms, I intend for the viewer to become comfortable with or to be able to visually rest upon the simple shape. This gives the viewer the opportunity to investigate the overall pattern and travel through the rhythmic, repetitive composition. Color works in a similar way. I generally work with colors in which I find pleasure, those that encourage a sense of optimism and stimulation. Clear and bright colors often guide my palette choices. Light, reflection, and suggestions of transparency feature prominently in my compositions of pattern and color. In creating the colors for my most recent work, I chose to focus on color as one of the most basic forms of ornament, celebrating the power of bright, familiar colors. In this case, color itself offers a sense of pleasure, warmth, and invitation. Again, Oscar

Wilde states aptly, “Mere colour, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways.”¹¹

Pattern, shape, and color come together in my most recent work, *Plic Plac Series*. I have found the most pleasure in the creation of pattern on the textile surface, and I strove to find a method of presentation of these textiles that is both formally appropriate and relevant to the material. Previous experimental installations utilized traditional, found domestic furniture forms and the surfaces they presented. This earlier investigation into the role of printed textiles in an interior space prompted further exploration of the sculptural possibilities for such textiles. I wanted to address human relationships to interior spaces using a form that is at the same time both familiar and imagined, drawing upon the familiar associations that we have with textiles. I also wanted to create a body of work that would invite the viewer to interact with it, one that would encourage some level of discovery and play. Above all, I hope that this body of work emphasizes the experience of pleasure.

My interests in interiors, the objects that reside in them, and the interactions that occur within them drew me to a functional form, that of the chair. A chair is a recognizable object, and it offers a sense of comfort, understanding, and, in some cases, safety. A *Plic Plac Chair* appeals to a viewer’s desire for familiarity. The formal qualities of the *Plic Plac Chair* all grow out of one basic shape—the visual form of the structure directly relates to the pattern and repetition of the applied textile. Such formal continuity and integration create a conversation between function and ornament. At the same time, the various iterations of the one simple shape, the rounded trapezoid, present the element of transformation. Capable of hinging open and becoming nearly two-dimensional, the *Plic Plac Chair*

¹¹ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 369.

transforms from a functional piece of furniture to an ornamental wall piece. When presented as a series, eight *Plic Plac Chairs* have the ability to transform from a set of functional seats to a compositional wall installation. In this way, a *Plic Plac Chair*, fulfills the definitions of three categories so often cautiously divided: art, ornament, and design. It aspires toward the goals of art, as it is “a visual object or experience consciously created through an expression of skill or imagination.”¹² It is also ornament. In its two-dimensional form, it is “something added to [the space] for the sake of visual pleasure,”¹³ and in its chair stance, it displays a printed textile that was created primarily for the sake of visual pleasure. And finally, it is design, taking on a “functional shape as a means to visual pleasure.”¹⁴

A *Plic Plac Chair* is a handmade object that implies an industrial relationship, embracing the unexpected pleasures of machine-oriented elements. Industrial hardware works in cooperation with the soft, somewhat familiar textile. While resembling an industrial prototype, the *Plic Plac Chair* presents evidence of the human maker through its printed imperfections and its handcrafted materials. It is a hybrid object, existing at a point where art, ornament, and design merge. I create and approach it from several different but related points of view: those of artist, designer, maker, and craftsman. While my exact location within these realms may change over time, some underlying principles in my work will remain constant: the value of ornament and the pursuit of pleasure.

¹² “Visual Art,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (accessed 3 October 2010), <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/630806/visual-art>>

¹³ Trilling, *The Language of Ornament*, 65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: *Plic Plac*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 2: *Plic Plac* (alternate view), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 3: *Plic Plac* (alternate view), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 4: *Plic Plac* (alternate composition), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 5: *Plic Plac* (alternate composition), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 6: *Plic Plac* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 7: *Plic Plac* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 8: *Plic Plac* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 9: *Plic Plac Chair: Caterpillar*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 10: *Plic Plac Chair: Caterpillar* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 11: *Plic Plac Chair: Fade*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 12: *Plic Plac Chair: Drops*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 13: *Plic Plac Chair: Drops* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 14: *Plic Plac Chair: Ring Tangle*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 15: *Plic Plac Chair: Ring Tangle* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 16: *Plic Plac Chair: Ring Tangle* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 17: *Plic Plac Chair: Stripe*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 18: *Plic Plac Chair: Fragment*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 19: *Plic Plac Chair: Stack*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 20: *Plic Plac Chair: Stack* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 21: *Plic Plac Chair: Shift*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 22: *Plic Plac Chair: Shift* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

Figure 23: *Plic Plac* (alternate composition), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 1, *Plic Plac*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 2, *Plic Plac* (alternate view), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 3, *Plic Plac* (alternate view), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 4, *Plic Plac* (alternate composition), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 5, *Plic Plac* (alternate composition), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 6, *Plic Plac* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 7, *Plic Plac* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 8, *Plic Plac* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 9, *Plic Plac Chair: Caterpillar*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 10, *Plic Plac Chair: Caterpillar* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 11, *Plic Plac Chair: Fade*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 12, *Plic Plac Chair: Drops*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

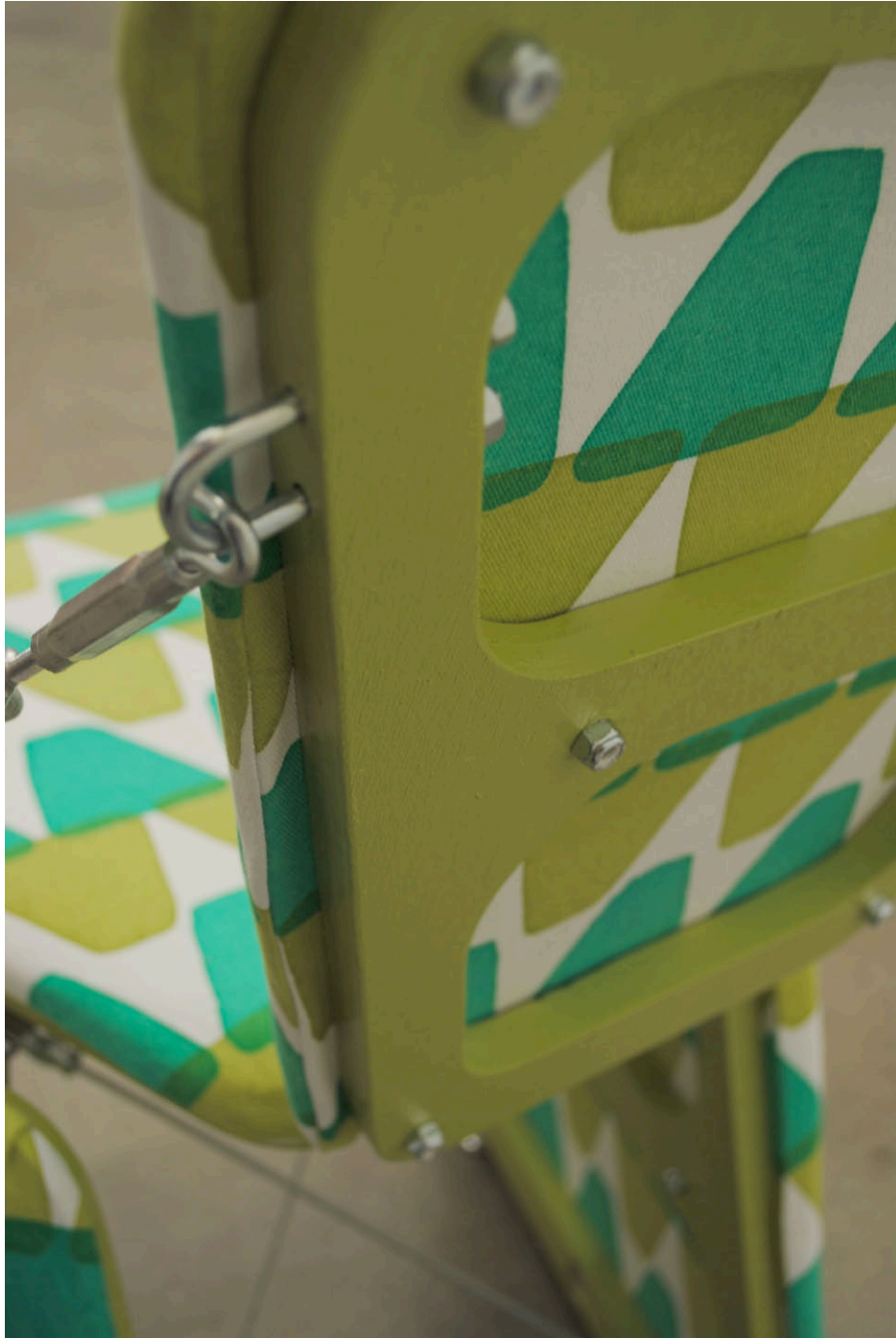


Fig. 13, *Plic Plac Chair: Drops* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 14, *Plic Plac Chair: Ring Tangle*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 15, *Plic Plac Chair: Ring Tangle* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 16, *Plic Plac Chair: Ring Tangle* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 17, *Plic Plac Chair: Stripe*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 18, *Plic Plac Chair: Fragment*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 19, *Plic Plac Chair: Stack*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

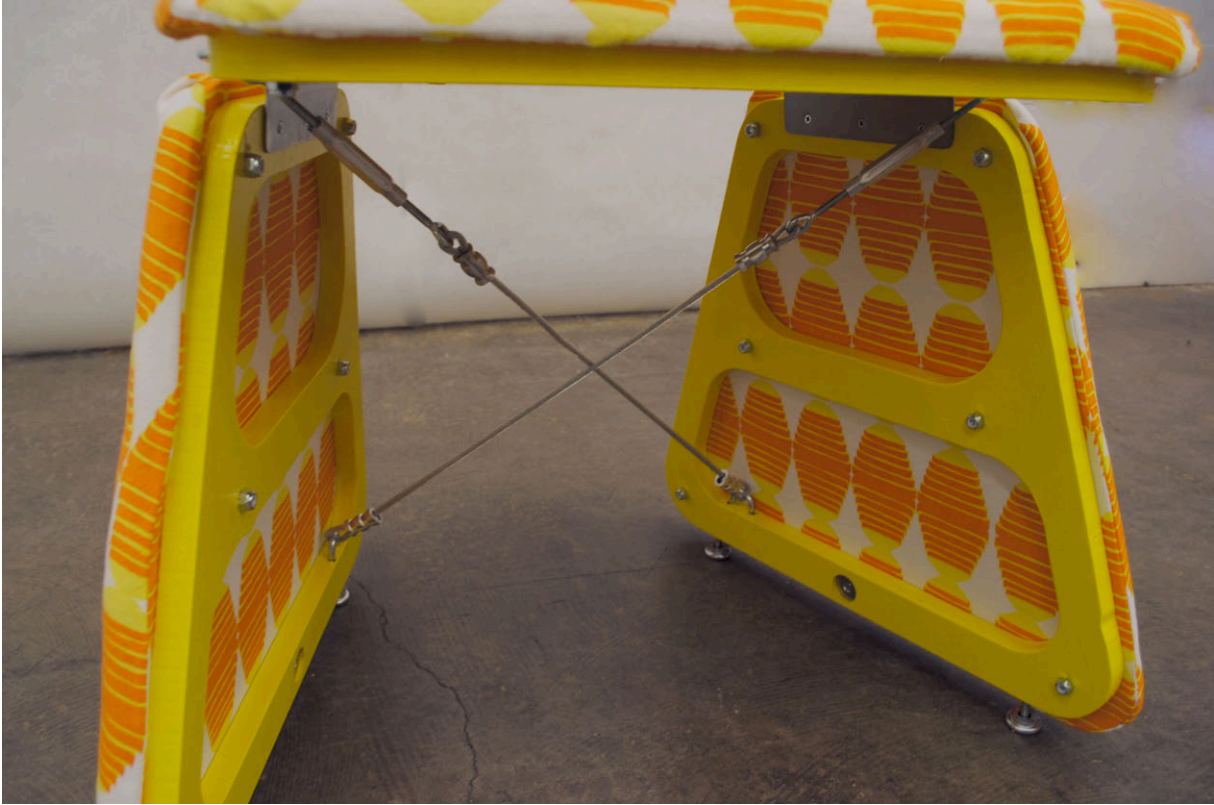


Fig. 20, *Plic Plac Chair: Stack* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 21, *Plic Plac Chair: Shift*, 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 22, *Plic Plac Chair: Shift* (detail), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.



Fig. 23, *Plic Plac* (alternate composition), 2010; fiber-reactive dye, cotton canvas, plywood, hardware; screenprinted, hand and machine cut.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Clottes, Jean. *Chauvet Cave: The Art of Earliest Times*. Salt Lake City, UT: The University of Utah Press, 2003.
- “Decoration.” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2010.
<<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/decoration>> (accessed 3 October 2010).
- Justema, William. *The Pleasures of Pattern*. New York: Reinhold Book Corp., 1968.
- “Ornament.” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2010.
<<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ornament>> (accessed 3 October 2010).
- Trilling, James. *The Language of Ornament*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2001.
- . *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.
- “Visual Art.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/630806/visual-art>>
(accessed 3 October, 2010).
- Washburn, Dorothy K. and Crowe, Donald W. *Symmetry Comes of Age: The Role of Pattern in Culture*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004.
- Wilde, Oscar. “The Critic as Artist.” In *The Best of Oscar Wilde: Selected Plays and Literary Criticism*. Compiled by Sylvan Barnet. New York: Signet Classic, 2004.