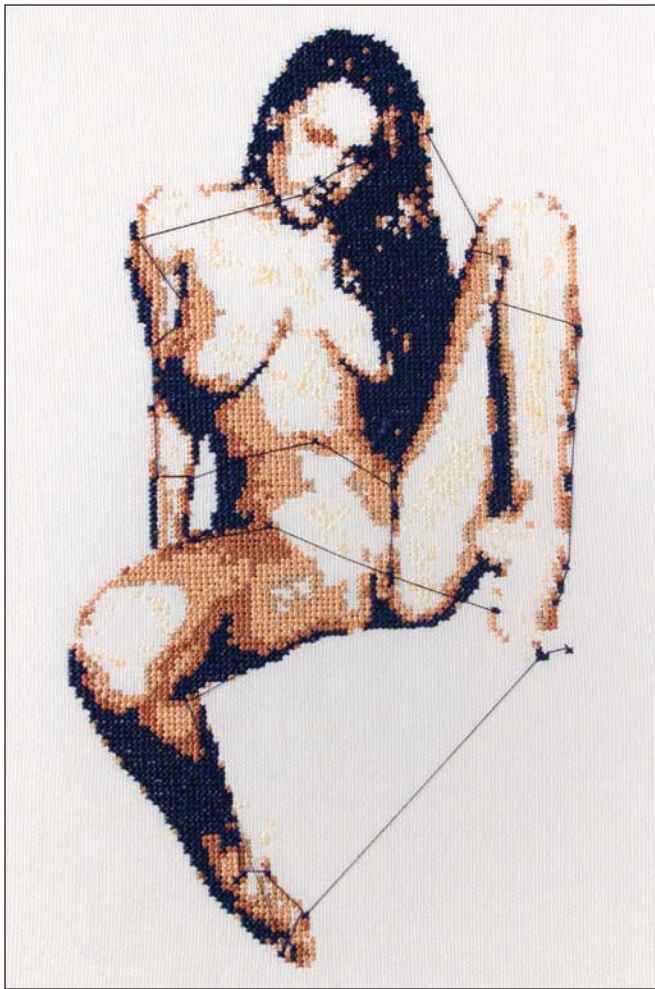




ALICIA ROSS

Samplers



Sampler, 2006
16 x 20 inch / 11 x 14 inch
cross-stitch

Pamela #1, 2006
54x80 in.
inkjet print on vinyl

into spheres predominantly visual. It has not lost its critical edge, but a strident position is no longer de rigeur, as younger artists seek to remark upon the problematic undercurrents of such imagery while conceding to—or often even exalting—its visual allure.

These concurrent impulses are what attracted me to the work of Alicia Ross. There is a specific and unavoidable critique of the male gaze in Ross' work. Her methodology is intended specifically to disrupt, dismantle, frustrate, and obfuscate that gaze. Ross complicates the ease with which the male gaze lustfully perceives the female, with most of her gestures pushing the original image toward an abstracted version of itself. More difficult to discern, the images become more difficult to crassly appreciate...somewhat.

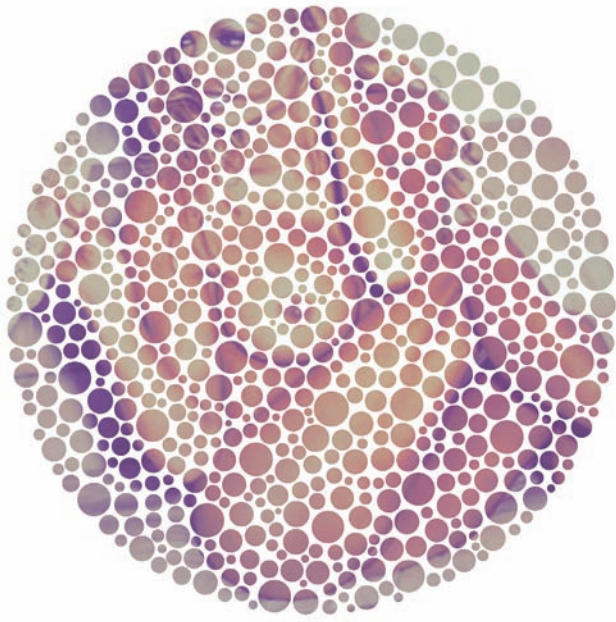
At the same time that Ross' artistic gestures are messing with the easeful gaze, they also introduce new layers of visual allure. She disrupts one kind of fetish and enables another. The blatantly sexualized image gives way to an abstracted version of itself which does not deny its reality as a willing partner in a seductive relationship with the viewer. If there is a critical layer to the porno-pop images that are veiled within her work, there is a simultaneous adoration of those images, a concession to their undeniable allure. It is an allure that is enhanced by the dynamic aspect of Ross' particular treatment of these images.

In her series of *Samplers*, Ross uses downloaded images, excising her figures from their original backgrounds and using a computer program to translate the image pixels into a pattern of cross-stitching. Ross further edits the cross-stitched patterns, determining the fullness of the pattern, the delineation of lines, and her choice of thread color. Using the sewing machine as a drawing instrument, Ross is toying with particular versions of female pop iconography. While all Ross' source images are downloaded, only a portion are culled from pornographic sites. Just as many figures are selected from fashion websites and art historical sources, conflating each into the other, and reducing them all to the same discreet, beautiful objects of handcraft.

Yet "handcraft" is a skewed term for what is taking place. ("Sexicraft" may be more apt—the repetitive puncturing of holes with a needle being an

We are at the point in contemporary art culture where the appropriation of popular culture is a historical-given. More so, the appropriation of pornographic imagery—by young women artists, in particular—is a well-established sub-genre of art. And it's no longer merely about recognizing the subjugation of women as sexualized subjects. Nor is it merely about the reclamation of such imagery as a mode of self-empowerment.

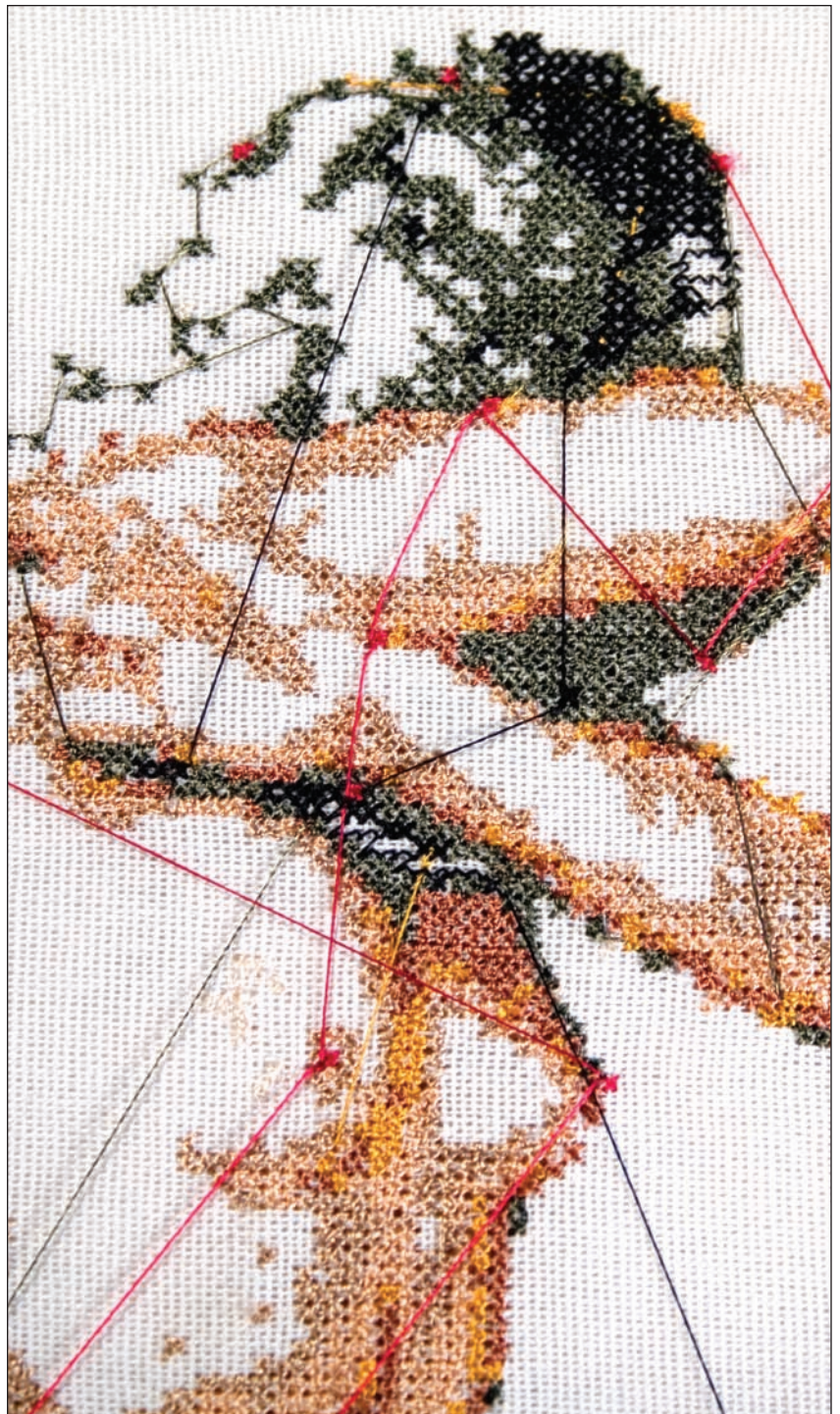
These issues remain implicit in the language, but the hypersexualized imagery of women (and men) in contemporary art has segued into some other space. It has become common enough as subject matter that it often moves from the political and social



obviously salacious metaphor.) While Ross has not given up control of her stitching and her conscious choices predicate the final form, there are unique dimensions to using an automated sewing machine. There is a tight precision to the work, a consistency and regularity to the stitching that might or might not be evident with hand-stitched pieces. This precision connects the *Samplers* more closely with their digitized source materials.

The automated sewing machine also creates a curious gesture within the works, as Ross opts to leave the jump-stitches in the piece. Jump-stitches indicate where the machine has changed from one color to another and are typically trimmed. By leaving these intact, Ross creates a situation within which each image remains bound—bound to itself visually and physically and underscoring the question of whether the image remains bound to any particular meaning. The *Samplers* never become unrecognizable as female figures, but they consciously incorporate a persistent sense of abstraction—enough to provide an acute visual reality that stands apart from the implications of meaning. You cannot deny the beautiful thingness of them.

More so the *Ishihara Test Series*, in which similarly-sourced imagery is fitted into the template for testing color deficiencies (red-green



colorblind, blue colorblind, etc). A circle comprised of different-sized dots of different colors obscures the image hidden in plain sight (the original tests “hid” numbers) and gauges the degree of colorblindness in the viewer. Ross is savvy about her use of this scientific test for the work, aware that men are considerably more prone to colorblindness than women. Hence, Ishihara becomes an ideal mechanism with which to confound the male gaze. It becomes nearly impossible to possess that which you cannot see.

At the same time, Ross selects a process that does not entirely eradicate the vamp quotient and she selects sex icons—Pamela Anderson, Jenna Jameson, Paris Hilton—who should be familiar to most young men not living in caves. These choices also reveal the power dynamics within the works. These are not exploited, wayward teens from Wisconsin chewed up and spit out by the sex industry. Anderson and Hilton have turned celebrity sexuality and scandal into perpetual career fuel, while Jameson is the 21st century paradigm for a one-woman sex industry. They are the power brokers of their own sexuality—gazing upon them is not a desultory act, it’s the whole point.

The *Ishihara* pieces are reproduced on scrolls of commercial vinyl, presented as highly-polished and sexually-charged eye charts. Ross is confronting the notion of sexual desire derived through visual cues, perhaps even gently mocking it as a clinical, measurable response. Still, the *Ishihara* pieces and the *Samplers* do not veil their appeal. They are arguably more seductive (or at least employ a more sophisticated seduction) than the source material from which they are derived.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator

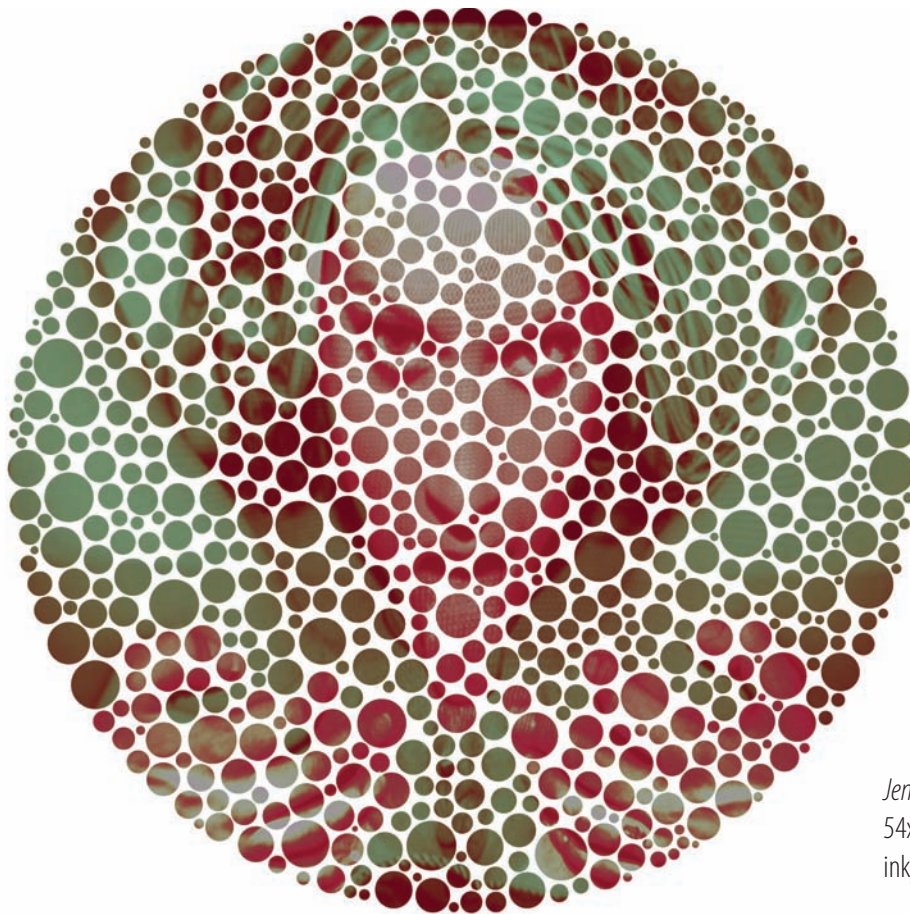
Sampler, 2006
16 x 20 inch / 11 x 14 inch
cross-stitch

Motherboard I, 2007
32 x 56 inches framed
cross-stitch





Sampler, 2006
16 x 20 inch /
11 x 14 inch



Jenna #1, 2006
54x80 in.
inkjet print on vinyl

Over the last half-decade, Cleveland native Alicia Ross has been juxtaposing the fetishistic and conceptual into her own ideology of body and self. She is widely exhibited at the national level, and has taught undergraduate photography as well as instructed digital workshops. This past December, Alicia Ross completed her Master of Fine Arts in the Imaging Arts at Rochester Institute of Technology (Rochester, New York). www.aliciacross.com

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