

Francesca DiMattio on Craft and Hybrid
by Emily Weiner

Table Setting and Flower Arranging

Francesca DiMattio

Salon 94 Bowery

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Still life and craft, two themes that have long been bottom-shelved in art history's hierarchy, get a lift from Francesca DiMattio in "Table Setting and Flower Arranging," her current, swirling show at Salon 94 Bowery. In the downstairs gallery, collaged paintings of semi-abstract domestic interiors span the walls, while outsized ceramic vessels command the room's center. These two bodies of work—each in their respective materiality—manage to communicate the same sense of a long, convoluted, lineage flash-frozen into a contemporary hybrid. But what might be a schizophrenic number of references are layered deftly for a leveling effect: Within the largest canvas on view, *Guilloche* (2012), for example, DiMattio juxtaposes Hudson River School landscape painting, vanitas still life, contemporary abstraction (à la Albert Oehlen), Frank Stella-esque minimalism—even kitschy tablecloth gingham too—without favoritism. Meanwhile, a sculpture like *Totem* (2012) squashes together ceramic vessels resembling French Rococo porcelain, a Victorian teapot, a Chinese vase, and even 1990s homeware into illogical strata.

The show was on its third week when I met with DiMattio at Salon 94. She had stopped by to remove the flowers which she had arranged inside her vase-sculptures at the opening. These had added yet another layer to the show, she explained, "pushing the sculptures over the top both visually and referentially." (Within one vase, for instance, an Ikebana arrangement might balance out a bouquet plucked straight from a Dutch still life.) Now dried and crumbled, a few petals on the floor were all that remained, and as DiMattio swept, she noted unsentimentally that the vases stood up equally well emptied of flowers, still chock full of theoretical content. "Like the paintings, they speak in their own language of materiality to reference history in a non-linear way," she says. As one style is not prioritized over another, the associations are left to mingle and shift on their own: "Here's a really specific technique that's used in the French Rococo period," DiMattio pointed out, identifying a section of *Totem* embellished with gold. "But it's also used in kitsch craft that you can find in thrift stores." To her, it's the way in which an object is placed—either in real space or in history—that's important. "One minute it's the beautiful thing and the next minute it's cloyingly disgusting," she deadpans. "I'm interested in putting the different elements together to shift preconceived notions—and create an unstable view where everything continually undermines or affects the other thing."



Francesca DiMattio, *Edo Pot*, 2012, Chinapaint and underpaint on porcelain ceramic, 24 x 15 x 15 in. ; Courtesy of the artist & Salon 94 Bowery

To make these massive vases, DiMattio worked long hours into the desert night at Arizona State University, where she had access to a kiln capable of firing pieces this large (even when worked in parts the pieces weighed 300 or 400 pounds). "I was helped by people in the craft world and they were really surprised by the way I did things. I thought 'what's so weird?,' but the way I put things together, handled the clay... I didn't inherit any rules because I didn't know any." She sees this impromptu methodology as an asset to her art-making, as an idea can be unadulterated in its execution by any "right" convention of doing things.

Exploring the craft theme "was a huge interest of mine," she admits, "I have this strange relationship to craft, as my father-in-law was a professional ceramic artist my whole life, so I got to know his world, which operates quite separately from the fine-art world." Finding this curious, DiMattio tried to define what differentiates craft, realizing that "it's an order and adherence to history." As an artist who has found her way while experimenting across mediums, hard and fast rules were never primary: "That's always how I've worked, and it's with painting too. You figure out what you need to know to make something, but it's not about knowing *how* to do it first." Gesturing toward the ceramics she maintains: "I was really driven by wanting to make these objects. I could have used found objects, but they'd look too different." So every piece was molded by hand, and the methods of painting for optimal effect, in various styles, all had to be learned in one short year. "I wanted these things to come together and become something else," she explains—regardless of how painstaking the process might be.



Francesca DiMattio, *Damask*, 2012, Oil, acrylic and collage on canvas, 112 x 84 in.; Courtesy of the artist & Salon 94 Bowery

Meanwhile, DiMattio's canvases lead a parallel investigation into the genre of still life, a longtime subordinate of portrait, history, landscape, and even animal painting—and a signifier of feminine space. Cultural constructions (gender role, hierarchies) upend here, as the viewer can get lost in the patchwork that make up these interior scenes. "My influences are all really digested," the artist says of her images, which overlap throughout the compositions and often become disembodied from their original sources: "Anything can go in, since I'm interested in that space where two different things get sandwiched together." DiMattio looks for the alchemy that can happen with the right structure, when meaning can shift through cultures and material into something else: "When one thing is put next to another, everything can change."

—Emily Weiner

(Image on top right: Francesca DiMattio, *Jingdezhen*, 2012, Chinapaint and underpaint on porcelain ceramic, 12.5 x 16 x 12 in.; Courtesy of the artist & Salon 94 Bowery)

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