

## BROOKLYN RAIL

Elisabeth Kley: Minutes of Sand. William Corwin. The Brooklyn Rail. July-August 2021. Online and print. <https://brooklynrail.org/2021/07/artseen/Elisabeth-Kley-Minutes-of-Sand>

### ELISABETH KLEY: MINUTES OF SAND



Installation view: *Elisabeth Kley: Minutes of Sand*, The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, 2021. Photo: Carlos Avendaño.

Elisabeth Kley's first solo museum exhibition reminds me of the National Art Museum of Catalonia in Barcelona. Much of the museum is a wonderland of intimate spaces: the disembodied frescoed interiors of myriad early medieval chapels. In some traditions, depictions of paradise take the form of zones of rich alternating bands of bright color and eternally repeated patterns, and Kley has created a space like this, albeit temporarily. In her installation of black and white large-scale geometric pottery, floor panels, and three color screen-printed wall hangings, *Edouard Benedictus Lotus*, *X's and Stripes*, and *After Bakst* (all 2020), Kley imagines heaven, or at least an alternate realm, not as an aery cloud-filled firmament, but of geometric perfection and the comforting repetition of vegetal forms, rolling waves, and architectural detail.

In her recent residency at the FWM, Kley created three screen-printed patterns as the basis for her show, all sourced from details drawn from ancient Egyptian wall paintings. Like the medieval Spaniards, the Egyptians depicted the hereafter in geometric simplicity: endless marshes of identical lotus blossoms, fish-filled streams,

and solid blue skies filled with fowl, where the cycles of life, represented in identical objects, are repeated ad infinitum. Kley's hanging *Edouard Benedictus Lotus* presents a line of alternating lotus buds and blossoms in yellow on a red background mirrored upside-down along a horizontal axis. This reproduction of the Egyptian detail makes us question our own obsession with symmetry—it emerges from our bodies, certainly, but perhaps it also comes from some deep collective memory of the lotuses reflected along the banks of the Nile.

As in many an early church, temple, or tomb, the floor of the gallery is itself part of the narrative. Kley has created passages of painting to interact with swatches of her three fabric designs, in the form of composite rectilinear floor islands, composed of precise panels hovering about two inches above the ground. The negative space in between offers a path through the exhibition, but one wishes they could step right onto the pattern and become fully immersed in this cosmos of color and rolling waves, flower and organic forms, and cross-hatchery.



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Along with her ceramic practice, Kley has spent much of her time painting and cataloging different patterns she delights in, on rice paper, fabric banners, and in wall-painting, so her research-based approach to patterning emerges in her design of the three large-scale fabric patterns. This is especially noticeable in her design *After Bakst*, where the artist allows the screen stencils to overlap, leaving a doubly-intense boundary between wave-form shapes. This reads cleverly as a fold in the fabric and adds an enigmatic sense of three dimensions in a patently flat genre: fabric screen printing. The ceramics which punctuate the space also rattle the chains which sometimes contain certain mediums. The glazed clay forms in this exhibition play with the surprising notion that jars and urns can be square or orthogonal. Central to the exhibition and prominently displayed as one enters the space is the magnificent, towering *Double Stack Pointing Two Ways* (2021), a ceramic work composed of heavily patterned house-shaped earthenware blocks, spaced and capped by found bottlenecks. While pattern is no stranger to ceramics, Kley's K-shaped *K with Flowers*, L-shaped *L with Four Feathers*, arch-shaped *Arch*, and triangular *Mountains with Trees*, respectively (all 2020), offer unexpected canvases on which these patterns play out and move.

I follow many ancient Egyptian Instagram feeds, and recently one of them posted an image of the tomb of Nefertari, favorite wife of Ramesses the Great, so it was stuck in my head. Considered probably the greatest example of New Kingdom tomb painting, Nefertari's tomb is a wonderland of deities enacting various myths and rituals within a static netherworld of gold bands of color and repeated organic patterns. Kley similarly seeks to enclose us in this narrative of pattern, but instead of Isis, Horus, and Osiris, she uses the pattern motifs of waves, blossoms, and Xs and Os as the actors in her pantomime. And while Nefertari's tomb was meant to be a sealed capsule, enclosed and never to be disturbed, Kley opens her space up and instead makes it a garden of miniature follies.



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Using another French inspiration (besides the folly) as a source for the exhibition—and the origin of its enigmatic name—Kley has chosen French symbolist writer Alfred Jarry's ironic science of pataphysics: the science of the exception, not the rule. We are guided through these rooms on a choreographed walk, stopping at a series of monuments with differing degrees of relevance for Kley. Each of these pieces survey a local patch of the floor-based pattern in its vicinity. At the end of the exhibition are a selection of framed sketches; part of the artist's never ending and voracious habit of sketching patterns as initial designs for the show. Kley notes down everything from Japanese textile design, ballet costumes, and even demonic sigils. Unlike her Catalan or Egyptian forebears, Kley is not trapped in one set of patterns or color palette—like us, she is just passing through.