

# Patterns of Protest: Pat Boas and the Making of *Sentinels*

— Prudence Roberts

The five paintings in Pat Boas's recent installation at the Sun Valley Museum of Art are testament to her brilliance as an artist. Dazzling in their sheer abundance of color, pattern, and rhythm, generous in their beauty and rewarding in their complexity, they were further enriched on the occasion by being installed against a wallpaper Boas designed. Together, wallpaper and paintings, along with quotations from a speech given by Oregon suffragist Abigail Scott Duniway (more on that later), form a body of work that is unique in Boas's oeuvre: the equivalent of an abstract history painting, as it were.

Collectively titled *Sentinels*, the installation was part of *Deeds Not Words: Women Working for Change*, organized by Sun Valley's curator, Courtney Gilbert. The exhibition, which ran from January 8 through April 16, 2021, included works by Boas contemporaries Angela Ellsworth, Elena del Rivero, and Lava Thomas, as well as drawings by early twentieth-century architect Alice Constance Austin that had been photographed by Kim Stringfellow. Gilbert conceived the project as a way to commemorate the centenary of the Nineteenth Amendment, which in 1920 gave U.S. women the right to vote, and to celebrate women's ongoing activism across a broad spectrum of social issues, from racial equity to dress reform.

In 2019, Gilbert invited Boas to Idaho to research the state's own history of women's suffrage and to develop a body of work that in some way responded to that history. While Boas had in her visual art frequently made use of texts, including newspapers and magazines, she had never made work based on historical research nor on a theme that she did not herself generate. The challenge intrigued her, and she initially envisioned that she would uncover and commemorate the stories of individual women warriors of Idaho suffrage.<sup>1</sup> During her residency, Boas visited state archives, historical societies, and local libraries. She found much that was interesting, but her research bore out her suspicion that the suffrage movement, and the women whose names are recorded in its history, had been overwhelmingly white. (As she has noted, that picture is beginning to change as historians recover the names of forgotten or overlooked figures.) She did learn the names of some women of color but did not feel qualified to interpret or represent their stories.

While in Idaho, Boas stayed at the Ezra Pound House in Hailey, the birthplace of the poet. The property was acquired by the Sun Valley Museum of Art some years ago and restored to its late-nineteenth-century roots, with facsimiles of period furnishings, fabrics, and wallcoverings,

Pat Boas, *Sentinel (banner)*, 2020. Acrylic on linen over panel, 19½×15½in.  
Courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery (Photo: Mario Gallucci)



Pat Boas, *Sentinel (vessel)*, 2020. Acrylic and flashe on linen over panel, 19½×15½in.  
Courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery (Photo: Mario Gallucci)



and a library of books on Victorian and Arts and Crafts decorative arts. Boas's immersion into the material world of nineteenth-century domestic culture was to be as influential for her project as the documents she consulted in Idaho archives. With her love of colors and a long-held interest in the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s, Boas relished both the nature-derived motifs and softer palettes of the furnishings that surrounded her, as well as the more garish, synthetic hues that were developed during the Industrial Revolution.

Her initial idea had been to honor Idaho suffragists by creating abstract "portrait" paintings based on the monogram, a motif of highly stylized interlaced letterforms. This seemed a logical extension of the work Boas had made over the last decade or so, including several paintings and prints in which deconstructed text and images, along with individual letters and numerals, were central to her visual and intellectual explorations of language and its underlying patterns. But she began to have doubts about the validity of her approach as she gave more thought to the monogram itself. It is typically a symbol of privilege, a way of marking one's linens or silver, for instance, and, as such, not relevant to most women. Further, the stylized initials do not always represent the identity of a woman so much as they do her dependence on male figures to define her—her surname is likely that of her husband or father. Boas was also finding it problematic to single out individual suffragists for honor when the movement had relied on the participation of so many whose identities will never be known.

As she pondered her path forward, the world began to change around her. The opening of *Deeds Not Words*, originally slated for September 2020, was twice pushed back by the pandemic. During months of delay and

lockdown, Boas read, distilled her research, started painting (in her garage, when she could not get to her studio), and considered and reconsidered her initial ideas. She was also finding parallels between early suffragist demonstrations and the passionate Black Lives Matter marches that filled the streets of Portland and other cities in the summer and fall of 2020. In particular, she was drawn to the stories of the historic Silent Sentinels, members of the National Women's Party. From January 1917 until the final ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in August 1920, the Silent Sentinels, as they came to be called, stood without speaking in front of the White House for hours each day, six days a week, in an effort to persuade President Woodrow Wilson and Congress to pass legislation guaranteeing women's right to vote. When one of the demonstrators left or was removed—many were jailed and some were tortured and force fed—another would take her place. Like the protestors in the streets in 2020, the women (more than 2,000 of them over the months) were, for the most part, anonymous. Their mute vigil was an embodiment of their collective voice, and their impact came as much from their unyielding and constant presence as from the words on the banners and placards they held.

In abandoning the monograms—and with them, the idea of paintings focusing on individuals—Boas searched for a way to represent the collective passion and power of the Silent Sentinels and, by extension, the greater suffrage movement. Bracketing the words of their slogans and the names of individual leaders, she kept returning to the patterns, colors, and costumes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gradually incorporating their aesthetic into the paintings that would become her *Sentinels* series: *banner*, *shield*, *frame*, *vessel*, and *window*. The single-word subtitles came as

Pat Boas, installation view of *Sentinels* on artist-designed wallpaper. Courtesy Sun Valley Museum of Art (Photo: Dev Khalsa)



she worked on the paintings and allude, albeit obliquely, to the silhouetted forms within her compositions. These ground rather than define the paintings and speak to the contradictions between the public and private lives of the suffragists.

The *Sentinels* paintings, like Boas's other compositions, reward close and leisurely study. At first glance, one is drawn to their surfaces, where layer upon layer of pattern and color jostle with each other. Scallops, zigzags, stripes, plaids, circles: a heady abundance. Each painting plays with positive and negative shapes, so that the form in the center dances in and out of dominance, suggesting an interplay between open and closed spaces and between silence and utterance. The symmetry of the regular lines and the patterns' repeated shapes impose order. But look more closely, and looser, more gestural underlayers emerge. The women to whom these paintings pay homage were radical and they were courageous. But, they reasoned, to better advance their cause, they needed to be seen as upstanding citizens and competent wives and mothers worthy of the responsibility of voting. The patterns within *Sentinels*, like the conservative clothing the suffragists wore, thus act as a cloak of respectability, suppressing the simmering turbulence glimpsed underneath. Look, for instance, at *Sentinels (vessel)* with its bright layers of windowpane plaids and checks that both define and surround the central motif of nested vessels, the smallest of which is a stoppered perfume bottle, perfectly centered. Behind the vases, urns, and bottles lies a gingham pattern, and beneath that the viewer glimpses a loosely painted, flame-colored ground—passionate, yet suppressed and held in check.

The scalloped window frame in *Sentinels (window)* establishes a sense of interior and exterior space. Four large triangles meet at a point

in the absolute center of the composition. Our eyes, trained to perceive illusionistic, perspectival space, interpret this as a vanishing point on a horizon. Alternatively, that point might be the core of a woman's body, her form suggested by undulating yellow lines enclosing wonderfully contradictory passages of scumbled paint and precise harlequin checks. We might be inside, looking out at a stormy vista, or outside, looking through a window at a female figure. The abstracted motif that anchors *Sentinels (frame)* resembles a bell jar, or cloche, with a jaunty row of yellow scallops at the bottom. Inside, rendered in shades of pink, is a silhouette of a woman's buttocks, seen from the side, its irregular curves breaking the geometries and more somber colors seen elsewhere. Boas derived the shape of the enclosing cloche from illustrations of Victorian hoop skirts. These metal cages, strapped to a woman's waist, acted as a framework for the weighty and voluminous upholstery of clothing they supported: skirts and underskirts that suffocated the wearer's sexuality.

Boas's wallpaper suggests, but does not replicate, the elaborate papers of the Victorian era. She worked on this piece of her project with her daughter-in-law, Kris Blackmore, a graphic designer. They fabricated a paper with yellow and white vertical stripes that allude to the turned balusters of a railing, and, at regular intervals, purple calligraphic motifs. The paper is, in a sense, an homage to the Ezra Pound House and to the sorts of interiors that were part of the suffragists' lives. One also cannot help but think of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's haunting novella, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, whose protagonist, confined to her yellow-walled room because of "female hysteria," gradually loses her mind. Sequestered by her controlling, over-protective, paternalistic husband,

Pat Boas, *Sentinel (window)*, 2020. Acrylic and flashe on linen over panel, 19½×15½ in.  
Courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery (Photo: Mario Gallucci)



Pat Boas, *Sentinel (frame)*, 2020. Acrylic and flashe on linen over panel, 19½×15½ in.  
Courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery (Photo: Mario Gallucci)



she represents the very kind of female disempowerment against which suffragists struggled.

One suffragist who emerged for Boas in her early research, when she was still looking for individuals to honor, was the above-mentioned Abigail Scott Duniway (1834–1915). This extraordinary woman, whose family trekked to the Pacific Northwest from Illinois, lived for most of her life in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, but also spent time at a family ranch in Idaho. Duniway wrote, lectured, and campaigned tirelessly for the cause of equal rights. At the Sun Valley Museum, Boas used excerpts from Duniway’s 1889 address to the Idaho Constitutional Convention in a takeaway broadside whose borders and design recall early voters’ ballots. Quotes from this speech also appeared on a wall in the installation, printed on vinyl and configured as five floral shapes invoking the syringa, Idaho’s state flower. Duniway’s words, like Boas’s paintings, couch passion and anger behind a scrim of polite eloquence: “What the great majority of the women of the Pacific Northwest are asking,” she explained to the gentlemen of the Convention, “is that you will engraft into the fundamental law of this commonwealth a clause in your chapter on suffrages and elections providing that, other things being equal, except the right to bear arms, which custom accords to men, and the far more perilous right to bear soldiers as armor-bearers (which nature imposes upon women), there shall be no restrictions placed upon the right of suffrage on account of the incident of sex.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the social and political changes wrought over the last 132 years, many of Duniway’s battles are still being waged, including universal access to the ballot, and who controls a woman’s body. In creating the works that

comprise *Sentinels*, Boas has constructed an aesthetic document that brilliantly exposes these battles, celebrates feminist activism, and also exists as testament to her own formidable gifts as an artist.

- 1 My account of Boas’s conception and development of the *Sentinels* project is based on conversations with the artist via Zoom and in her studio in Portland, Oregon on August 21, September 10 and November 20, 2020; , and on March 23, 2021, respectively.
- 2 Abigail Scott Duniway, “Equal Rights for All” address to the Idaho Constitutional Convention, Boise City, Idaho, July 17, 1889 in *She Flies with Her Own Wings: The Collected Speeches of Abigail Scott Duniway (1934–1915)*, <http://www.asduniway.org/home>.

In June 2018, Prudence Roberts retired from her position as a Professor of Art History and the Director of the Helzer Art Gallery at Portland Community College’s Rock Creek campus. Roberts was the Curator of American Art at the Portland Art Museum from 1987–2000, where she focused on the museum’s regional collections and also specialized in early American museology. She is co-chair of Portland Community College’s Women In Art Lecture series, which has brought such notable artists as Carolee Schneemann and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith to Portland audiences.

Pat Boas, takeaway broadside (detail) for *Sentinels*, courtesy Sun Valley Museum of Art (Photo: Dev Khalsa)



Pat Boas, vinyl text for *Sentinels*, courtesy Sun Valley Museum of Art (Photo: Dev Khalsa)

OF THIS 'CH  
YOUR CHAP'  
VING TO  
THE RIG  
CORDS TO N  
TO BEAR SO  
NATURE IMPU  
BE NO REST  
T. H

OF,  
GENTLEMEN  
WHEN YOU GRANT US THE  
RIGHT OF SUFFRAGE WE SHALL BE SO  
PROUD OF YOU AND OF OURSELVES THAT WE  
WILL PROCLAIM THE GLAD TIDINGS OF OUR  
FREEDOM AMONG ALL THE CROWDED STATES AND CITIES  
OF THE EAST, T<sup>H</sup> WELL I KNOW THERE IS NO OTHER ATTRIBUTE OF OUR  
HUMANITY THAT DIES SO HARD AS TYRANNY. I KNOW HOW PROKE MANY MEN  
ARE TO DELUDE THEMSELVES WITH THE FANCY THAT THEY ARE "HEADS OF THE  
FAMILY." I KNOW HOW PERSISTENTLY MANY WIVES — CUNNING DIPLOMATS —  
FOSTER THIS TRANSPARENT DELUSION. MEN'S VANITY AND SELF-LOVE ARE FED UPON THIS  
SOPHISTRY, ALTHOUGH THEY FULLY UNDERSTAND IT IS SOPHISTRY. MEN ARE VERY HUMAN. GOD MADE  
THEM TO MATCH THE WOMEN. W<sup>H</sup> KNOW EVERY ONE OF OUR OPPONENTS' THREADBARE ARGUMENTS AGAINST  
OUR LIBERTIES BY HEART. YOU SAY WE "MUSTN'T VOTE BECAUSE WE CANNOT FIGHT," FORGETTING, OR PRE-  
TENDING TO FORGET, THAT LIFE'S HARDEST BATTLES, EVERYWHERE, ARE FOUGHT BY THE MOTHERS OF MEN IN  
GIVING EXISTENCE TO THE RACE. YOU SAY, "WOMEN DO NOT WANT TO VOTE." WHEN ALL THE OPPORTUNITIES  
WE HAVE EVER HAD TO VOTE HAVE BEEN AS FREELY UTILIZED BY US AS BY YOURSELVES. YOU SAY, "IF WOMEN  
WANT THE BALLOT, LET THEM ASK FOR IT." WHEN WE HAVE BEEN ASKING FOR IT 10. THESE FORTY YEARS  
Y<sup>H</sup> SAY, "BAD WOMEN WILL VOTE." WHEN YOU WILL KNOW THAT BAD MEN VOTE, AND CLAIM THE  
BALLOT FOR THEIR PROTECTION. WHY DENY PROTECTION TO ONE CLASS OF HUMAN SINNERS AND ACCORD IT  
TO ANOTHER? YOU SAY WE "MUST NOT SIT ON JURIES," THOUGH EVER AND ANON A WOMAN IS TO BE TRIED BY A  
JURY. MAY WE NOT LOOK FORWARD, GENTLEMEN, TO THE DAY WHEN A WOMAN MAY BE TRIED BY A JURY OF HER  
PEERS? W<sup>H</sup> WHO SEEK THE BALLOT FOR LIBERTY'S SAKE ARE NOT PROPOSING TO GOVERN MEN. WE ARE SEEKING  
AN OPPORTUNITY TO GOVERN OURSELVES. WE APPEAL TO YOUR SENSE OF JUSTICE, YOUR CHIVALRY, YOUR PATRI  
OTISM, YOUR HONOR, AS WE ASK YOU TO GRANT US, AS PART OF THE FUNDAMENTAL LAW, OUR FREE, UNIQUE  
STIONED RIGHT TO VOTE. T<sup>H</sup> EYES OF THE WORLD ARE UPON THESE NEW STATES AND TERRITORIES OF THE  
PACIFIC NORTHWEST. THE FREEDOM-LOVING SPIRIT OF OUR WESTERN MEN IS OUR PRODIGEST BOAST.

SHALL WE, THE WOMEN OF THIS BORDER LAND, WHO HAVE SHARED ALIKE YOUR TRIALS AND  
YOUR TRIUMPHS — SHALL WE NOT BE PERMITTED TO GO UP TO THE NATIONAL CAPITAL NEXT  
WINTER, BEARING ALOFT THE BANNER OF OUR FREEDOM? SHALL WE NOT HAVE THE PROUD  
DISTINCTION OF PROCLAIMING TO THE OLDER STATES OF THE UNION THAT THE CHIVALRY  
AND HONOR OF OUR FATHERS, HUSBANDS, AND SONS OUTRANK THEIR OWN? MAY WE  
NOT TELL THE WORLD THAT THESE ARE THE MEN WHO SCORN TO  
ACCEPT ANY RIGHTS FOR THEMSELVES WHICH THEY  
WOULD DENY TO THEIR MOTHERS, SWEET  
THEARTS, WIVES, SISTERS AND  
DAUGHTERS?

OUR  
MAKING TH  
AS YOU MUST  
TO MAINTAIN  
YOURSELVES,  
TLEMEN,  
BELIEF  
TURY WIL  
CHISEMENT  
GREAT GALI  
STATES OF  
WEN P.

Prudence Roberts