Barbara Brown: Textiles for the Space Age

Description

Barbara Brown

From psychedelic swirls to towering fragments of brutalist architecture, the pioneering textiles of British designer Barbara Brown encapsulated the spirit of the 1960s space age. Looking to the future of design, she took inspiration from â?? as she put it â?? â??machines and architectureâ?•, to create visually striking patterns featuring vivid colours and dizzying optical illusions. In doing so, she ushered in a bold new brand of textile design that shaped the homes and fashion of the era, and has been widely influential on the next generation of visual artists and designers since.

Caprice, 1964

Born in 1932 in Manchester, Brown studied at Canterbury College of Art, followed by the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London. As a student, she was, like many female art students, steered towards the design school, as she recalled, â??I just loved doing sculpture and I loved drawing. But they said, no, youâ??re a woman. You canâ??t do sculpture. You have to be a textile designer, you know, you did what you were told then. And so, I became a textile designer.â?•

Complex, 1968

Talent spotted during her degree show at the RCA, Brownâ??s vibrant and expressive design work caught the attention of Tom Worthington, then artistic director of the internationally renowned Healâ??s Fabric, and he commissioned her to produce a series of new designs for furnishing fabric. Her first design for Healâ??s was *Sweet Corn*, 1958, a fluid blend of interlocking expressive shapes and lines that was marketed in varying colourways. Building on the success of her early work with Healâ??s, Brown continued to work with the fabric company for the next several decades, a fruitful partnership that secured Brownâ??s place in the mid-century modern landscape of British design, and earned her a moniker as â??the Golden Girl of Healâ??sâ??. From the 1960s to the 1990s Brown was also an influential teacher, taking up posts at the Medway College of Art in Kent and the RCA, among others.

Frequency, 1969

Over time Brownâ??s design style shifted from loose, painterly designs to crisp, graphic, and architectural motifs, making reference to the 1960s fascination with sci-fi and space age aesthetics, and mirroring the imagery of British Op artists such as Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely. Designs such as *Frequency,* 1969, convey wavy sensations of perpetual movement and the illusion of depth and space, while the later *Intermesh,* 1970, is a playful exploration into futuristic architectural shapes, merged with intricate geometric patterns, typifying the complex sophistication of her mature design work. The titles of these designs and others reflected Brownâ??s fascination with conveying dynamic movement and energy.

Automation, 1970

Gyration, 1970

During the 1970s Brown produced a series of visually arresting monochrome designs that are among the most popular and celebrated of her career, and which have earned her a series of awards and accolades. These fabric designs featured fragments of brutalist architecture or machine technology arranged into starkly-lit motifs with three-dimensional effects, such as *Automation,* 1970, which resembles machine cogs that seem to project outwards into space.

Country Bunch, 1971

Today, Brownâ??s textile work is held in public museum collections around the world, including the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Lawson Park Collection in Cumbria, UK, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art in the United States. Meanwhile, itâ??s clear to see the impact her visual language continues to exert on creative voices today, as varied as British fashion designer Zandra Rhodes, a former student of Brownâ??s, and the German artist Tomma Abts.

Reflecting on the strength of Brownâ??s legacy as a designer who thinks and works like an artist, the Lawson Park Collection writes, â??she never consciously designs with either fashion or the commercial market in mind, but works more like a painter, in that her designs â?? all of which have a characteristic three-dimensional quality â?? evolve and develop over a period of time.â?•

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