

# dwell

## Patterned Perfection

Story by Natasha Boas | June 2006



At home in Palm Springs, artist Jim Isermann is hard at work on one of his recent installations: a construction fence made of chain link panels and 40,000 plastic Put-In-Cups, created for UCLA's Hammer Museum

*Many contemporary visual artists are mining the reservoirs of design history in their art practice. Museum exhibitions on the conflation of “art” and “design” abound, generating new discourses and practices that blur critical distinctions between the two realms. One of the artists who has been at the vanguard of these concerns is Palm Springs, California-based Jim Isermann.*

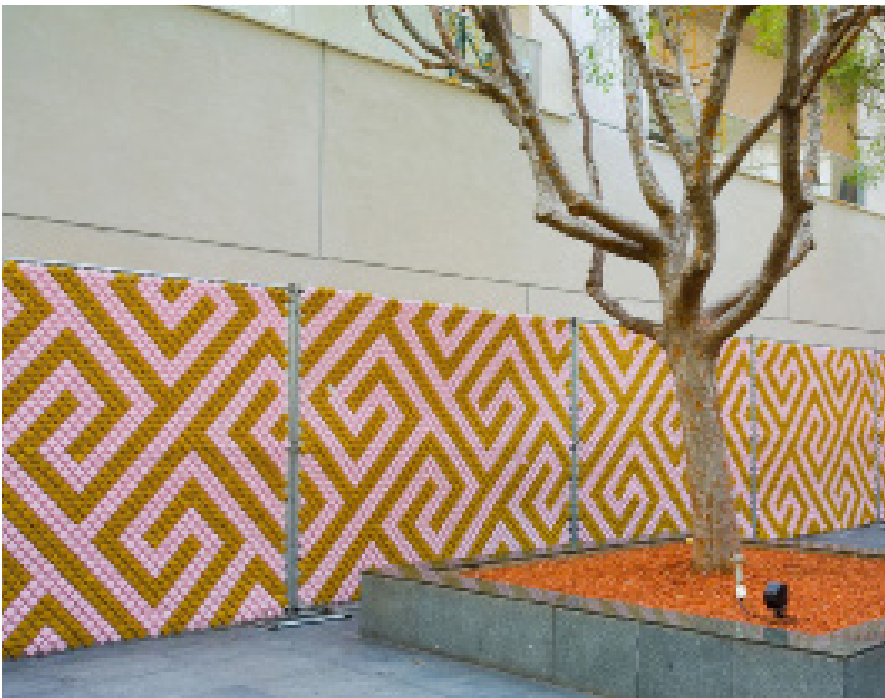
*Over the last 25 years, Isermann has combined the functional and the aesthetic in complex but surprisingly undidactic work that has consistently provoked questions about the status of art and design. Focusing on the fertile exchange of visual information between high art and postwar industrial design, Isermann has created (among other work) wall hangings, handmade woven rugs and tiles, and vacuum-molded wall modules that seem to celebrate—in the boldest sense—idealized and unmediated visual pleasure.*

*Today, Isermann divides his work between large-scale commissions like a 9,000-pound chandelier for Genentech Hall, in University of California, San Francisco's Mission Bay Campus; gallery shows; and new projects, which include the most recent iT House decals and a graphic pattern for fashion designer Trina Turk's spring line. On the occasion of his recent*

*Deitch Projects show in New York, we thought it was the perfect time to check in with Isermann.*

**Unlike the artists in last year's Cooper-Hewitt exhibition "Design ≠ Art," which featured functional designs by visual artists like Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Rachel Whiteread, your work engages with design on another level. I see your Corvi-Mora modular wall, for example, as a portal to understanding your work. It looks commercially fabricated but is in fact handmade.**

Fabrication of work for gallery shows creates a conundrum for me because it raises all those old questions for viewers as to whether the work is "art" or "design." I work with commercial manufacturers and art fabricators, and I make work by hand, depending on the project. Many artists work with fabricators, but they don't make art that exists in this no-man's land between art and design. Yes, at first glance the Corvi-Mora wall looks like it is



Jim Isermann, *Untitled (Greek Key)*,  
July-August 2006  
(UCLA's Hammer Museum)  
200 foot long chain link and 40,000  
Put-In-Cup construction fence.  
Photo by Joshua White.

commercially fabricated, but in fact I spent six months making the 112 modules myself. They are hand-painted and there is a degree of imperfection and difference between them. Like a lot of my practice, the work is not exactly what you initially think it is.

**Your work has a very strong effect on its audience. I see it more in the tradition of installation and site-specific art than design, which further complicates what you do.**

It's true that what I do is very open-ended. I design, or I propose, or I make something that functions in a space and has a dual or multiple purpose because it functions as art but does not knock you over the head as being art—or as having an impenetrable concept. It is about a particular quality of experience.

I approach art making, and especially the commissioned work, from a pragmatic point of view. I want to do the best within the given limitations and give something that has a slow, long-term enjoyment that resonates with its site. When you live with something day in and day out, you become attached to it in another way.

**Where do you situate yourself on the modernist map?**

"Modern" is a word that has many different meanings and is often misused. I used to really be fascinated by work like Verner Panton's that existed between modern and postmodern. He made the leap, left behind the sterile



Floor mats designed by Isermann for the Albright-Knox Art Gallery exhibit “Extreme Abstractions.” July 2005

materials that all the architects were using, and took on new synthetic materials that were all about colors and shapes. It was no longer about ergonomics and organic materials. Instead, he invented a supersaturated color theory and was famous for saying, “One sits more comfortably on a color one likes.” I love that stuff. It exists for reasons other than the modern rules. It doesn’t do that postmodern thing, looking backwards—it is very optimistic and forward-looking.

**You mentioned that you visited artist Donald Judd’s home and that, in your view, he really was an interior decorator. He made furniture and was obsessive about placement. Do you identify with the term “interior decorator”?**

I cavalierly use the word “decorator”: I am old enough to have grown up without openly gay role models. Homosexuals were accepted as florists, hairdressers, and, yes, interior decorators. I am not very militantly gay, but when I identify myself as a decorator it is as close as I get to being do. I do think my work had a gay melancholy or sensibility that is very difficult to talk about, and is not available to all.

**The art critic Dave Hickey has referred to your work as having a “utopian optimism” that is “essentially domestic” and of the moment. Can you address the idea of utopia?**

I guess I do aim for the perfect ideal. The early work was about the failure of modernism’s utopia to solve all the problems with good design for all. So there is a built-in melancholy of that not being achieved. With some of my newer work, there is the physical reality of human imperfection in hand-fabricating modules. Ultimately, I still believe in the pragmatic populist ideal that nothing is beneath being improved by being well designed. And I continue to remake the world piece by piece, object by object.