Spotlight Series Essay: August 2010
by Meredith Malone, associate curator

Allan McCollum's *Pam Beale* (1971) is one in a series of "constructed paintings" made in the early 1970s. The piece is comprised of a series of three-inch-wide rectangular strips of torn and dyed canvas adhered together with industrial caulking in an overlapping manner that evokes brickwork, shingles, or venetian blinds. Created at a moment when many artists and critics alike were interested in defining what a painting was by reducing it to its essential terms (two-dimensional canvas, pigment, and the stretcher), and working within those terms, *Pam Beale* simultaneously demonstrates McCollum's interest in and distance from this type of formalist investigation.

To make the work, McCollum first accordion-pleated standardized strips of canvas into compact bundles before dipping them into vats of grey dye. Because the cloth absorbed the dye unevenly, the edges and folds appear darker than the middle areas. He then caulked together the variegated strips, carefully juxtaposing dark, saturated pieces of canvas next to much lighter passages to create a large diamond shape around the outer edges of the work. While the artist's mechanized practice remained consistent throughout the series, no two constructed paintings are ever alike as he used a different systematic approach to arrive at a unique pattern for each work.[1]

McCollum's intention that *Pam Beale* be displayed stapled flat against the wall serves to emphasize the work's two-dimensional character while also heightening the viewer's awareness

of it as an object with weight and tactility. The fact that the threads from the tattered edges of the raw canvas are left to fall where they will and that the caulk holding the strips together remains a visible element of the painting makes it difficult to distinguish between the work's form and the process of its fabrication. Yet, the title of the work complicates such formalist concerns. According to McCollum, Pam Beale was a cocktail waitress at the Troubador night club in West Hollywood, near where the artist had a job as an art handler. He arbitrarily decided to name the series of constructed paintings after the waitresses at the Troubador in an attempt to demystify the act of titling an artwork. [2]The randomness, levity, and absurdity conveyed by the title belies McCollum's otherwise highly structured approach.

In the overall context of the artist's prestigious career, *Pam Beale* is an utterly transitional piece, linking McCollum to the formalist dialogues of the 1950s and 1960s while anticipating his future preoccupations with issues of serial production and strategies of display as emerged in the early 1980s. At the same time, this unstretched canvas offers intriguing perspective on the dominant discourses surrounding abstract painting in the beginning of the 1970s and McCollum's aspiration—as a young, untrained artist living in Los Angeles—to test and strain them.[3]

After deciding to become a painter in 1967, McCollum learned about contemporary art by culling information from art magazines, articles, museums, galleries in Los Angeles, and his experiences as an art handler. He freely experimented with a range of methods and techniques. In a 2001 interview, the artist recalled his approach in the early 1970s as "a cross between post-painterly abstraction and post-minimalism."[4] Indeed, *Pam Beale* is a curious hybrid of stylistic references. The artist's use of elements of chance and predetermined systems recalls the work of John Cage, the application of dyes to unprimed canvas calls to mind Helen Frankenthaler's

stained paintings, the mechanical method of his patterned construction resembles Frank Stella's minimalist abstractions, the emphasis on mathematic seriality evokes Sol Lewitt's structures, and the overt emphasis on process and raw materials points to works by such artists as Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Eva Hesse, and Barry Le Va.[5] Although drawing from an eclectic array of sources, McCollum recognized intersecting and shared strategies running through his chosen models, including a general thrust towards literalism: "I sensed how different they were, but, on the other hand, the issues were not that dissimilar. There was an interest in literalism, in Helen Frankenthaler's concern with the honesty of the materials of painting compared to, say, Robert Morris's interest in 'making.' There's a whole lot of parallels if you haven't been trained to think one way or the other."[6] Despite the fact that Frankenthaler's formalist painting and Morris's process art are philosophically distinct, even antithetical, what they held in common was a heightened emphasis on materials and process, characteristics that directly informed *Pam Beale*.

McCollum was one of a number of Los Angeles-based artists concurrently, if independently, testing accepted tenets of painting through experimentation with unstretched surfaces and unconventional materials. The move "off the stretcher" became a verifiable trend in Los Angeles, acknowledged by a series of group exhibitions mounted throughout the 1970s around the theme of "soft" painting in Southern California.[7] The majority of the artists included in these exhibitions rejected the rigidity imposed by the stretcher bars as a means of advancing a fatigued tradition of abstraction. Hardly a coherent movement, the explorations with the unstretched surface covered a wide range of divergent experiments in terms of both method and material. While some artists used paint, others incorporated cast polyester resin, nylon, fiberglass cloth, and paper, often slashing, sewing, wrinkling, or pasting their chosen media.[8] In many cases, this experimentation resulted in decorative or lyrical compositions that stressed

both plastic and metaphysical concerns. McCollum's interests, on the other hand, were always more structural, driven by a systematic approach and a desire ultimately to push painting's literalness toward more conceptual ends.

While the development of soft painting in Southern California can be understood as a challenge to the dominance of the slick, precise art known as Finish Fetish or "the LA Look,"[9] it is more commonly characterized as a response to Abstract Expressionism (most notably Jackson Pollock's allover paintings executed on large unstretched canvases laid out on the floor) and the ensuing influence of color-field painting, also known as post-painterly abstraction. As early as 1953, Helen Frankenthaler, followed by Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski, adopted the method of applying thin washes or stains of color to large pieces of unprimed canvas, letting paint literally fuse with the support. The resultant works stressed pictorial flatness, frontality, and "opticality," a construct proposed by art critic Clement Greenberg in his influential 1960 essay "Modernist Painting." According to Greenberg, modernist painting progressed only to the extent that it reflected on its own properties as a medium. The one characteristic unique to painting was the flatness of the picture plane which privileges a purely optical experience without bodily involvement.[10] McCollum, however, quickly began to consider this kind of thinking absurd, coming to the realization that the meaning of an artwork resides in the role it plays in the culture before anything else.[11] His practice of staining and his attention to the flatness of the unstretched canvas, as seen in *Pam Beale*, evinces only a superficial link to the tenets of post-painterly abstraction, one that actually refuses such an overdetermined emphasis on opticality.[12] The choice of title reveals an additional element of irreverence and a desire to question the formalist theory of painting as autonomous, completely divorced from the world outside its borders.

Pam Beale represents an important step in McCollum's career. It was, in part, by working through the type of self-reflective inquiry demonstrated in his constructed paintings that he became increasingly conscious of how process and the context-dependent contingency of all objects inform practice at multiple levels, from the studio to the systems that support the institutions of art. After testing these formalist, minimalist, and postminimalist trains of thought, McCollum arrived at his more conceptually driven *Surrogate Paintings* (begun in 1978), "unique multiples" consisting solely of a minimal frame, mat, and rectangle overlaid with many coats of paint. This body of work marked the artist's move beyond preoccupations with form and content to a focus on the strategies and systems through which objects are more broadly assigned meaning and value in contemporary culture. The literalism demonstrated in *Pam Beale* is ultimately displaced with his surrogates from an emphasis on process and the unstretched canvas to the devices that frame a work, both literally and figuratively.[13]

1 For a detailed description of McCollum's method for making his constructed paintings, see Cara Montgomery, *New Painting in Los Angeles* (Balboa, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1971), np.
2 Allan McCollum, in an email to the author, April 28, 2010.
3 For excellent overviews of McCollum's early work, see Anne Rorimer, "Self-Referentiality and Mass-Production in the Work of Allan McCollum, 1969–1989," and Lynne Cooke, "Allan McCollum: The Art of Duplicitous Ingemination," in *Allan McCollum* (Eindhoven, The Netherlands: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1989), 6–14 and 15–23, respectively.
4 Allan McCollum, in Robert Enright, "No Things But in Ideas: An Interview with Allan McCollum," *Border Crossings* 20, no. 3 (August 2001): 31.
5 Morris, Serra, Hesse, and Le Va were all included in the groundbreaking exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures / Materials,* which opened at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City in May 19, 1969, and ran through July 6, 1969. The exhibition and its catalog were incredibly influential, including copious photographs of works in the exhibition as well as artists in the process of making them.
6 McCollum, in Enright, "No Things But in Ideas," 32.
7 Exhibitions of this sort include *Off the Stretcher* (Oakland Museum, December 21, 1971–February 6, 1972); *24 Young Los Angeles Artists* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, May–June, 1971); and *Unstretched Surfaces: Los Angeles-Paris* (Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, November 5–December 16, 1977). Examples of McCollum's constructed paintings were included in each exhibition.
8 In her 1978 review of the exhibition "Unstretched Surfaces," Susan C. Larsen offers a detailed description of the diverse methods and materials employed by the artists in the exhibition. See Larsen, "Los Angeles: Inside Jobs," *ArtNews* 77, no.1 (January 1978): 110-111.
9 For on overview of these tendencies in Southern Californian art, see Howard N. Fox, "Tremors in Paradise, 1960–1980," in *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000*, Stephanie Barron et al. (Los Angeles: Los

Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000), 193–234. See also Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974).
10 See Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Michael Fried was an early adherent to Greenberg's theories. In his 1965 catalog essay for the exhibition *Three American Painters* held at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, Fried described the work of artists featured in the show—Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Frank Stella—in terms of Greenberg's opticality. See also Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): 12–23.
11 Allan McCollum in D.A. Robbins, "An Interview with Allan McCollum," *Arts Magazine* 60, no. 2 (October 1985): 41.
12 McCollum was well versed in these practices. His work was exhibited at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery in the early 1970s, which was among Los Angeles's leading contemporary art venues in the 1960s and 1970s. Wilder exhibited the work of numerous painters championed by Clement Greenberg and associated with color-field painting, including Barnett Newman, Jules Olitski, Helen Frankenthaler, and Kenneth Noland, among others.
13 For an insightful analysis of the shift at this time in artistic practice towards an analysis of the systems and relations of artistic production more broadly, see Craig Owens, "From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author?'," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 122–39.