

# Art in America

MAY 1998

ALEX KATZ

THE NEW GETTY:  
TWO VIEWS

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LORENZO LOTTO



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elsewhere. What might be folding chairs or ladders—or strands of DNA—cascade down the center of the canvas. Or perhaps they are being sucked up into the sky. Space is ambiguous, making orientation something of a moot point.

Even when a kind of order is established, as in *Viajero, ven conmigo* (Traveler, come with me), 1994-96, we are left with questions. Cool white columns along the right and left edges of the picture suggest the entrance to a temple. At center is a bursting star above a black platform amid an intensely blue enclosure. The explosion appears to tear the space apart. Fox chose to anchor the 80-by-72-inch *Rogue* (1997) with a large, ragged-edged black rectangle placed dead center. Around it, on fields of yellow, lavender and fiery red, general havoc reigns, with more flying ladders, odd shapes and profuse paint intermingling.

Fox's paintings do not support any cut-and-dried interpretation, and that's their beauty. Coming of age as a painter in the era of Abstract Expressionism, she has always handled subject matter—and the paintbrush—with panache. Part of the ongoing pleasure of viewing her work lies in this loose approach and the singular amalgams that appear on the gallery walls.

—Carl Little

### Cary Smith at Derek Eller

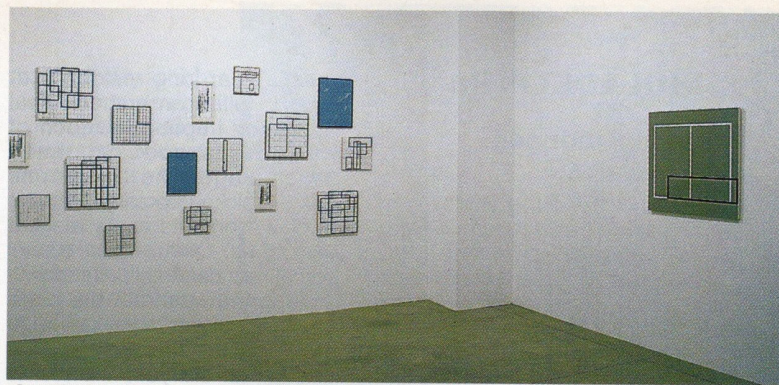
In these 1997 geometric abstractions, Cary Smith has abandoned his high-keyed signature colors of chartreuse, yellow and pink for a radically reduced palette. Although Smith showed one deep red painting,

the exhibition was dominated by four gray paintings, each containing a white and a black linear rectangle. But even here, the artist's color sense is in play. Creating four subtly different grays, Smith only made one painting, the largest one, that evoked industrial interiors or battleships. In the other works he infused the gray with either celadon, blue or brown.

Self-imposed rules govern Smith's placement of the rectangular elements. The white rectangles are laid down first, with the black-lined forms overlapping and sometimes partially obscuring the white structures. One further notices how the white rectangles are allowed to float freely, while one or more sides of the black rectangles always lie along the edge of the canvas and anchor the composition.

Having established these artistic rules, Smith works steadily to ameliorate the starkness of his chosen geometry. Using oil and wax, he scrapes and smooths the paintings until he obtains a surface as soft and supple as skin. If taping was ever involved in laying down the rectangles, he's removed any evidence of the process, and his inch-wide lines have a steady but hand-drawn quality. The initial impression of intellectual clarity given by Smith's work is followed up by a growing awareness of the thoughtfulness and care that have gone into the making of each painting.

Also on view were a number of works on paper that serve as studies for the paintings. At first glance, these seem to be drawings but closer examination reveals them to be collages.



Cary Smith: Installation view of mixed-medium paintings, 1997; at Derek Eller.

What look like carefully ruled black and white lines on gray paper prove to be incredibly thin and carefully cut strips of paper. The tiny ridges formed where these strips overlap emphasize the fragility of what initially seem to be hard-edged and rather perfunctory works. In a group of small paintings on panel also included, Smith tosses out all his rules in favor of improvisation. Thin black lines on a white background create patterns that could be eccentric musical scores. Black squares and rectangles come together and fall apart in compositions that provide a jazzy counterpoint to the austerity of the other works.

—Charles Dee Mitchell

## BOSTON

### Ambreen Butt at Bernard Toale

Ambreen Butt studied traditional miniature painting in her native Pakistan before coming to Boston in the mid-'90s for graduate art studies. The 13 paintings in her first gallery show reflect a gulf between past and present cultures, despite their look of elegant serenity.

In these small, pale works, a few bright spots of traditional miniature painting—in acrylic—float on gessoed fields that are painted or collaged with ultra-pastel patterns of Minimalist-inspired hairline stripes, tiny floral vines arranged in geometric configurations, or mosaics of torn bits of paper bearing loops of unreadable script. The delicately layered surfaces are in keeping with the refined imagery, which is primarily figurative and placed either dead center or along the canvas edges. The specific subject matter of Butt's works invariably deals with relationships and independence.

*"You would rather throw stones at a mirror, I am your mirror and here are the stones"* (May 1997) is, at 24 by 24 inches, one of the largest works in the show. It offers two spots of miniature painting: at upper center is a woman's head, placed against the torso of an outlined female nude. Riding into the picture plane at lower right is an elephant in full regalia carrying a man whose spear is aimed upward at the woman.

Butt deviates from traditional miniature painting by contrasting the scale of her small figures with comparatively vast spaces filled only with the subtle wallpaperlike patterns. Sometimes she uses patterned insets to define a shallow depth of field, as in the shadowy square veil of tiny floral vines surrounding a figure in an otherwise striped expanse. Though the eye is drawn to the bright figures, the layers of painstaking, barely visible patterning seem to hold submerged content.

The intricate composition of concentric spaces in an untitled work dated November 1997 synthesizes the patterns virtuosically. This one has them all: vines, stripes and torn paper in geometric arrangements. In the middle is a Kahlo-esque female head branded with blood that drips from an overhead plant which has been pierced by an arrow from the bow of a tiny male figure at the painting's top edge. But the figurative melodrama is less compelling than the shadowy complexity of the painting's background.

Butt's interest in suggested space goes beyond the picture plane. Using sand-toned neutrals, she painted panels of concentric lines on the gallery walls, creating a graceful installation showcasing each painting.

—Ann Wilson Lloyd

Anders Moseholm: *Rosebud II*, 1996, oil on canvas, 80 by 132 inches; at Art Projects International.

