

# Art in America

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## James Siena at Cristinerose

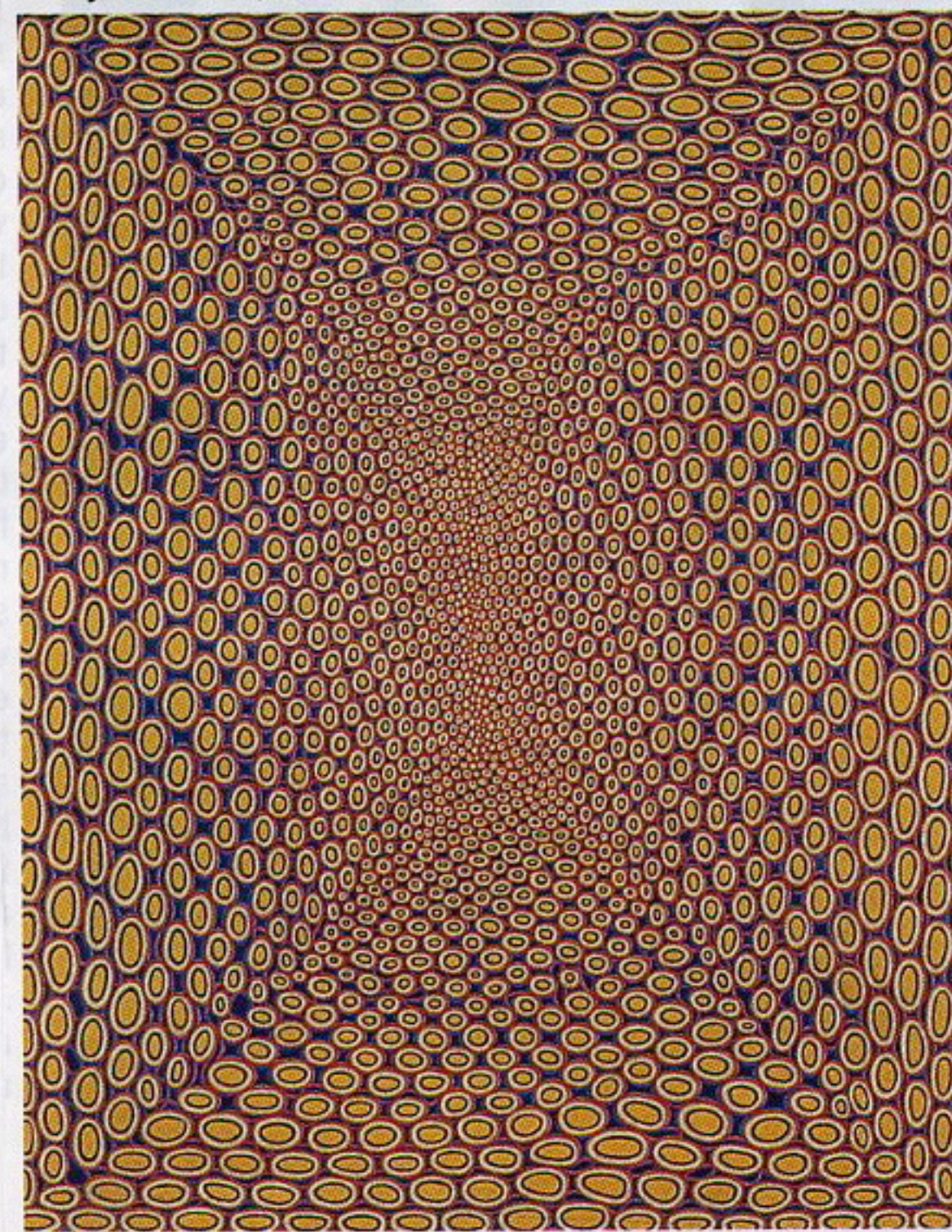
James Siena showed 15 medium-sized enamel paintings on aluminum, produced over the past four years. His abstract compositions are tightly organized and feature the repetition of a module, pattern or line that fills the entire rectangular field. The thin lines of pure, densely applied color, laid side by side without any transition or blending, produce a cold brilliance. These unpainterly, all-over pictures have their origin in drawing—almost certainly on graph paper—and, to a considerable extent, their effect results from his modulation of line. Siena's intimately scaled art explores age-old ideas having to do with flatness versus illusionism, as well as repetition, symmetry and ornament.

In *Battery* (1997), the elemental module is a small yellow oval, surrounded by bands of black, white and red. Each connects to its neighbor by means of thin red lines offset by a dark blue ground. The gradual and then sudden diminishment of the size of the cells from the edges of the composition inward creates an oddly sexual image of infinite space. *Rictus* (1997) shows a quivering, centralized Greek cross. Distorted concentric ellipses of red, white, beige and blue make up the arms.

Fleshy red interlacing bands fill the space between the arms with a diagonal pattern that spreads into the corners of the composition, where warped ellipses reappear. The resulting compressed configuration, reminiscent of early medieval Irish book illumination in its cross imagery and *horror vacui*, pulsates with a life of its own. This artist's best works retain an irregular, emphatically handmade and arbitrary quality, despite his striving for rigorous organization.

Siena's configurations allude to a plethora of subjects through purely abstract means. *Taste the Houses* (1997) evokes frightening ideas having to do with seriality and uniformity (cloning), mesmerizingly intricate computer circuits and densely populated areas seen from a bird's-eye view. *Red Scream* (1995), with its rippling effect, develops an idea enunciated in Edvard Munch's most famous painting, and *Upside Down Devil (Second Version)*, 1997, is like a blinding detonation. —Michaël Amy

James Siena: *Battery*, 1997, enamel on aluminum, 29 by 23 inches; at Cristinerose.



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