

## James Siena

Cristenrose Gallery  
529 West 20th Street  
Chelsea  
Through Jan. 10

James Siena's last show, at Pierogi 2000 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, was very good; this one is terrific. He continues to strengthen his idiosyncratic approach to painting, filling smallish surfaces with wavering lines (parallel, concentric or wildly wandering), repeating nuggets of rich color, nesting squares and ellipses or fanciful grids, until each work achieves a radiant life and space all its own.

Space under pressure is the operative concept here: the tight patterns and jewel-like colors warp space or compress it, open the surface to a central slot of infinity (as in the pulsating blues of "Wickets") or push it inward, forming an expanse of patterned color that never reaches the vanishing point (as the cats-eye honeycomb of "Battery").

Mr. Siena also gets a lot of mileage out of the vagaries of his hand, so that his obsessive repetitions of line and shape fluctuate continuously with an entropic energy that counters the artist's clear interest in control. And it is extremely important that his tender, if tightly wound touch is cooled by the choice of the materials: bright enamel applied, without alteration, to sheets of aluminum, creating the gleaming perfection of Islamic tiles.

Several works involve repeating fine lines that seem to animate and bend the surface as they move from center point to outer edge or vice versa: for example, the parabolic distortion at the heart of "Red Scream," which looks like a collaboration between Jim Nutt and Edvard Munch rendered abstractly.

In other cases — the star-like grid of "Conversation," the nesting, round-cornered squares of "Base Two" and "Base Three" — a casually manual sense of mathematics or geometry dominates. And other works are relatively corporeal, as in the compressed figure-eight lines of "Rictus," which banish space with a rippling sense of musculature.

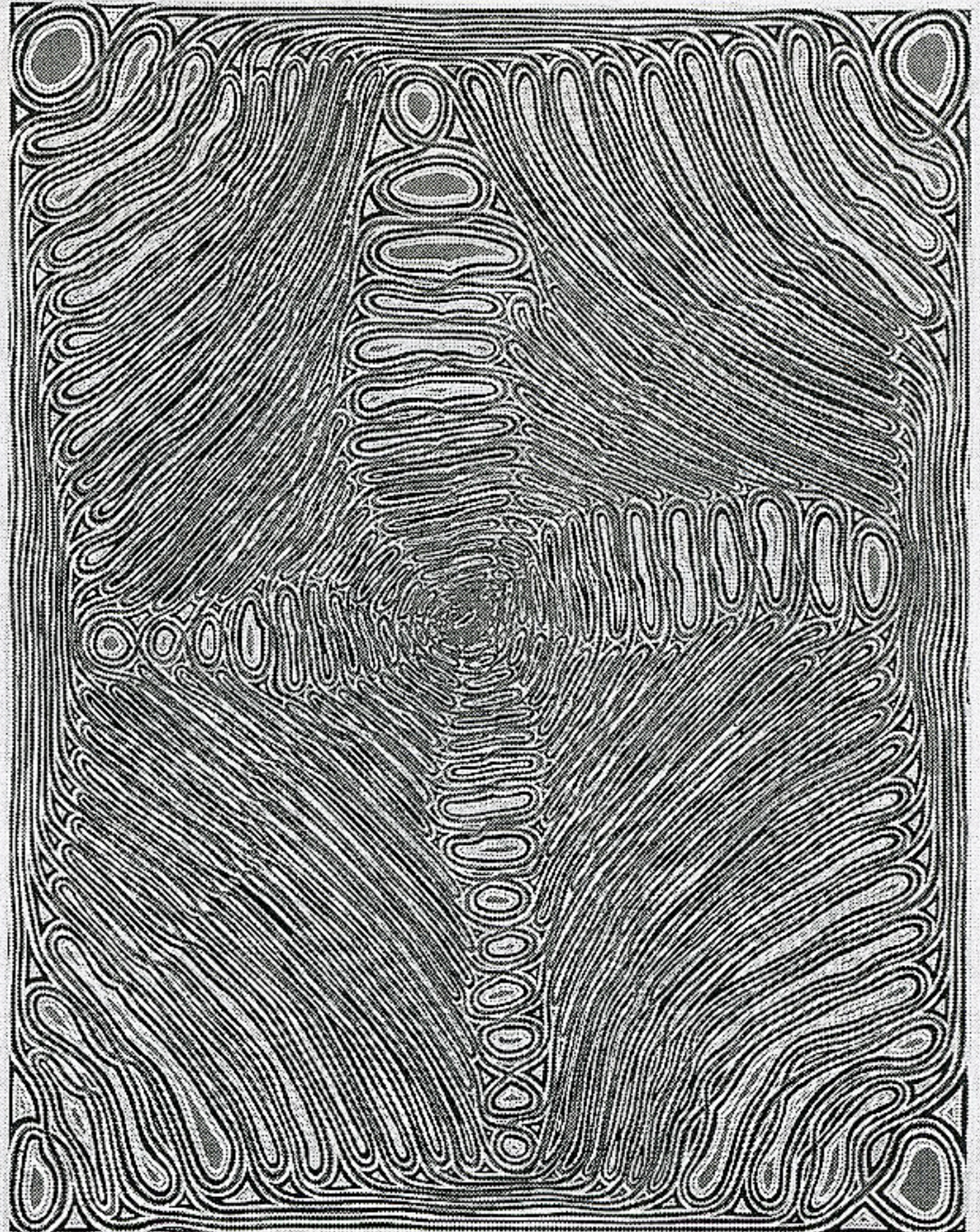
Here as elsewhere, Mr. Siena's "lines" are actually strands of different colors that always repeat in the same order, as long as space permits. When it doesn't, and some colors are eliminated, the pressure increases. Such pressure and elimination are spelled out in "Typical Force," in which concentric bars of color are reduced from eight to one as the design proceeds toward center point.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1997

# Weekend

## The New York Times

Mr. Siena's art has clear if skewed precedents: it can seem like a folk-art version of early Frank Stella (or Sol LeWitt), a systemic version of Louise Bourgeois, a painting version of Tom Friedman's labor-intensive sculptures. Basically, he has found his own way to do what all painters want to do: make viewers stop, look and think about the combination of touch and thought that have created the sight before their eyes, and feel rewarded. **ROBERTA SMITH**



Cristenrose Gallery

James Siena explores space under pressure in works like "Rictus" (1997) in which repeating strands of color form flattened figure eights.