

Time Out

New York

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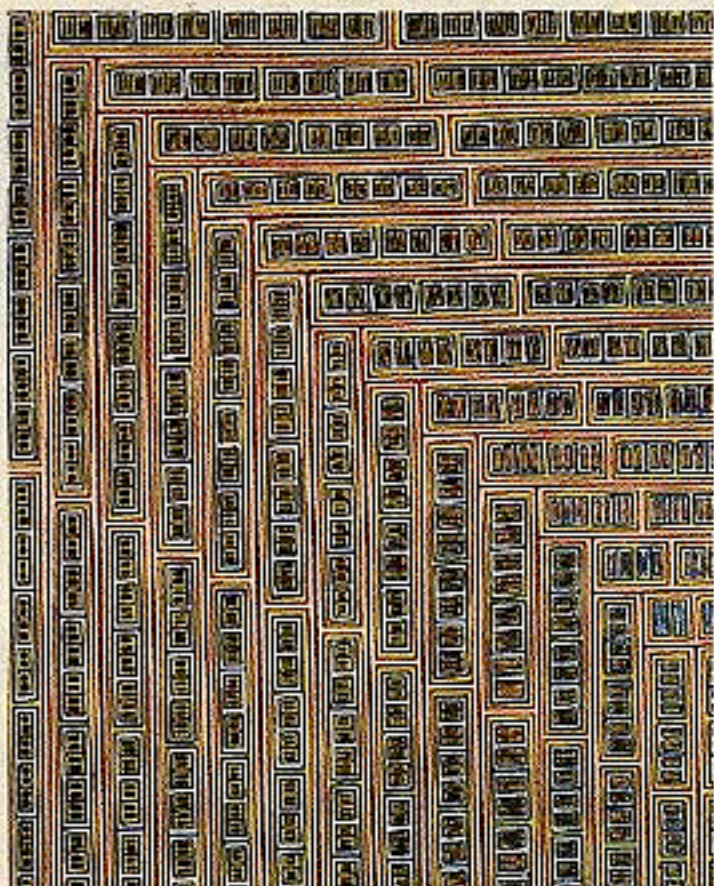
James Siena

Pierogi 2000, through Mon 2
(see Elsewhere).

James Siena's new canvases jump off the wall to lick your eyes, caress your senses and go for your crotch, leaving you pleasantly sated. No, this isn't some wacky performance piece; it's an act of pure painting by an artist who has spent years dishing up delicious eye candy. Most abstract painters avoid this dreaded result, wrapping their work in layers of theory and art-historical quotation out of fear of being labeled "decorative." But Siena pushes the beauty quotient to the breaking point. He is perfectly happy to let the viewer to decide if there's any meaning to his work beyond pleasure.

Siena is a highly regarded figure within New York's painting community, although he remains mostly invisible to the rest of the public. He's been quite open about his antitheoretical stance. A few years ago, at a symposium in Williamsburg, he publicly declared, "I'm just a stupid painter who makes stupid paintings as well as I possibly can." That statement raised eyebrows, but for me, he clarified the true nature of the language surrounding abstraction. Siena's license was liberating, allowing me to feel that as a critic, I was permitted like work I could not wrap words around.

Here, Siena offers eight tasty new paintings, each in glossy enamel on aluminum panels. The paintings' small scale gives them an Indian-miniature feel, although their loose op-



James Sienna, *Left Top Divide Contain*, 1996.

tical effects may remind you more of a slacker Bridget Riley. Like Frank Stella's early works, Siena's compositions take their defining measurement from the painting's support, dividing and subdividing ad infinitum.

For ideal viewing, you should be close enough to smell the surface of the paintings. Take time to linger on *Upside Down Devil*—a frozen solar flare of a painting rendered with an almost mystical attention to detail—and feel your pulse quicken.

I once bid on a Siena at a benefit auction, but chickened out when the price rose above the limit I'd set for myself. After seeing this show, I hope to have more courage if the chance comes again.—*Bill Arning*