

# NEW YORK OBSERVER

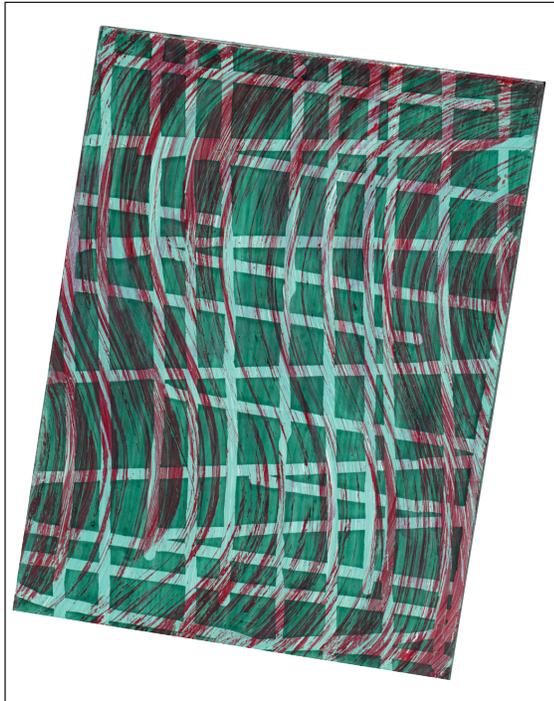
DECEMBER 16, 2005

WEEKLY NEWS

ONE DOLLAR



## Mario Naves *Trace Elements*



Nancy Olivier, *Double Whammy*, 2004,  
acrylic on wood; courtesy the artist

*Trace Elements* is the title of an exhibition of abstract paintings by Nancy Olivier, and it fits. By over-lapping brushstrokes, lines, runs of acrylic paint and a recurring grid on small, sometimes irregularly shaped panels, Ms. Olivier launches detailed investigations into facets of the basic principles of painting—alternately reiterating, obscuring and uncovering them.

Emphasis on the handcrafted object, establishment of illusory space, careful juxta-position of form and the often-vexing material independence of paint—Ms. Olivier's pictures offer a fairly relentless dissection of her chosen craft. Clement Greenberg famously suggested that painting must shed its extraneous baggage to achieve a purity of medium. Ms. Olivier's overriding desire is to interrogate that purity. And to muck it up a bit, too.

That's how the paintings bypass the theoretical and pedantic. Ms. Olivier knows that there has been more than enough skepticism concerning the viability of art and its ability to withstand the driving force of history. Her aesthetic pursuit admits no defeat; instead, it affirms the role that individuality and optimism can play in the regenerative potential of art.

For Ms. Olivier, painting is as much a plaything as it is a calling. An unaffected, almost childlike whimsy defines the work. Though mindful of the weight of tradition, the paintings never take themselves too seriously. Titles like *Some Assembly Required* and *Full Contact Karaoke* indicate the self-deprecating side of Ms. Olivier's approach

More persuasive and integral to her vision are the sharp and icy palette, the touch that's immediate, studied and offhand all at once, and the homely wood-shop leftovers she paints upon. Hers is an art of heroic ambitions and unassuming means, rigorous methodology and throwaway improvisation. Ms. Olivier knows that being smart and fooling around aren't mutually exclusive. And she knows that art isn't anything unless it embraces paradox.

*Trace Elements: New paintings by Nancy Olivier* is at Bond Gallery, 5 Rivington Street, NYC until Nov. 10, 2005.

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Originally published in the November 11, 2005 edition of *The New York Observer*.

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Mario Naves

## *Serious Fun*

In the past few years, there's been a tendency for painters to exhibit, alongside their recent efforts on canvas, a temporary wall painting created specifically for its venue. This trend is an-if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em phenomenon, indicative of nothing so much as the painter's insecurity in the face of an art scene dominated by the site-specific, the object-oriented and the sensational. It was with some trepidation, therefore, that I attended *Wall*, an exhibition at Metaphor Contemporary Art: Sculptor Jim Osman and painter Nancy Olivier had been invited to transform the gallery's environs by painting on one wall apiece. My trepidation was unwarranted. Mr. Osman and Ms. Olivier have acquitted themselves honorably. Mr. Osman, whose fascination with cut-rate architecture is tongue-in-cheek but devoid of condescension, has created a geometric fresco reminiscent of the Williamsburg Housing Murals on display at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Ms. Olivier, who's done wall paintings before, overlaps looping calligraphy, satiny grids and vertical drips to impressive decorative effect.

Still, both artists lose something when straying from, in Mr. Osman's case, the three-dimensional and, in Ms. Olivier's, the physical parameters of the painting support. Indeed, *Wall* underscores how pivotal the right format is to an artist's vision, how it can energize and focus style. Mr. Osman's mural is sturdy and fine, his paintings of faux brickwork droll but no more—whereas *Here and There Wall* (2002), the lone sculpture on view, is dead-on, activating space in a deceptively simple and curious manner. As for Ms. Olivier, her coupling of chance incident and the utterly methodical gains in rigor, wit and authority the more it's contained: Compression does wonders for her. The recent paintings on panel, aligned on the vertical and measuring 24 by 18 inches, are her strongest work to date. Two of them—the abrupt classicism that is *House Arrest* (2002), and *First Among Equals* (also 2002), with its wan light and wandering drips—are among the most beautiful abstractions I've seen by a contemporary painter. Hard-headed yet flexible, smart and funky, Ms. Olivier is a formalist who likes to have fun—and her fun is serious business.

***Wall: Jim Osman and Nancy Olivier*** is at Metaphor Contemporary Art, 70 Washington Street, Suite 1113, in Brooklyn until Dec. 15.

# ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 1993

REVIEWS

## NANCY OLIVIER 55 MERCER

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Nancy Olivier treats painting and drawing as equals, rather than as elements in a strict hierarchy. In this show, Olivier used quite a large stretch of wall as well as canvas and paper for her emotionally charged abstract compositions. Images seemed to separate from surfaces, to propel forms and their contents outside the viewer's perceptual boundaries.

In *Night Light*, 1993, an eight-by-twelve-foot wall painting, bustling linear networks traverse a muted ground, enhancing the ceaseless movement of the gestural shapes. This work is suggestive of the process of recognizing the patterns and structures of one's own behavior. The bold pencil lines in this piece recall Jackson Pollock's seminal drawings from the late '40s, crowded with strange configurations. Other works, however, had more of a minimalist character, such as *Vestige* and *Screen Memory #2* (both 1992).

In fact, Olivier's deployment of the language of abstraction is based largely on her appropriation of minimalist bands and grids, and post-Minimalist strategies, from which she creates works that emphasize abstraction's emotive rather than formal potential. The vertical drips of *Screen Memory #1*, and the grid in *Screen Memory #2*, both function to create a bridge between color and darkness, as if figuring the power of subjective perception.

—Ronny Cohen



**Nancy Olivier, *Vestige*, 1992,**  
acrylic on canvas. 72" x 60"

ART REVIEWS/Phyllis Braff

# Going Exploring on Different Trails

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## 'The Grid'

Nese Alpan Gallery, 1499 Old Northern Boulevard, Roslyn. To Saturday. (516) 484-7238.

All six artists in this small but rewarding show pursue the grid format as part of a 1990's search for urgency, rather than a continuation of Minimalist concerns. As might be expected, there is ample evidence of modules, systems, rhythms and patterns, but there is also much use of unpredictable pushing, morphing, fading and other types of restless movement that generates optical energy.

A sense of loose, dripping pigment makes Nancy Olivier's "Interior Motif" the show's most overtly assertive work. Shifting luminosity triggers the constant surface action in Susan Kornblum's heavily textured pale works and in Kristen Mara Brown's beeswax assemblages.

Regularized drilled perforations both create and pierce the schematics in Keith Gamache's wood surfaces, making the process part of the subject and introducing an important conceptual dimension to the exhibition. Duncan Johnson also imposes an order using wood in his wall piece, "Step," a work that relies on the unpredictability of grain and tone for its lively presence.

Grids can trigger sensual vibrations, as demonstrated in several handsome paintings by Hester Simpson. The broad expanses of tightly detailed linear designs over a mottled color field have a meditative quality. When these mesmerizing rhythms suddenly alter slightly, the break has the forceful impact of a ritual being challenged.



Nancy Olivier, *Interior Motif*, 1997, acrylic on wood, 48" x 60"

IN THE GALLERIES

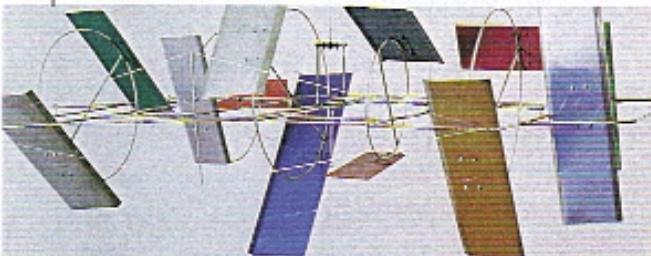
## PUBLIC OR PRIVATE

Macrocosms as miniatures,  
microcosms as monuments.

Edited by Jed Perl

When I think of George Rickey's sculpture I see big steel needles crisscrossing slowly in public spaces, so this show of twenty small pieces

suspended bunch of wires, circles, and rectangles that rotated in constantly changing patterns. Some of the pieces were merely cute, but most looked as though Rickey had



Rickey's Portrait of A Lady, 1958.

done between 1954 and 1990 was a surprise in several ways. For one thing, the sculptures moved delicately and quickly, so there was a lot going on and the show felt appealingly lighthearted. For another, most of the pieces had lots of little elements that related to each other in complicated ways—there was a sense of lively experimentation and invention. The biggest surprise was the early work. *Little Machine of Unconscious Use* (1954) reminded me of one of Giacometti's obsessive surrealist objects; *Catenary and Trapezoids* (1955) was an eccentric variation on the Calder mobile. One of my favorites was the 1958 *Portrait of a Lady*, a

had a lot of formal and technical fun putting together this witty and inventive sculpture. (Maxwell Davidson, New York) NANCY GROVE

Nancy Olivier paints snaking lines. Sometimes a composition is filled with one unwinding thread; other times there are two or three or a whole gaggle of squiggly paths. Some lines meander in and out of blocks of color; others take off into flat, uninflected space. I like the variations-on-a-theme aspect of Olivier's small, square-format compositions; it's interesting to see an abstract artist experimenting with related but distinct possibili-

ties. And while Olivier's titles—such as *Only Connect* and *Examined Life*—are rather clichéd, they do underline her metaphoric ambitions. These paintings are interesting to examine; they do get a viewer's mind going. What's missing is the touch of poetic abandon that would carry Olivier's lines into the unknown. (55 Mercer, New York) JED PERL



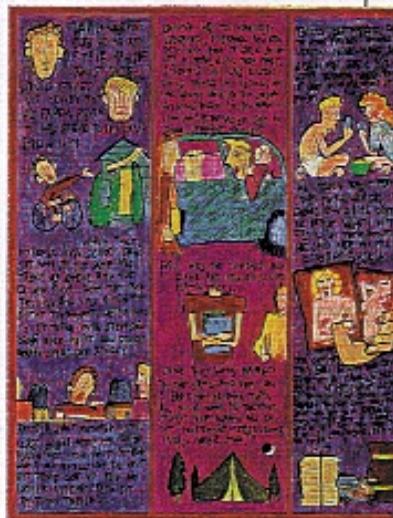
Olivier's  
Uroboros, 1991.

Jim Shaw's chockablock salon of things that teenage boys find gross or great was a definite crowd pleaser at the Whitney Biennial this past spring and summer. Shaw included everything from a commercially slick portrait of Catwoman, to Batman and Beatles cards, parodies of Magritte, hippie art, swatches of astro turf, high-school yearbook photo pages, *Life* magazine collages, Ratfunk graphics, and on and on. (No) thanks for the memories. Shaw's archeology will embarrass the high-art populist who, as an adult, forgets how low low is or was. At the Feature Gallery, his wholesale regurgitation of the five-and-dime-store junk continued into takeoffs of Hieronymus Bosch and others, but did not come up to the Biennial display. Shaw wants to undo the optimism of the pop artists, who democratized art with an influx of free and open, commercial and extroverted styles. He's saying good-bye to the high spirits of pop. At the Whitney, a swatch of shag carpet graced with

mock vomit evoked (but why?) the low point of a Friday night in teenage America. (Feature, New York)

ROBERT MAITONEY

Timothy Woodman's wall sculptures are fascinating to look at, with the word craftsmanship written all over them—these visions of life on earth are definitely made by human hands. Woodman's constructions of welded, oil-painted aluminum present highly charged moments ranging from the mythic to the mundane: Zeus striking earth with a thunderbolt; Benjamin Franklin losing his kite into the electricity-filled sky; a couple lingering on a dance



Shaw's Three Relationships.