

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

Review

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Exhibitions

Fran Siegel

Suspension

Margaret Thatcher Projects

through November 14

BY DOMINIQUE NAHAS

SUSPENSION, THE OVERALL title of artist Fran Siegel's latest effort at Margaret Thatcher Projects, is one of the most surprisingly subtle and striking exhibitions in Chelsea. Using a variety of techniques — layering, gilding, painting burning, tinting and bleaching stretched scrims on wooden and Plexiglas triptych armatures — the artist creates a ghostly contemplative world where the eye is led through a series of contrapuntal digressive movements in, around and through space, both laterally and in depth.

Think of Siegel's work as contemporary Cornell boxes devoid of found objects and surrealistically displaced reference points drawn from the world of culture or nature. Instead, Siegel's subject matter is an attempt to pinpoint the interlayerings of evanescence as it crosses into the territory of ephemerality, where transparency merges with opacity, where dispersion becomes contour (as in the best moments in Seurat's passages of colored light and shade). The main objective of the artist is to capture a certain gauzy light. You can see what the artist was after by looking at two earlier works made of cast and silvered panes of glass resting on small shelves and leaning against the gallery walls. Here dappled patterns on the glass surfaces and behind them give off a heady and opulently glowing light that transfixes the viewer's gaze.

Siegel's burn holes (reminiscent of stars or skin pores) and marks are arranged to recall the meandering tracks of transient organisms. Through them we sense the suggestion of tiny moments of flickering light and shade which seem to vibrate intermittently within each of the wall mounted constructions Siegel calls her "airboxes."

What is particularly effective in this exhibition is the artist's controlled exploration of the seemingly impossible: the reigning in of amorphousness itself, an attempt to define the idea of containing something that is not meant to be held. What I like in Siegel's work is the simplicity of her working materials, the matter-of-factness of her presentation (you can easily see what's going on from each side of her boxes) and the wide range of sensations and effects she extracts using a systematic methodology. Siegel is interested in elevating what would normally be considered mundane materials to new heights. And what a view we get from these new perspectives.

The artist's works use outer perforated and marked scrims whose patterns are (or seem to be) mirrored by an interior placement of scrims set-back closer to the wall at an angle. These back planes, sometimes repeated, sometimes rotated, spatially energize the front planes by creating a slippage between front and rear. AIRBOX #6, 1998, a triptych, is a particularly good example. If you peer through the tiny surface burn hole marks into the interior of her boxes you can't quite be sure what you're seeing: Are you staring at interior marks, observing shadows of holes against the back wall or seeing more burn holes in an inset scrim and shadows beyond this? Siegel's perceptual play is remarkably nimble: opacity melts away into translucency, transparent and diaphanous light becomes shimmering and serene.

This is a strong body of work that resolutely resists the quick take. It rewards the viewer's patience by a gradual unfolding of meditative spaces. An accomplishment rarely encountered in contemporary art.