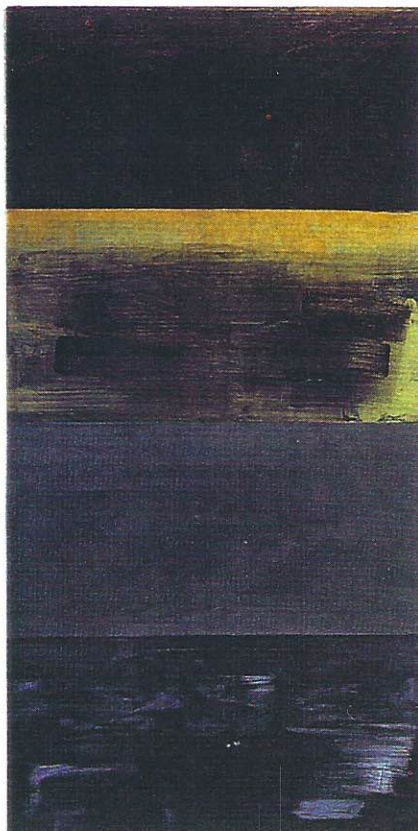


## Martha Keller at Stephen Rosenberg

Martha Keller's recent exhibition was her most focused to date; steadiness of intent and clarity of vision were its commendable strengths. While the artist's pleasure in materials and meticulously rendered surfaces remains evident, these eight new paintings rely less on visual seduction than her previous work, preferring a cooler, more detached mode. With the exception of a large wall work, they are vertical rectangles and near squares sectioned into four horizontal bands of equal width or into a series of vertical lines set close together. They function as a lexicon of modernist motifs—lines or stripes, rectangles or bands, the grid. While the recycling of these formalist devices might be construed as a radical stance on the part of painters using them as found objects, for Keller, who never abandoned them, the act seems more reflective, a commentary rather than a critique.

Her materials are traditional: oil, pigment, wax, graphite, ink over a white-lead ground. She limits her palette to caustic yellow-green, transparent red-orange, burnt sienna, a range of grays and, in one case, off-color primaries. Although straight from the tube, the close-valued colors look personalized and eccentric. Their application differs; some bands are opaque, smoothed over and dense. Most often, however, the markings of the brush are visible—broad, quick, yet carefully placed. In many areas the paint has been thinned, the color attenuated, veiled by a delicate black wash. Certain touches, here and there, resemble blow-ups of clouds or waves; these are made by reversing the direction of the stroke. Keller plays the illusionistic capacities of paint against its straightforward physicality. In works such as *Native Declension*, *Summer Dispersion* and *Diva*, a natural order is reversed: burnt sienna is placed in the uppermost register, and horizontal zones that might suggest landscape become more conceptual.

In the largest work in the show, *Fautrice del Tempo #2* (loosely translated: Keeping Time), tremulous lines of india ink, uneven in tonality, ran from ceiling to floor on one section of the



Martha Keller: *From Prelude to Tailpiece*, 1993, oil, graphite and zinc on canvas, 84 by 42 inches;

gallery wall, striping everything they encountered—a closed door, a shuttered wall opening, a collapsible counter. This repetitive, pragmatic marking divested itself of formalist purity as it interacted with the architecture. Nonetheless, as substance merged with shadow, pragmatism became poetic.

Keller and many other artists continue to be obsessed by abstraction; in attempting to extricate it from the impasses of the formalist discourse, they are also trying to discover a future for it. That there is one is posited on an undiminished desire for it, a desire which these lucid, elegant paintings do much to sustain.

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