

# Art in America

September 1997

## MARTHA KELLER AT ROSENBERG + KAUFMAN

It's hard to believe that anyone could make interesting paintings of stripes these days. In the wake of Frank Stella's use of stripes to reinforce objectness, Agnes Martin's to meditate on repetition and subtle variation, Sean Scully's to order and structure expressionist gesture and color, and Ross Bleckner's to evoke nostalgia for an era when painting stripes was heroic (to name just a few instances of stripe painting), one would think that the motif was pretty much used up. Not so. Martha Keller, who has been painting stripes for a while, continues to make them interesting and visually complex in paintings which build upon the legacies of these other artists.

Here, she exhibited paintings from a series begun in 1993, titled *Fautrice* (which the press release says is an Italian noun meaning "one who makes female authorship possible"). With narrow vertical stripes that extend from top to bottom, Keller's paintings are somewhat reminiscent of Bleckner's of the early 1980s. As in Bleckner's so-called Op paintings, Keller's thin, soft-edged verticals appear to vibrate, making a vague association to the flickering of television or computer screens. And like Bleckner's, Keller's seem to emanate an internal light. But Keller's paintings are more complicated formally and less specific in content; they integrate many modernist devices--drips, brush strokes, flatness, gesture, process--and the connotations that come with them. Initially, Keller's stripes appear to stand out as ridges of paint. On closer observation, one sees her thin, transparent colors that make flat, smooth surfaces. Sometimes the weave of the canvas shows through and sometimes her paint--mixed with wax or zinc dust--has a solid, matte finish.



Her paintings are structured visually and conceptually on the rational order associated with geometric painting. Square formats enhance a sense of stability. Juxtaposed with stability, however, is movement. Nothing in her paintings appears entirely fixed. The slightly vibrating surfaces provoke the viewer into moving around--back and forth, and side to side. From afar, multicolored stripes recede into all-over splotches of color that undulate in and out. Up close, the surfaces flatten as thinly applied, fluid paint, matte color, or the weave of the linen, become apparent. Her paints--some mixed by Keller herself from powdered graphite, zinc or wax--reflect light differently, so that their color and intensity change when the light falling on them varies.

Color and size differentiate these paintings. In *Tao Wow Now* (1995), the harmonious pastels--pinks, greens and blues--work in tension with the shifts in space and perception; whereas the acidic, discordant color--purple and lime green--of *They, in occupation (of the whole view)*...(1996) reinforces the unsettling impression. All in all, Keller's stripes manage to elicit a surprising range of emotional inflection and visual complexity.

-Tiffany Bell