

Ann Pibal: 'Drmn'

By ROBERTA SMITH SEPT. 22, 2011

Meulensteen

511 West 22nd Street, Chelsea

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Ann Pibal's new paintings can deliver something bordering on an eyeful, but only if you have patience and ignore their slightly pretentious bending-over-backward modesty and attenuation, as well as, in this instance, their numerosness. Her fourth gallery solo show in New York, "DRMN" presents 17 small paintings, which is too much considering the close looking required, and furthermore creates something of a production-line effect.

Ms. Pibal's fastidious little works, painted on aluminum panels not much larger than the pages of a book, usually begin with smooth, monochrome grounds in tasteful colors. These are disrupted by thin, clustered lines and bars in contrasting colors that suggest collapsing scaffolding, fragmented maps or computer designs, and are punctuated by tiny stacks of more intensely colored bars and rectangles loosely brushed with a second color. The brushiness is sometimes more expansive, as in the light blue right half of "FLS2," which plays against a solid aqua left side and is overlaid with lines suggesting a falling ladder in a third blue. In "EPTO," uncharacteristically loose black brushstrokes nearly obscure a glowing pink, creating relatively fiery effects and electrifying a pair of pink lines running parallel at the edges and across the bottom of the panel.

There is an argument to be made for these works as latter-day, text-free manuscript illuminations that expand up close, especially as you begin to fathom the careful layering (and taping) that goes into each composition. But there is an equal argument against them as a kind of overly precious micropainting that is similar to (if less nostalgic than) the more widely lauded Tomma Abts.

Perhaps the most concise criticism of this show comes from Ms. Pibal's own work: two paintings with more assertive colors and emphatic arrangements of lines currently on view in a group show at Feature on the Lower East Side. They suggest that despite the severe restrictions she places on painting, they provide more room to move than she is using here.