

***Ultra Buzz:***

Karin Davie  
Peter Hopkins  
Tom Moody  
James Siena  
Fred Tomaselli

February 14 - March 31, 1999

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

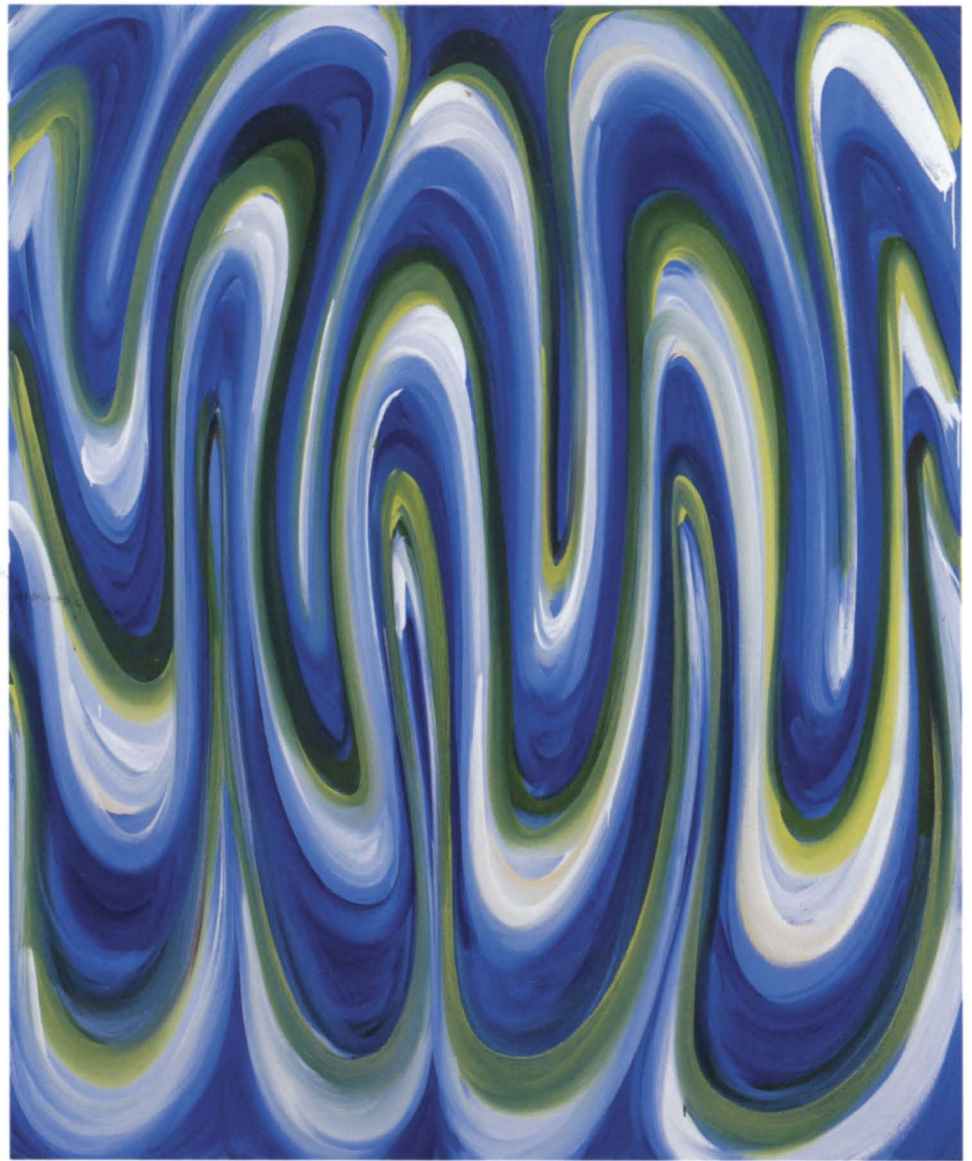


## Circular Reasoning

A sense of swirling viscosity and suspension as well as a keen awareness and application of the visual seduction at work in our image-saturated lives characterize the work of Karin Davie, Peter Hopkins, Tom Moody, James Siena and Fred Tomaselli. Each of these artists lures the viewer with an obvious visual hook — Davie's gyrating out-of-body stripes; Hopkins' holographic foil, glittering fabrics and poured cosmetics and dyes; Moody's eye-bending spheres, discs and rods; Siena's entrancing geometries and sinuous calligraphic line; Tomaselli's inner landscapes of prints, pot leaves and pills. Each also revels in long-tabooed illusionism, using visual tricks to initiate a time-release meditation on how technology has altered our way of seeing — enhancing yet not displacing art's Dionysian power to shed the transitory through an acute overindulgence of the senses.

While philosophers, computer scientists and neurologists grapple with the nature and location of consciousness, '60s counterculture's more intuitive discoveries — the visceral overtones of a droning electric guitar; the visual, aural and temporal hallucinations induced by mind-bending drugs; the mantras and mandalas of Eastern religions — have been gradually assimilated by the popular media and accelerated to a fever pitch in the form of "rave" culture techno-psychedelia, mesmerizing computer-animated TV graphics and high-definition video games. In contrast to color-field painting's adherence to rigid formalism, Minimalism's dismissal of metaphor and Op's "shalt not" attitude towards imagery, Davie, Siena, Moody, Tomaselli and Hopkins infuse their eye-popping patterned abstractions with provocative and often questioning references to this highly charged visual landscape.

Whatever theory of de-evolution, death, resurrection or reincarnation of painting you subscribe to, one thing is plain to anyone who bothers to take a close look: painting is trying to get out of itself, to spring into the more traveled zones of the semiotic spectrum. In fact, the word "spring" aptly addresses the work of the five artists under consideration — it implies a lightness, suppleness, coiling, fluidity, a brief but ecstatic defiance of gravity. Ironically, one of the most intriguing ways in the '90s to accomplish the aforementioned escape act is



Karin Davie, *Over*, 1998, oil on canvas, 72" x 60", collection Victoria Love Salnikoff, New York

not, as in previous decades or in current installation-based art, to abandon the format of a two-dimensional rectangular support hung on a wall, but rather to subvert it by embracing it. This is not to suggest that these artists follow the time-honored tenets of painting to the letter: Tomaselli, Moody and Hopkins use collage or mosaic as their primary technique, only Davie and Siena (and occasionally Tomaselli) use paintbrushes, and Davie alone uses canvas in any traditional sense.

In order to avoid the Euclidian confines of linear perspective and the equally limiting high modernist delusion of flatness, these artists are among a growing number who choose to create a space situated neither through the canvas nor on its surface — one that projects outward into the viewer's realm. This is screen-based thinking, practiced intuitively by the first two generations of image

makers for whom television and computers are not mere inventions, but the tangible apparitions that convey experience. Responding to the mesmerizing patterns in their work, which emerge like rainbows in pools of oil and water, we become conscious of a layer that removes itself from the support — exists outside of painting — despite the grounding references to modernist painting's heyday in the 1950s and '60s. Perhaps the paradox I'm circling around here explains painting's continued relevance — it is at once a sign of the hand, a primeval mark in time and in space, a relic, a commodity, a precursor to the virtual nexus of "graphical user interface." It is also a stubborn testament to, memorial of and surrogate for the spit, skin, blood and sweat that are the true corporeal measure of our existence.

Besides Peter Hopkins, Karin Davie is the only artist in this exhibition whose



work is gestural, although her embrace of the sincere Action painter's mark is a double-edged sword. Her close-cropped paintings thrust their convoluted stripes toward the viewer like flags snapping in the wind. Known since the early part of this decade for exhibiting nearly identical pairs of paintings, often parallelograms, which performed color-field painting to a bump-and-grind beat, the artist has most recently pursued a new incarnation of the doubling device (which recalled Rauschenberg's replication of supposedly spontaneous marks in his twin paintings *Factum 1* and *Factum 2*) by making paintings, e.g. *Over*, that appear to be their own wavy reflections as viewed through a funhouse mirror. Whereas her earlier, more tightly painted stripe paintings, with titles like *Wow* and *Ooh Baby*, played upon both the hypnotic sway of the female posterior and the forbidden voluptuousness of surface pleasure in painting, her recent work is more slowly digested, evoking the gushing interior sense of the body: tissue, blood, organs.

James Siena's labyrinthine pathways meander somewhere between Stella's early stripes, Islamic tiles and Australian aboriginal painting. Eschewing the scale associated with Abstract Expressionist *isness*, Siena prefers to draw the viewer within whispering distance of his mesmeric webs of line and saturated pools of color rendered in enamel. The slick surface and aluminum support belie the quirky and obsessive nature of his intoxicating mark making. As poet Geoffrey Young has pointed out, "no two of his lines ... are precisely the same, no



James Siena, *Untitled Yellow-Black*, 1991, enamel on aluminum, 19" x 15", courtesy the artist, New York



Tom Moody, *Greater*, 1997, photocopies, linen tape, 88" x 78", courtesy Derek Eller Gallery, New York

two edges or widths or lengths exhibit a shred of mechanical reproduction." Like a Celtic monk laboring over an illuminated manuscript, Siena inscribes endless networks that radiate and pulsate, revealing their intricate geometries over time, verging on but stopping just short of representation. The dizzyingly intertwined zigzags defining *Untitled Yellow-Black* both relate to, and provide counterpoint to, an inner and outer landscape that has been turned inside out through recent feats of electronic (exact digital reproducibility) and biological (cloning perfect copies) osmosis.

Tom Moody's equally idiosyncratic approach to drawing and composition is mediated by his application of low-tech computer graphics. He activates our attraction/repulsion reflexes toward digital reproduction by not only drawing and printing illusionistically shaded globes of various diameters in a simple 2-D paint program, but then photocopying them onto colored (the omnipresent blue,

canary, goldenrod, pink) office paper, cutting around them in the shape of various irregular polygons and taping them together patchwork style. Fastened unstretched to the wall with pushpins, these subversively appealing paper quilts flaunt lowbrow craft and household design, slyly demonstrating both the presaging of the computer matrix in traditional weaving and the Photoshop "cut-'n'-paste" technique in simple collage and mosaic. In the recent piece, *Large Discs*, Moody opts for computer-skewed concentric circles, creating the illusion of alternately concave and convex cones coming at the viewer from different directions. These visually and verbally reference CDs and CD-ROMs, the shiny rainbow bearers of so much information and audiovisual entertainment. In addition, one cannot view *Large Discs* without considering Marcel Duchamp's *Rotary Demispheres*, an acknowledged prototype for Op art and kinetic art's temporal concerns. No matter how digital the





Peter Hopkins, *Capital Project: (Covered Site: KC #1)*, 1999, fluids and fabric on holographic foils with resin, 72" x 36" x 3", courtesy Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, Calif.

world gets, circular forms remain insistent reminders of the passage of time, whether they be wheels tracking the road, videotape winding around two spools, age rings on the cross-sections of timber or cellular replication through mitosis.

Embedded in clear resin like insects in amber, Fred Tomaselli's intricately arranged pills and marijuana leaves combine with painted or printed elements, alluding to art's transportive, consciousness-raising potential. Tomaselli is unabashedly vocal about his intention

to take the viewer to another place. First exhibiting installation art in the late '80s — spotlit styrofoam cups dancing wavelike on floor tarpaulins, propelled by the air current of electric fans; planetariumlike boxes you could stick your head into for a private lightshow — he then made black and white constellation drawings charting friends' legal and illegal drug histories. Since 1991, however, he has produced wall-mounted constructions incorporating all sorts of tablets, capsules, leaves, and, more recently, collaged color reproductions — all encased in a layer of

milky-clear resin. *Isometric Interlock* reveals the illusion of "the skin-encapsulated ego," a term Eastern philosophy popularizer Alan Watts used to describe our false sense of separate-ness from our surroundings. Here, a cosmic Big Bang coincides with the neural explosion of consciousness: a disembodied head with mouth agape drinks deep from a sea of constellations — consisting of multicolored painted circles superimposed on radiating clusters of aspirin, saccharine and ephedrine tablets — that are the extensions of his own inner synapse firings.

Having addressed the themes of entropy and post-industrial waste in past photographs, paintings and installations, Peter Hopkins, like Tomaselli, takes materials from the "real world" — medical dyes, cosmetics, fabric, decorative polarized adhesive metal foils, perfume — and suspends them in resin to create "small, deep ambiguous spaces" that lose the viewer in a "pre-modern' void." As in much of Moody's work, discs of varying diameters are a predominant compositional device, although in Hopkins' case, the illusion of space occurs not through 3-D shading effects, but through overlapping shapes and the holographic patterns on the metallic foil. Hopkins embalms layers of chintzy fabric and decorative foil with pourings of nail polish thinned in bleach — in the process creating shimmering translucencies and weblike patterns. So luminous that viewers might mistake his lush constructions for backlit displays, Hopkins' work, in the lineage of Rauschenberg, involves a poetical transformation of debased commercial materials into signposts of a technological sublime.

As this exhibition demonstrates, our dazzling scientific and technological knowledge informs but cannot displace the role of image makers bearing archaic tools. Just as we savor chamber music in an age of synthesizers and sampling, painting and collage thrive in a jacked-in culture whose visual messages are increasingly conveyed through fiber-optic phone lines. The obsessive desire to create, view and collect fragile artifacts grows along with our bewildering navigation of a phantasmagorical sea of images.

— Barry Blinderman, director  
University Galleries, Illinois State University, Normal

Cover: Fred Tomaselli, *Multiple Landscape*, 1995, saccharin, acrylic, resin, wood, 72" x 54" x 1½", collection Eileen and Peter Norton, Santa Monica, Calif.