

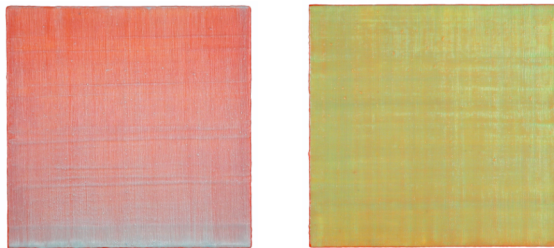
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JOANNE MATTERA: Silk Road
OK Harris Works of Art

The ancient, labor-intensive process of encaustic painting has come a long way since art historian H.W. Janson, in 1941, declared it an "almost forgotten medium." If Jasper Johns put it back on the map in the 1950s and '60s, Joanne Mattera has been a prime mover in making the technique accessible to a new generation of painters. Her 2001 handbook, "The Art of Encaustic Painting," is the reigning manual for contemporary artists drawn to the surface qualities and translucence for which the medium is known.

The medium itself is very much the subject of "Silk Road," Ms. Mattera's series of small encaustic panels on view at OK Harris. Each panel is a simple expanse of what appears, at quick glance, to be a single color. But owing to the opalescent properties of pigmented beeswax applied in layers, these radiant fields are irreducible to monochrome. Cunning visual subtleties are the *raison d'être* of the series.



Silk Road 87, Silk Road 90; each 2007, encaustic on panel, 12 x 12 inches

"Silk Road 87" (2007) appears superficially as red. But the panel cools, through a preternaturally delicate scumble, to a nimbus of pale blue that rises upward from the bottom edge like polar rays on the horizon. The red undergoes shifts in intensity from layer to layer (10 of them).

"Silk Road 90" (2007) spreads a luminous green-yellow over clear vermilion that asserts itself between the interstices of the covering brush strokes that crisscross right to left and top to bottom. Each panel achieves the woven quality of a textile, the warp and woof of exquisitely controlled brushwork.

If no panel is truly monochrome, neither is any color totally opaque. Light is held in the depths of the wax; color is suspended within the body of the medium. You look into the panels, not simply at them. Unseen underlayers display themselves naked at the edges in counterpoint with the dominant color

The refinement of Ms. Mattera's touch is all the more impressive when weighed against the handling properties of encaustic, which work against finesse. Encaustic begins to cool — and harden — the instant a brush leaves the heated palette. Speed of application is critical. Ms. Mattera's panels are no larger than 12 inches square because that is as far as a single, discriminating brush stroke can be sustained on an unwarmed panel.

Resonance from within lends depth to understated surface patterns. Viewed in ensemble, there is nothing minimal about them.

--Maureen Mullarkey

Until May 26 (383 West Broadway, between Broome and Spring streets, 212-431-3600).

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