

WHAT TO SEE IN NEW YORK ART GALLERIES THIS WEEK

by Roberta Smith



Installation view of Paul Mogensen's solo show at Karma Gallery.

It would be too simple to say that Paul Mogensen is doing the best work of his life right now. Over his 50-year career he has made many excellent paintings, all adamantly abstract. He has extracted an impressive variety from the possibilities of proportion and geometry, and of paint as both material and color (straight from the tube). His pursuit of the figure-ground relationship of abstraction — geometric shapes on monochromatic backgrounds — initiated by Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian in the early 1900s — has led him at times to shaped canvases and also to multipanel installations that use the white wall as canvas.

So let's just say Mr. Mogensen's recent efforts in the front space at Karma form one of the best displays of abstract painting in New York right now, for their rigor and pleasures and their illumination of the act of looking. In these two-color works, fattish rectangles and squares hug the edges of the paintings at uneven intervals, always in progression from small to large, like boxy spirals. They recall the Abstract Expressionist painter Hans Hofmann's push-pull dynamic, but stripped down, blunt. The colors contrast sharply, satisfyingly: hot pink on bright orange or on deep red-brown, red or white on black. Paint surfaces also contrast noticeably: glossy against matte, smooth against brushy. A black background of twitchy little strokes contains squares of becalmed, gleaming white. A solid sheen of red features has blue squares so textured they resemble waves. In the gallery's back space, canvases from 1969-70 are all horizontal in proportion and traversed by bands of colors broken in different rhythms, like Morse code. Their colors are many and also marvelous, like the show as a whole.