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ZAMMITT: A COLOR PAINTER WITH A FINISH FETISH

by Paul Richard

Norman Zammitt, the Pasadena painter whose first East Coast exhibition opened here last week at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, might seem, to Washingtonians, something of a holdout. For Zammitt's work obeys a set of art conventions that, while out of fashion now, once ruled the local art scene. He is a color painter still.

He uses tape and straight edge, he is obsessed with color, he paints horizontal bands that stretch from edge to edge. Though crowds of local painters have employed the same devices, Zammitt owes no debt to the Washington Color School: His is West Coast art.

"Zammitt," curator Jane Livingston writes rightly, "is a true child of Los Angeles esthetic of the last 15 years."

Zammitt, who prepares each canvas with a dozen coats of primer, has what local artists call the "West Coast finish fetish." He applies his colors as meticulously as any L.A. painter of lacquered custom cars. His pictures bring to mind not whim, but mathematics. Behind his color choices lie calculations as abstruse as those employed by aerospace engineers. Zammitt, like his fellow Californians Robert Irwin and Michael Asher, is almost scientifically concerned with the subtleties of perception. Nowhere in his pictures does one detect the ghost of abstract expressionism that haunted, in the '60s, so much local art.

And Zammitt's pictures, though abstract, even look like California. Sunsets on the deserts, the hues of the Pacific and the bright light and black shadows of sunny California are conjured by his art.

That sense of landscape is enhanced by the way he uses colors. In almost every picture the dark hues at the bottom, the earthy violet-blacks, pale as they rise, through complex gradations, to the light sky-tones above.

The paintings here evoke a peculiar sense of lift, of upward movement, that is, in part dependent on an optical illusion. Because each parallel band of color has a darker band below it, and a lighter one above, the bands look less like flat stripes than like the rounded slats of Venetian blinds.

Despite their ordered structures, Zammitt's paintings seem to throw an eerie violet glow. He is a serious, skillful painter. His exhibition, the latest in a series sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the SCM Corp., closes April 2.