

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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Painting as decoration, agitation or just a futile expression

By Kenneth Baker

Arthur Danto and various younger critics have argued persuasively that they and a raft of contemporary artists since the 1960s have put to rest the issues of modernism. But abstract painting still nourishes itself on a central modernist project: a search for the art form's internal self-definition.

German painters Peter Tollens and **Michael Toenges**, showing together again at Patricia Sweetow, have two definitions covered: painting as decoration of and as agitation of a surface.



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Toenges takes surface decoration to almost comic extremes, piling oil color on boards until their edges disappear behind thick tissues of pigment that seem to flutter freely before the wall.

The variety of works on view show how Toenges' touch and the way he varies tools can make a small piece look monumental and a large one small.

Toenges alters his palette, sometimes dramatically, from one picture to another, always asserting color and matter as sufficient content.

His pictures' material overload contrasts strikingly with their expressive restraint. Toenges apparently wants to banish both the communicative verve of a painter such as Willem de Kooning at his most abstract and the referential air of a tachiste such as Nicholas De Stael.

Tollens also appears to seek a maximum of constructive activity that will leave the object nature of his paintings undiminished.

He works on panels of slate that permit us to sense the resistance his surfaces present to the application of paint with short, stiff brushes.

Underpainted color typically winks through the march of deadpan topmost brushstrokes in a Tollens painting. Each piece develops a distinct appearance, but one communicatively null, more like a fingerprint than a facial expression.

Tollens' paintings imply that sheer persistence has become a core imperative of painting as an art at a time when power flows mostly through more kinetic and diverting media. Tollens and Toenges have added to their show two ethnographic curiosities, a Balinese wall sculpture and a tiny Egyptian stone mortar and pestle purportedly deaccessioned by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. They invite reading as touchstones of an authenticity -- in the sense of freedom from irony -- that both painters apparently seek.