

Art in America

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Matthew Abbott: *Icons*, 1996, acrylic and glitter on linen, 69 by 104 inches; at Boesky & Callery.

Matthew Abbott at Boesky & Callery

It takes a while to realize that each of Matthew Abbott's vibrant, at times garish, seemingly abstract paintings actually consists of a written phrase presented in a twisting, pulled-apart style that renders many of the words all but unrecognizable. However, don't expect to find oracular wisdom when and if you decipher these phrases: they're crossword puzzle clues, seemingly chosen for their absurdity, with the title of the painting being the correct response to the clue. Abbott has been pursuing this quirky procedure for some time, and it's certainly one of today's more unusual combinations of language and painting. Visually, 1960s psychedelia (especially rock-concert posters) is a big influence, while there are also traces of mandalas and Islamic decorations and design.

In the most readily decipherable of these seven works, the phrase "Took Risks with Carrots," largely in black, seems to bulge outward, a bit like an advertising logo on an inflated balloon (the correct response, by the way, is *Diced*.) Interspersed silver and white triangles, a small golden circle in the center, and black, silver and beige rings radiating outward situate the words against a background design reminiscent of tile floors in illustrious buildings. A

dominant motif in most of these works is that of centralized circular forms expanding outward toward the borders and intersected by crossing diagonal bands. The mix of words, letters and scattered geometric fragments results in paintings that are heavily—even obsessively—patterned and planned, yet also jarring and frenetic.

Metallic colors predominate, many of which have the shiny appeal of new cars. Abbott's acrylic paintings in general have an air of brazen artifice, typically calling attention to just how "painted" they really are. *Apple of Discord*

(1995) contains several passages in which swirling brushstrokes suddenly become hypervisible, as if one were looking at them through a magnifying glass. In *Clutch* (1995), a smattering of turquoise forms are rendered in paint mixed with Rolatex, giving them a gritty tactility and creating the illusion that they were cut out from different materials and pasted into the work. In *Icons* (1996), whatever words are in the painting are in such tatters that one is forced to "read" the painting solely in terms of its visual language. Even so, the feeling that forms and meanings are still sliding by unrecognized leaves the viewer in a state of permanent discombobulation. —Gregory Volk