

ARTFORUM

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MATTHEW ABBOTT

FAWBUSH GALLERY

It's like when you're drunk at a party and the person you came with seems to have wandered off, and someone's talking to you, someone you don't recognize, but the music is really loud, and lights from an unidentifiable source keep flashing, so even though you're trying really hard to hear what this guy is saying, nothing quite adds up, though it keeps sounding like it should.

This kind of woozy confusion emanates from Matthew Abbott's paintings. He combines complex abstract patterns—often with strong color contrasts or “tacky” metallic tones, sometimes over more or less irrelevant swirling textures for good measure—with slightly nonsensical phrases, variously lettered. Sometimes the texts are lettered “straight,” sometimes they go in circles, in some paintings they appear as if projected onto a globed surface. At times their colors stand out in contrast to the patterns, but then again they may just as easily blend in and out with teasing semilegibility. The sources for these texts, it turns out, are *London Times* crossword puzzle clues. If you're experienced with this punning and highly stylized pastime, you might recognize the phrase “A hell of a beauty spot? That's the message” as a clue for the word “dispatch” (the title of one painting). But even then, with all the visual clatter, you're still likely to experience the neophyte's uneasy sense that though something quite definite is being communicated, it's almost impossible to reconstruct what that is.

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In the tradition of some of Roy Lichtenstein's cartoon paintings—think of phrases like “WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT MY IMAGE DUPLICATOR?” or “BRAD, DARLING, YOU'VE CREATED A MASTERPIECE!”—Abbott has an eye for expressions that take



Matthew Abbott, *Curio II*, 1993, acrylic on linen, 72 x 72".

on special emphasis in the context of painting: “IT'S IMMATERIAL THAT I CAN MUSE INWARDLY” wittily invokes an ideology of art just as surely as “PIGMENT THAT MAKES SOME FRENCHMEN ENVIOUS” does its sociology. But he might think twice about titling his paintings with the solutions to the clues (in this case, *Immutable*, 1993, and *Paris Green*, 1994). These titles are genuinely irrelevant—they don't solve the enigmas of the paintings, just those of the clues themselves—and tend to subtract a certain quotient of the works' mystery.

A sequence of small “Twister Paintings,” 1993–94, patterned with dots based on the children's party game, on the other hand, not only omits the interplay of language and abstract pattern but also presents much simpler patterns. In the end, they're too generic to sustain interest. Abbott is better at overload than at reduction. Like any good party, his work might leave you with a headache, but the hangover is actually quite pleasant and will even give you something to puzzle over in the morning.

—Barry Schwabsky