

Art in Review; Donald Moffett

By ROBERTA SMITH
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Marianne Boesky Gallery
535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
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Donald Moffett's installation-art presentation of his elegantly sinister silver monochrome paintings evokes the no man's land between museum storage racks and hardware stores. The salon-style display, narrow space, harsh fluorescent lighting and twangy harmonica soundtrack all conspire in this mix-up. But mainly they emphasize the already scary nature of the paintings themselves. Their extravagantly built-up, brush-free, exquisitely crafted paint surfaces invoke the history of abstract painting -- from Barnett Newman to Peter Halley -- but also suggest refrigerator doors or expanses of woven leather. They are foremost feats of trompe l'oeil Process Art: the manipulations of paint tend to look like strips of sharp-edged metal, perhaps razor wire. The fact that two of the paintings have holes at their centers, like rudimentary Dutch wives (which some cryptic works by Jasper Johns have also referred to), can make one downright queasy.

Since Mr. Moffett began showing in the late 1980's, his work has always seemed like a tamer, tangential version of Neo Geo and its unlikely combination of physical perfection and commodity critique. But with this show, he may be overseeing a Neo Geo revival at a moment when its twin interests in formalism and consumerism are especially relevant. The overt glare of his environment conflates visual pleasure, monetary value and physical pain, an intense package. And it is definitely an achievement to give teeth to the exhausted form of monochrome painting so late in the continuing modern/postmodern game. ROBERTA SMITH