

Thomas Erben Gallery

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ART IN REVIEW

Adrian Piper

Thomas Erben Gallery
516 West 20th Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 20
Paula Cooper Gallery
521 West 21st Street, Chelsea
Through tomorrow

The art market likes predictability. No wonder Adrian Piper's 30-year career has hovered somewhere on its fringes. Her retrospective at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo (through Jan. 21) ranges across mediums from painting to video to installations. In tone it veers between daffy, deadpan humor and level-eyed political anger. The mix tends to cause confusion, which in turn can inspire discomfort, even resentment.

In an effort to complicate a narrow view of her output as a kind of Conceptualist version of "protest art," as well as to suggest her formal consistency, Thomas Erben is showing, for the first time, two early series of works on paper, both done in 1967, when Ms. Piper was looking closely at modernist painters like Barnett Newman and at Sol LeWitt. The pieces in the "Drawing About Paper" series, often done on graph paper in pencil and collage, are entirely abstract, with the blank page divided into sections by vertical lines. The pieces in "Writing About Words" include, or consist of, blocks of typewritten words or phrases suggesting concrete poetry.

Also in the show are two excerpts from Ms. Piper's much later series "Decide Who You Are" (1992), large-scale photomontages that use the formal components of the drawings done nearly three decades earlier, but toward a new content. The once-abstract texts now refer to various forms of social authority; the collage element is a repeated childhood photograph of Anita Hill; the pencil drawing is of three monkeys: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

The monkeys recur in Ms. Piper's most recent work, "The Color Wheel Series," at Paula Cooper. Here they accompany an image of the dancing god Shiva in what is (I think) intended as an extended, computer-manipulated visual meditation on color theory filtered through the Vedanta philosophy of India, and specifically on an aspect of that philosophy based on a principle of nondualism, the idea that all essential things are one.

As arcane as it may sound, and as weird as it looks with its garish colors and glossy surfaces, the series has clear links to what has preceded it. It connects not only with the abstract and didactic pieces at Erben, but also with two of the most striking entries at the New Museum, the yogalike photographs titled "Food for the Spirit" (1971) and the witty dance video "Funk Lessons" (1983), an energetic, "Soul Train"-style demonstration that at least some perceived racial distinctions are learned, and learnable, behavior.

In short, whether Ms. Piper is dealing with geometric abstraction, political issues or spiritual discipline, her output is all of a richly textured, highly individualistic piece. This may keep her from ever being a best seller, but it makes for one of the most interestingly imagined art careers around.

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