

Art in Review

By HOLLAND COTTER
Published: September 19, 1997

'Drawings and Paintings'

Wooster Gardens

558 Broadway, near Prince Street

SoHo -- Through Oct. 11

Painting by women is taking center stage in New York galleries right now, and this show of 11 artists, some familiar, others new to the scene, brings some fine recent work together.

The roster of abstract painters is headed by the influential figure of Mary Heilmann, represented by two recent works in her signature style: a hand both relaxed and alert, muted colors that feel like cheerfulness dreamed or remembered. Nearby are several tiny mixed-media pieces on paper by Jasmin Sian, an artist in her early 20's, who combines pigment, gold thread, drawn arabesques and collaged bits of fabric (one work brings Anne Ryan to mind) in bookmark-size work of great beauty.

Paintings by Margaret Egan are huge by comparison, but also incorporate dense, close-work detailing (her strong, monumental, maplike "Riverside Park" is dotted with clustered blobs of thick paint). Ena Swansea uses similar scale in a very different way. Her single impressive painting here is a wide-open field of white, lightly brushed with darker paint suggesting the elongated shadows of flowers.

Two other artists who work in a mode of organic abstraction are seen in some depth: Julie Evans, with eight paintings of sinuous forms painted on or under layers of opaque vellum, and Amy Sillman, with a wall of four dozen unframed gouache-on-paper pieces full of wildly inventive forms interspersed with words.

In Ms. Sillman's work -- characteristically funny, distraught, visionary -- the line between abstract and figurative painting starts to blur, as it does in the quieter work of Ellen Berkenblit, with its beautifully judged merging of expressive brushwork and cartoon-derived figures. Cartoon imagery is, in fact, one of the show's underlying themes, evident in Mary Esch's wry depictions of female swashbucklers and Sarah Sze's skinny scroll drawings of tilting architecture and casual crimes.

Ann Craven's two depictions of parrots -- one large, one small -- are the nearest things to realist painting here, while the work of the Boston artist Sheila Pepe seems grounded in installation and performance art. It begins with small sculptures of grotesque figures obliquely lighted to throw shadows, which are then traced directly on the wall. The results may seem like painting or drawing only by stretch, but they are a logical extension of an expressive language whose flexibility this show helps to define. HOLLAND COTTER