

Review

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

May 1, 1997

Frances Barth

New Paintings

Donahue/Sosinski through May 17

By J. BOWYER BELL

FRANCES BARTH'S NEW WORK, AND IT IS THE FIRST I HAVE SEEN, LOOKS AS IF THEY were painted by a post-modern neo-abstract expressionist convert to Buddhism. But in the end, these categories and influences are irrelevant because her big, bold work needs neither labels nor arrows pointing at Oriental influence. There is no difficulty in discerning the hard edges and the soft, the free brushwork and the precise, the bits of Oriental subject and the use of the grid. Barth's painting is seriously informed by lots that goes on, has gone on, and, of course it is most contemporary work. What is special here is that all these work. She produces paintings that do not rely on single adjectives, are decorative but more, are often grids but less, are divided into segments, and they hold together. What is patent is that any description would not lead you directly to the work in a group show, not as clearly as say the description of "the painting with a blue cat" would. And the reason is that these come out at the end *sui generis* — like nothing so much as themselves. And is this not what every artist strives to make, something special, informed, resonant, relevant and effective?

Certainly nearly all of these works would be handsome and would look great over the sofa or in a corporate headquarters. Barth has been making things for a long time, showed first at Susan Caldwell in 1974, knows the trade and the scene. And sooner or later, those corporate heads would note that she, her work, Barth, is taking up their time, is demanding attention, is displaying a cunningly quiet aggressiveness. There is no simple decoration here, but large, complex work that offers much in return for time invested, does so from the first — for from the first they make a striking impression.

What you see are large, segmented, often straight edges and solid areas with an overlay of the Orient — Barth is in fact a Buddhist convert. Some are more loosely painted than others and none are really tight — one large work dark with blues and tight with grids has as well a slice of shocking pink off to one side.

Everything is what they seem, tight, carefully organized, intent deployed, form followed, but somehow there is a calligraphic spontaneity as well — a touch of this, a dribble, a slash of pink. And in the end the work is nifty and neat and different, worth seeing, again and again, the images shimmering long after one has left Donahue/Sosinski.