

Dan Walsh

*Paula Cooper Gallery
534 West 21st Street, Chelsea
Through tomorrow*

Donald Judd famously said that art need only be interesting. Not beautiful, not political, just not boring or familiar. But engaging the mind, in this case through the eye, is actually a fairly tall order. It is worth considering in front of Dan Walsh's extremely interesting paintings.

The obvious historical precedents of these canvases include Minimal art's grids and stripes, Color Field painting's stained-canvas punch and Josef Albers's chromatic intelligence jazzed toward Op. But Mr. Walsh's fusion of them is surprisingly organic and present. It is grounded in a slightly muted though still vivid palette, a distinctive sense of proportion and a penchant for compositions — especially grids — built from large expanses, little squares, lines and stripes of layered, contrasting colors. Everything is softened by the vagaries of the hand.

The result is choral. No element functions independently; each modulates the others. Mr. Walsh paints with a directness similar to Agnes Martin's, but gives himself more to do. So, despite the paintings' seeming straightforwardness, what you see is not what you see.

Mr. Walsh lightens the burden of painting's past with compositions that evoke table cloths, tiled walls and even abstract cartoons. Hanging the paintings unusually close to the ground tames the Cooper gallery's immense, sculpture-friendly space. It also puts them decisively on our level, where they seem less like paintings than flat, interesting objects.

ROBERTA SMITH