

James Siena

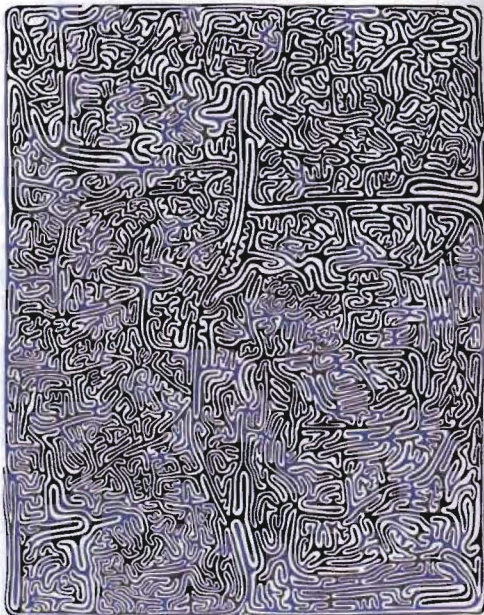
THE PACE GALLERY

For his third solo show at the Pace Gallery, James Siena assembled graphic paintings, prints, and drawings made in the past three years. Executing premeditated compositional directives freehand and using the slick combination of sign painter's enamel on aluminum, Siena creates jiving geometric patterns whose careful craftsmanship marks them with durational depth and attractive immediacy. While the underlying structures of his compositions afford them a measured integrity, the unruliness of the lines' behavior makes them come alive.

A step-by-step sequence of engravings, *Non-Slice: Ten Progressive Proofs*, 2005–2009, framed and hung in the center of the main gallery, illustrated, from start to finish, the process by which Siena generates an image: The first print portrays a simple outline of an amoebalike form nearly touching the edges of the otherwise empty sheet. Next, Siena cordones off areas within this larger mother-form, and then gradually populates each of the subsections with smaller and smaller cells, thereby filling the picture plane, from the outside in, with cleanly nested shapes. The patterns that Siena regularly uses (ranging from interlocking "combs" to continuous lines and self-replicating, fractal-based images) echo this process of internalized organic growth, in that each work acts as an isolated system, whose proliferation is contained only by the limits of its support—the edges of the panel. His designs, as a result, have an optical dynamism, pulsating with synergistic alternations between positive and negative space.

In their perky syncopation, Siena's line and color schemes take on animated personalities and can assume character traits of generic niche cultures—*Malevolent Adolescent Form*, 2010, is made up of a ne'er-do-well shape of spiny, curved blades that looks as if it stepped out of a tattoo parlor, while others, such as *Coffered Perforated Recursive Combs*, 2008, sport an abstracted Maui-casual look. The representational quality latent in Siena's abstractions was actualized in a selection of somewhat grotesque figurations hung salon style in the rear gallery—depictions of warped limbs, appendages, or orifices—which suggested that nightmarish forms may lurk

James Siena. *Two Scrambled Combs*, 2008, enamel on aluminum, 19 1/4 x 15 1/4".



in the subconscious depths of the generally well-mannered compositions presented in the main room. *Screaming Old Man*, 2008–11, which was hung in the midst of these deformities, portrays a face midscream, as if at the peak of a kind of Ayahuascan hallucination of apocalyptic interconnectedness—a nauseating revelation perhaps fitting considering the installation of works surrounding it. The Old Man reminds us, too, of the ritualistic or cultish element to Siena's patterns; the micro-cosmic structure of his designs invokes an ethnographically wide range of imagery denoting belief systems and meditative models.

A small drawing hung in this rear gallery, *Connected Hooks (Pathway)*, 2011, consists of a continuous line punctuated with arrows winding through and around itself in a comical loop of endless, illogical direction. This picture, at once poised and meandering, illustrates the self-containment of Siena's systems, or their satisfaction with meticulously carrying out intent without an explicit, greater goal in sight. But while Siena's compositions unapologetically engage pattern and contentedly work within their practical boundaries, their humanist temperament imbues them with an openness to the world and saves them from hermeticism. Siena's self-fulfilling mode of inner development is distinct from the scatter of all-over compositions, the uniform expansion of grid-based minimal work, the stoic rigidity of geometric abstractions, or the noncommittal reliance on remote conceptual apparatuses that seems to characterize much abstract painting being shown today. The natural buoyancy of Siena's work is visible testament to a seasoned, self-propelled momentum, an appreciation for nonsense, and a sustained adherence to one's own criteria.

—Annie Ochmanek