

HYPERALLERGIC

James Siena's Radical Abstraction

By John Yau | 23 November 2022

The pleasure of Siena's art arises from the tension between the overall image or the changing visual field and the individual units.



James Siena, "Trectiuff" (2020), acrylic and graphite on linen, 75 x 120 inches
(all images courtesy Miles McEnery Gallery)

Drawing a line is central to James Siena's painting practice. The lines are repeated according to a pre-established set of rules, or what the artist calls a "visual algorithm." This is how he described the impetus to work this way in a lecture he gave at Youngstown State University in 2018: "At a certain point I wanted to make drawings and works that act as machines. The way they act as machines is you have to find your way into them and find your way out of them. As you undo the making of them they come to life." Siena's description reminds me of Raymond Queneau, co-founder of Oulipo, a group dedicated to writing under structural constraints, who described fellow oulipians as "rats who build the labyrinth from which they will try to escape."

Working this way Siena seems never to have stepped into the same machine twice. Between 2005, when I first wrote about his work, and the present, he has made optically vibrant geometric abstractions; evoked different human orifices; depicted angry old men made entirely of wrinkles (imagine conceptual mystic Sol LeWitt meets *Mad* magazine's Basil Wolverton), some of whom were masturbating; suggested visual mazes and topographical maps; and seemingly become a painting machine run amok, both repeating and mis-recognizing a lost original. By working within a self-defined set of moves, he has been able to push back against the limitations of style and the art world's demand for branding and signature works. This does not mean everything that Siena does is equally strong, but I

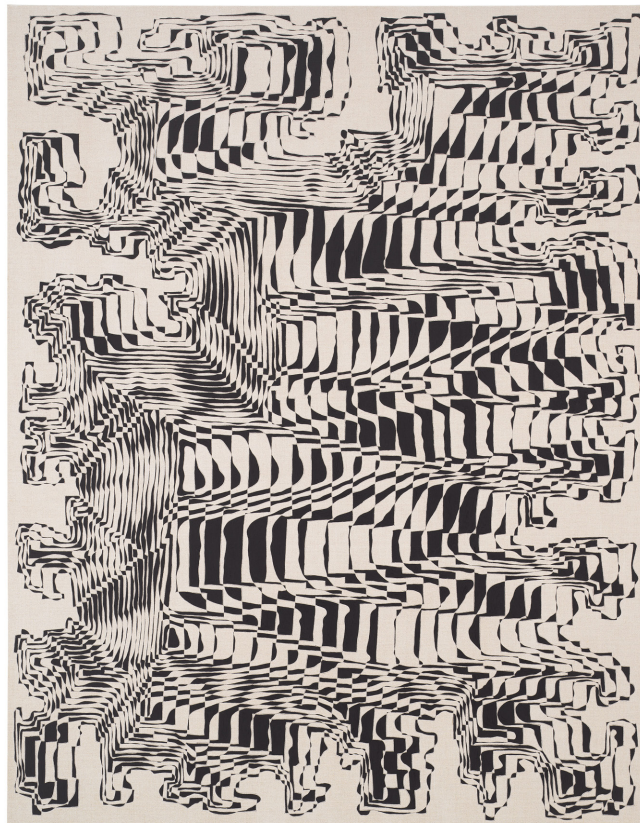
am not interested in investment reliability. I am interested in where the artist takes me.

Intrigued by both the connection and breakdown between machine and human, Siena's art diverges from the Warholian model of the artist as robotic machine and the long-cherished model of the artist as omnipotent creator, maker of frozen moments in time. We don't see time stopped in Siena's work, but rather the pathways he's taken to mark what he can neither break free of nor transcend: time passing. His work is about addressing his passage in time, knowing that mortality and termination are getting ever closer. It is when Siena most deeply inhabits this state of consciousness that his work become something to reflect upon, and get lost in.

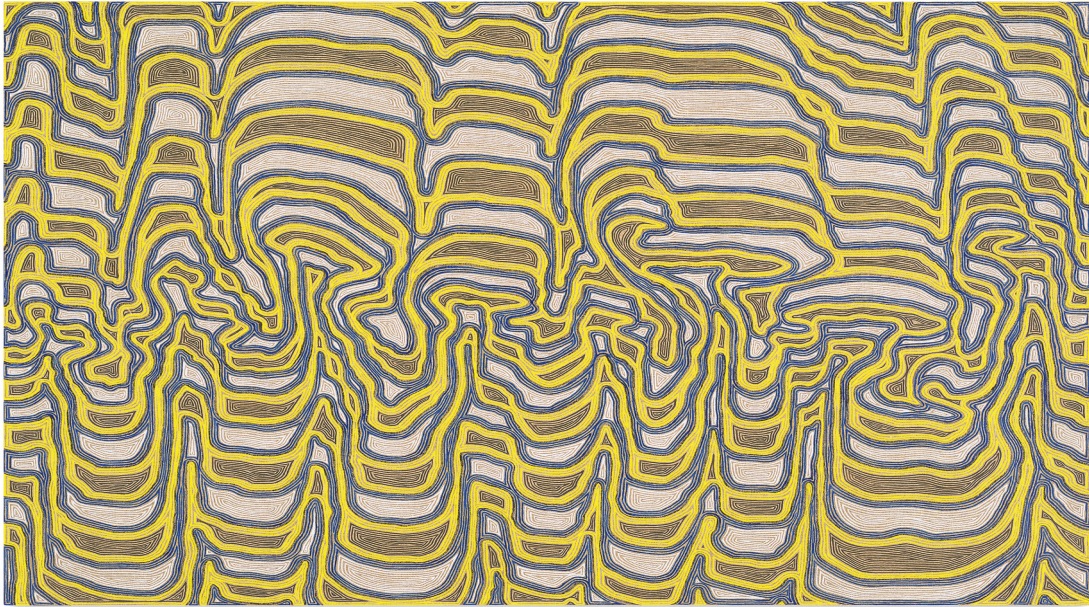
I cannot say that I know what visual algorithm the artist came up with to make the work in *James Siena*, his debut exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery (October 20–November 26, 2022), but knowing the rules does not necessarily make a work more or less interesting. Ever since Siena switched from enamel on aluminum to acrylic and graphite on canvas, his use of recursive lines and shapes has grown more fluid and mind-boggling to the point that it is now impossible to tell whether we are looking at the work of a psychotic (such as Adolf Wölfli) or a genius (such as Albrecht Dürer). That place of suspended judgement is what I find most engaging about his work.

The pleasure of Siena's art arises from the tension between the overall image or, in his recent work, the changing visual field, and the individual units. In this he shares something with Peter Young and Xylor Jane, artists whose dedication to systems made of basic units (lines and/or dots) leads to paintings that evoke alternate states of consciousness, in which the bonds between the macrocosmic and the microcosmic, immateriality and matter, become apparent. It is closest you can come to the feeling of being on hallucinogenics and attaining complete lucidity.

In the current exhibition's best pieces, the tension between overall image and basic unit is a lovely, unending dance, as attention shifts between the small and large. What differentiates this work from his previous paintings is that the unit is in a state of constant transformation. In "Resselgenator" (2019), done in acrylic and watercolor pencil, the basic, repeating unit is composed of an interlocking black and white shape. This shape stretches, echoes, and multiplies in layers until it is nearly impossible to determine where one shape ends and another begins.



James Siena, "Resselgenator" (2019), acrylic and watercolor pencil on linen, 75 x 59 1/16 inches



James Siena, "Infolded Ridgeling" (2020), acrylic and charcoal on linen, 36 x 48 inches

In "Trectiuff" (2020), which measures 75 by 120 inches, and is the largest work in the exhibition, the swaying, undulating two-color pattern extends beyond the painting's physical edges. This extension is what Jackson Pollock did with unrepeatable arabesque meteor trails in his poured paintings and what formalist critics sought to "correct" by emphasizing the importance of the painting's physical edges. The leading formalist critic, Clement Greenberg, also emphasized the overall visual field at the expense of the figure. But to understand the figure-ground relation as a problem to be solved is to limit its possibilities, and to ignore that molecules are always changing. Could this be what Willem de Kooning meant when he referred to himself as a "slipping glimser"? The porous border between form and dissolution, or what can be called a state of constant change, is not a subject many artists pursue. If change is constant, and we cannot transcend it, can we recognize as well as shape our passage through time — what will eventually consume and reconfigure us? Can we recognize our repetitions, confusions, doubts, hesitations, and willful persistence as time pulls us forward? These are just some of the places that Siena's work has taken me, and I am thankful for these gifts of self-observation and reflection that he offers me.

In "Trectiuff" and other paintings in this challenging and rewarding exhibition, viewers see only part of something larger and unknowable. Is the outer contour of the changing internal shapes ever repeated? This question does not seem purely formal to me. Siena's acts of painting, and the type of looking they engender, go beyond the domain of wonderment. He shares this quality with Young and Jane, and this is why they are all singular figures. At a time when distraction and displays of material expense in the guise of art continue to be celebrated, and auction prices are watched as closely as the stock market, Siena belongs to what appears to be a shrinking, long-stigmatized group of artists. He prefers to be alone in his studio, doing something by hand. Not the master of his own fate, he follows where the line takes him, and is adamant about not making an easily branded product.

James Siena continues at Miles McEnery Gallery (525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 26. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.