

Art in America

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Review of Exhibitions

Anthony Thompson at Artists Space

For some years, Anthony Thompson was one of Boston's most respected artists. Not long ago he moved to New York, and this spring he showed a group of characteristically modest and intense wall-works at Artists Space.

Thompson's recent work is as much paint as painting. His basic operation and format is the brushstroke. Painting with acrylic on glass, he begins a piece by laying down either a straight or curved stroke of a chosen color. When that smooth, thick stroke dries, he applies another stroke of another color directly on top of the first, which he uses as a template. He repeats the same operation, using a different hue each time, until he is satisfied with the accumulation of color and material. The result, once dry, is a flexible "belt" of paint that can be peeled from its glass ground and affixed to a wall.

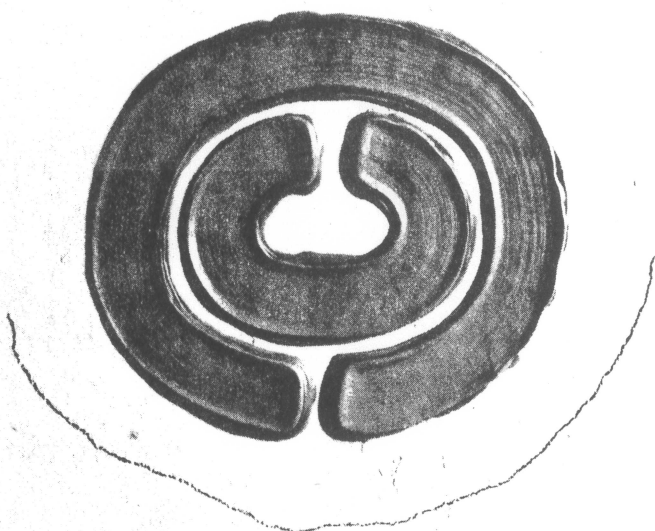
Thompson's paint-objects command a lot of wall space for such small constructions. At a distance they look like simple signs, but even the stretching, curved brushstrokes look too abrupt to be called drawing with color. Yet, as clear-cut as these works look from across the room, they have details that must be perceived slowly. Because each successive layer of color covers all but the edges of those under it, the top layer of paint decides the dominant color of each piece. Thus, viewed up close, the perimeter of each paint-object is marked by fluid, overlapping margins of color that recede like colored hills in a miniature landscape. These margins reconcile horizon line and framing edge in

terms of the paint's own fluidity.

By handling paint as a sculptor might, Thompson makes the details of his work matter while avoiding problems over the optical behavior of color. The colors in his pieces have no pictorial structure, for they are related only by the operation of "stacking" layers of paint. That operation is evidenced not by the sequence of colors but only by the fact that each is different from the others. As simple as Thompson's work is, it is completely dependent upon execution.

Considered as art objects in themselves, the paint-forms are a brilliant invention. The work's only tentative aspect is in its interaction with the wall. Because he wants to manage the wall's surface in sculptural rather than pictorial terms, Thompson keeps composition minimal. Still, a couple of pieces in this show were undermined by a slight but unnecessary complication: in both, the paint-forms were inflected by pencil lines drawn in a non-gestural manner on the wall. The graphite marks activated an illusionism that the paint-forms by themselves suppressed, thus loosening visually the pieces' physical hold on the wall. Thompson's introduction of line disturbed rather than modulated his use of paint, part of whose economy and sense is its elimination of drawing.

— Kenneth Baker



Anthony Thompson: *Ner Charbier I*, 1979. 9 by 11 inches; at Artists Space.