

ART IN REVIEW

Mara Held

By KEN JOHNSON

Gary Snyder Gallery
529 West 20th Street, Chelsea

Through March 2



Ogee (2012)

Making a painting is like packing a suitcase; you want to include only what you need for your trip. For the excellent Mara Held that is a lot. Her easel-size abstractions are jammed with multilayered patterns — floral, watery, geological and gridded — and irradiated within by spacey colored lights. Visual punch is both complemented by and in tension with sensuous material qualities.

Working on toothy linen Ms. Held uses egg tempera, an old-fashioned medium that produces glossy, sometimes finely crackled surfaces, produces smoky colors and gives the paintings an antique appearance. She applies paint in varying thicknesses and viscosities and uses intricately cut stencils for some patterns. Her paintings are as physically sensuous as they are optical.

The formal variety reflects an eclectic array of aesthetic inspirations, including Art Nouveau, Japanese woodcuts, Paul Klee, Op Art and psychedelic posters. “Between Island and Mainland” is like a Japanese garden seen through the eyes of a drunken Buddhist monk. In “Ferryman” it is as if you were looking down into a tropical pool to a submarine landscape of rocks, plants and shells.

The bold cloverleaf pattern formed by curving parallel lines shot through with luminous blues in “Ogee” seems determined to burst out of its rectangle. The combination of moiré patterning and melting concentric ribbons in “Ostinato” delivers a gripping electric buzz.

Psychically and formally loaded as they are, Ms. Held’s paintings are not heavy. They have a lithe, improvisational fluidity, each one an adventure for the senses and the imagination.