

# James Siena

GORNEY BRAVIN + LEE

Radiating from this superb show of 12 oils and 39 drawings is an intent to communicate. Not that James Siena has a specific artistic, philosophical, or political message to direct at his viewers; he paints the idea of communication itself. Circuits, biological cells, lines between two points—he deploys these in eye-catching, seductive colors to demonstrate that all communication is illusion, that miscommunication is the fundamental reality of artistic expression.

Siena toys with the idea of representation. *Eight Line Way* (2001), for example, could be a city block viewed from a high altitude; *Blue Corner Painting* might be the artist's rendition of computer circuitry. But nothing in these paintings actually completes the metaphoric bridge between the work of art and some object in the world. This separation of art from reality is brilliantly dramatized in *Two Combs, Red and Black* (2000), where the horizontal lines carefully end before they reach either the left or right margin of the painting: Siena leaves the tiniest of spaces to remind us that his art is, precisely, *not* about closing the connection or freezing the metaphor.

Everything in these paintings and the wonderful drawings that accompany them (each of these an idea, an improvised prefiguration of the larger, meticulously crafted paintings) paradoxically expresses openness and expansiveness, despite their apparently obsessive attention to detail. Siena's work closely focuses on minutiae, but it always shows how important the interstices are, spaces that may express the abyss between painterly intention and the viewer's need to find a hidden meaning.

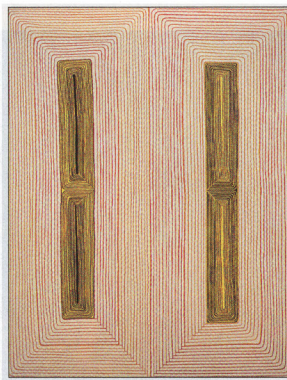
No painting tempts the viewer into interpretation more than *Double Reverse Five Color Recursive Bivalve (third variation)* (1999). Looking at this two-sided painting contemplating itself in a mirror like some Narcissus staring into a pool, we might want to connect the two halves on the horizontal axis, but in doing so, we would be closing the painting as if it were a book. If we look carefully, we see that Siena is leading us through the surface and into the void.

—Alfred Mac Adam

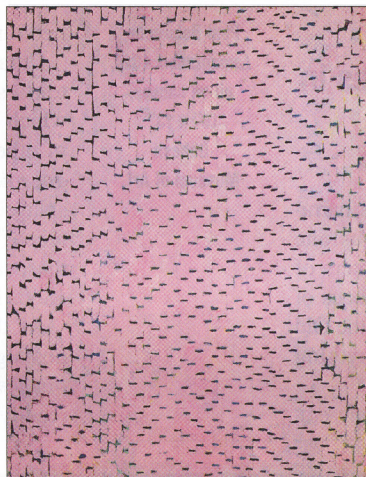
# Alma Thomas

MICHAEL ROSENFELD

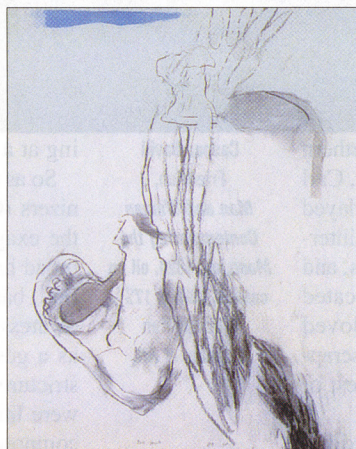
"Alma Thomas: Phantasmagoria" was a joyous survey of this abstract painter's accomplishments. Thomas (1891–1978) was a late bloomer. After retiring from a long career teaching art and puppetry to Washington, D.C., schoolchildren, she returned to full-time painting at the age of 71. It was a fertile time. The Washington Color School, which included Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Gene Davis, had staked a claim for the city as an important outpost of Color Field abstraction.



James Siena, *Double Reverse Five Color Recursive Bivalve (third variation)*, 1999, enamel on aluminum, 29" x 22". Gorney Bravin + Lee.



Alma Thomas, *Cherry Blossom Symphony*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 69" x 54". Michael Rosenfeld.



John Berger, *Into Fourth*, 1998, charcoal and water on paper, 25½" x 19½". Denise Cadé.

By the mid-1960s, Thomas was expertly employing the new rules of painting: large, all-over compositions, shallow depth, and delicate, disciplined use of color. She had also settled on a highly personal, radically reduced range of marks, consisting of small, rapid brushstrokes over a monochrome painted field. *Oriental Sunset* (1973) is a brilliant example. Bright red dash and comma shapes cover a luminous yellow background. The red strokes crowd one another and then dissipate gently in waves across the canvas, creating a sense of space and light even in the near-total absence of illusion.

*Phantasmagoria* discloses another link with the Color Fielders: a common ancestor in Paul Klee, whom the Washington painters worshipped. The slate gray picture is divided into five orderly columns, each brimming with playful irregular shapes reminiscent of Klee.

*Early Cherry Blossoms* enunciates Thomas's divergence from Color Field painting. It is a radically simple mesh of narrow pink brush marks squeezed and stretched into vertical bands over a neutral white field. Thomas emphasizes the immediacy of the artist's hand. Each stroke is a visceral reminder of the tightening, relaxing, pushing, and pulling of Thomas's muscles; each is a record of her spontaneous, intuitive, and decisive powers of invention.

—Rex Weil

# John Berger

DENISE CADÉ

John Berger—the septuagenarian Marxist interpreter of Picasso, Booker Prize-winning novelist, and radical scourge of the art world—is really into motorcycles. A suite of Berger's drawings on view here showed off the critic's surprisingly fine draftsmanship and his pure enthusiasm for the riding life.

The internal-combustion engine is just a means to an end for Berger. He cares about the bike only insofar as it supplies the impetus for exposing the muscular athleticism of the human form. The motorcycles here were barely sketched in. Instead sinewy nudes seemed to straddle invisible mounts.

Berger depicts the strain of riding the Alpine passes near his mountain village and communicates it vividly in scribbled figures that are posed squatting and with tensed, outstretched limbs and white knuckles. The nudes seem to aspire to the coiled energy of Pollaiuolo's wrestlers, and while they may not equal the anatomical drawings of that quattrocento master, and don't aim to, they certainly make an impressive showing.

Berger had the good sense to go too far in these drawings. He inked the wheel of his bike and ran over a few of the works to make sure we get the point. The thick white paper stock took a visible beating, and this gives the drawings a certain vitality. It keeps these