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MARIO NAVES

ELEMENTARY ART

Trace Elements is the title of an exhibition of abstract paintings by Nancy Olivier, and it fits. By overlapping brushstrokes, lines, runs of acrylic paint and a recurring grid on small, sometimes irregularly shaped panels, Ms. Olivier launches detailed investigations into facets of the basic principles of painting—alternately reiterating, obscuring and uncovering them.

Emphasis on the handcrafted object, establishment of illusory space, careful juxtaposition of form and the often-vexing material independence of paint—Ms. Olivier's pictures offer a fairly relentless dissection of her chosen craft. Clement Greenberg famously suggested that painting must shed its extraneous baggage to achieve a purity of medium. Ms. Olivier's overriding desire is to interrogate that purity. And to muck it up a bit, too.

That's how the paintings bypass the theoretical and pedantic. Ms. Olivier knows that there has been more than enough skepticism concerning the viability of art and its ability to withstand the driving force of history. Her aesthetic pursuit admits no defeat; instead, it affirms the role that individuality and optimism can play in the regenerative potential of art.

For Ms. Olivier, painting is as much a plaything as it is a calling. An unaffected, almost childlike whimsy defines the work. Though mindful of the weight of tradition, the paintings never take themselves too seriously. Titles like *Some Assembly Required* and *Full Contact Karaoke* indicate the self-deprecating side of Ms. Olivier's approach.



Nancy Olivier, *Double Whammy*, Acrylic on Wood, 7" x 7"

More persuasive and integral to her vision are the sharp and icy palette, the touch that's immediate, studied and offhand all at once, and the homey wood-shop leftovers she paints upon. Hers is an art of heroic ambitions and unassuming means, rigorous methodology and throwaway improvisation. Ms. Olivier knows that being smart and fooling around aren't mutually exclusive. And she knows that art isn't anything unless it embraces paradox.

Nancy Olivier: Trace Elements—New Paintings is at Bond Gallery, 5 Rivington Street, until Dec. 4.