
By MICHAEL BRENSON

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Joan Witek (Rosa Esman, 121 Spring Street): Joan Witek's paintings consist of row upon row of vertical and horizontal black bars, rounded at both ends, spread across barely visible white grounds. The vertical and horizontal bars in a work tend to be the same length. The bars may become darker toward the top of a painting, creating a sense of flowering or emergence. In "Split," a staircase of horizontal bars, surrounded on both sides by rows of vertical bars, climbs the middle of a canvas. The paintings suggest calligraphy, graphic design, Agnes Martin, Mondrian and, of course, Frank Stella, whom Witek admires.

Of the many differences between Witek's and Stella's work, the two most important involve Witek's approach to space and her attempts to bring expressive content into a severe black and white format. Although Stella did not eliminate space in his black paintings, he concealed it to such a degree that many critics thought it was absent. By allowing the white behind the black to become an active force, Witek opens up many possibilities.

The bars can seem to mask or to block out the light like the bars of a prison. When the bars seem elastic — squeezing, turning, balancing one another — their interaction can be experienced in terms of the light behind it trying to break through. The play of darkness and light also has a theological dimension, which gives some of these works a feeling not unlike that communicated by Romanesque and early Christian art. (Through June 23.)

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