

ARTnews

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Joan Witek

CDS

Joan Witek has been true blue to black since 1974, inspired in part by Richard Serra's oil-stick drawings and Ad Reinhardt's black paintings. A painter of remarkable range, although limiting herself to this one color—or noncolor—Witek once more demonstrated her mastery of its nuances. The works—in this show, which consisted of seven mixed-media paintings from 1998 to 2000 as well as a few watercolors and drawings—were as enticingly textured as ever, with velvety surfaces that begged to be touched.

Her black is laid down over a white gessoed ground that glimmers through the darkness in ways Witek thinks of as impressionistic. In *Transfigured Night* (1998), the top flickers with white, like city lights, and the bottom, an opaque midnight black. *Tiger, Tiger* (1999) and *The Raven*

(1999), tributes to the poems of William Blake and Edgar Allan Poe, and to blackness, are richly filigreed with details recalling pictographs and Mayan motifs.

Tiger, Tiger is punctuated by two small, intensely black vertical rectangles, each floated near the middle of its half of the field in a strategy that divides the surface between them. *The Raven* has four small vertical rectangles, and *The Trickster* (1999) six, also placed to suggest gridded divisions. Rimmed in white, these rectangles come forward slightly, occupying the foremost planes, lending a sense of nonobjective formality while incorporating the more florid, the subjective, even the autobiographical, into these signature black paintings, proving that fidelity, with variations, can work in art—and possibly in life.

—Lilly Wei

Joan Witek,
Autorretrato, 1999,
mixed media on
canvas, 32" x 32".
CDS.

