

REVIEWS

## Zach Harris

ZACH FEUER GALLERY

Aesthetics, as Jacques Derrida famously observed, "presupposes a discourse on the limit between the inside and the outside of the art object, in this case a *discourse on the frame*." A number of painters over the years have taken this discourse in hand, as it were: One thinks of Howard Hodgkin, Neil Jenney, or Christian Eckart, each in his own way an artist who has made efforts to unsettle the distinction between painting and frame, thereby leading us to wonder what, if anything, is intrinsic to the work. Another such painter is Zach Harris, a Californian who recently exhibited fifteen pieces in New York under the brain-teasing title "Central Park in a No Vex Cave." In many of the works that



Zach Harris, *Hand Held the Shining Chroma Zones*, 2012–13, water-based paint, wood, 30 1/4 x 18 3/4 x 1 1/4".

It's probably clear from what I've just said that Harris is a fanatical technician and a stickler for detail. The intricacy of his work—especially when it comes to the elaborately worked frames—can evoke that of outsider artists; it's hard not to think of what's sometimes called "tramp art" in particular. But the glories of Islamic ornamentation and Tibetan *thangkas* sometimes seem close at hand as well. As for what those patterns frame—what I am so loath to refer to as the paintings proper—that too breathes a not unpleasant air of nonspecific familiarity: Harris is one of the more interesting practitioners of what I like to call retro-modernism, a kind of art that seems to want to turn back the clock to some imagined moment just before modernist ways of abstracting and stylizing representational imagery actually tipped over into pure abstraction. Harris's imagery is mostly a sort of visionary warping of landscape in which mountainous forms rise up like flickering flames, sometimes with tiny buildings reminiscent of Greek temples dwarfed at their feet, and it seems at least a distant cousin to the work of Marsden Hartley, Charles Burchfield, or even early Mondrian.

Which leads to the real question: Can Harris be serious? Does his work really reflect a sincerely felt emotional response to nature such as we are more or less willing to grant the painters of a century ago? Or is he simply an unusually adept player of stylistic games, a wily pasticheur? For me, it's too early to tell, but what fascinates me about Harris's paintings (beyond their sheer visual vitality) is the way they make me wonder whether vision and style, spirit and technique, might be just as indistinguishable as artwork and frame.

—Barry Schwabsky

were on view, the frames claimed more of the wall's real estate than did the paintings they were ostensibly there to showcase. But then it was also hard, often enough, to say why one felt the central rectangle alone ought to have been thought of as "the painting" when, after all, the carved and shaped wooden borders of each were also elaborately painted. Sometimes the central image is on canvas, which creates a material distinction from the wooden frame, but not always. Perhaps it is that the centers are flat whereas their enclosures are in relief? Though in one case, that is not quite true: *Nap Time at 90°*, 2011–13, which also has one of the narrower and less eye-catching surrounds, sports an oddly wavy surface, which Harris seems to have made by planing or sanding the wood support to create irregularities, laying down canvas on top of it and painting, then cutting back into the paint-on-canvas-on-wood and painting some more.