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ArtScene: "Carlos Estrada-Vega"

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Carlos Estrada-Vega's paintings make me drool. I could blame the effect on the paintings' superficial resemblance to stacks of confections at a dulceria. But that association is itself a rationalization, an attempt to get a handle on the ineffable synaesthetic kick these works deliver. By devising a technique--at once transparent in its simplicity, but entirely beguiling in its effect--that allows his abstractions to simultaneously assert the materiality of color and its instability, **Estrada-Vega** seems capable of giving representation to the well-spring of desire itself. The cravings these paintings activate flicker iridescently between the erotic and the sublime, ultimately escaping fixation and therefore also the possibility of satiety. Which is, perhaps, just a way of saying that once you start looking at these things, it's hard to take your eyes off them. What they induce is something like sensory hypoglycemia.

Estrada-Vega's technique brings together the laborious fastidiousness of the confectioner and the pixel-level constructivism of digital media practices. The artist mixes his own paints, then slathers them over what are essentially square, rectangular, or circular wood dowels wrapped in canvas. These wooden elements, the basic building blocks of the artist's assemblages, have magnets at one end that allow them to stick, like refrigerator magnets, to steel plate backings. The artist arranges them in groups of varying numbers, ranging, as the title of this show informs us, from 12 to 5,000. Since the wood pieces are not identical and project from the wall by varying lengths, the resultant grid is topographic.

Chromatically, the assembled paintings range from the subtly variegated ("Daisy", "Lucia") to the pyrotechnic ("Rita"). Color just seems to be in **Estrada-Vega's** blood. His palette goes all over the spectrum, giving him



Florito, 2005, Oil, wax, oleopasto, dry pigments on canvas on wood, 6 x 6 inches.

the freedom to play with all manner of contrasts and saturations. As a result, the associational possibilities incorporated into his pieces are numerous. In addition to those already mentioned, landscapes, rock formations, bouquets, packaging, and anatomy come to mind. You can even see these painterly aggregates as projections of the very retinal cones with which they are meant to be apprehended, a compound eye looking back into your eyes.

This plenitude of metaphorical possibilities culminates in what is perhaps the subtlest metaphor of all: the parallel between the rhythmic play of color across the uneven surface of these syntactical grids, and the play of color significations. The yellows in "Daisy" might indeed be related to the flower but they also bring to mind honey, urine, gold, sand, Post-It notes, Butterfinger bars, Van Gogh, and who knows what else. In that respect, the paintings are about the instability of signification that makes metaphor possible in the first place.

Of course, having traversed the conceptual dimension of **Estrada-Vega's** paintings, what you return to again and again is the ecstasy of color. It is rare to come across work such as this, which manages to be at the same time flagrantly retinal, childlike in its unashamed sensuality, and smart to boot.