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Galleries: "Estrada-Vega Expresses Abstract Affinity for Color"

By Kenneth Baker
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Will abstract painting prove to have been just a 20th century folly?

No one knows yet, and that has made abstraction magnetic again as the century ends.

The work of Southern California painter **Carlos Estrada-Vega** at Brian Gross Fine Art reminds us that embodying color is one thing abstract painting can do uniquely well.

At a glance, **Estrada-Vega's** work looks like a descendant of the stripe painting Kenneth Noland and Gene Davis practiced 30 years ago.

But **Estrada-Vega's** true predecessor is Ellsworth Kelly, who configured whole monochrome canvases on the wall as if they themselves were shapes in an abstract picture.

The title of **Estrada-Vega's** show -- "Between 1,500 and 3,000 Paintings" -- sounds like hype until you notice that each bar and block of color in his work is an individual stretched canvas. Many measure less than an inch on a side.

Variants on grids, these composite paintings have a systematic air. But look longer and the absurd number of their components reverses that impression.

The 10-foot-square "Flaubert (128+1)" (1997), for example, is imposing in its order at first. But it soon starts to read like stanzas of praise for the strange reality of color -- its ubiquity, inconstancy and symbolism of everything elusive in experience.