

**Karen Barth,
David Mann,
Tom Martinelli**
James Graham & Sons
through January 17
BY EZRA SHALES

Tom Martinelli's paintings avoid becoming objects by retaining a sense of motion, and almost avoid becoming paintings through the same resilient quiver. Looking at Martinelli's paintings is an activity during which curiosity is deflected from the object itself to the activity of looking. The paintings are vehicles for contemplation.

Martinelli's consistent structure of discs tightly stacked together in a grid, described to me by a non-believer (in the way only non-believers do) as "just a rack of wine bottles," have an optical hum that is the visual equivalent of white noise. Each disc is painted by hand, repeatedly, and each disc has its own vitality. Primary colors buried deep under other layers of paint residually remain. The discs flicker in a taut space that is not deep or flat, just tight. The discs all intone different chromal inflections quietly, but audibly. They are dark and hover on a white ground.

The most potent of Martinelli's paintings is *Untitled (#9719)*, 1997, in which the window-sized canvas and the discs have a very alluring tension in their proportional relationship. The particularly lush, purple discs result in an oddly warm and sweet sense of discord. The purple throb of the structure is self-effacing in a way that is very atmospheric.

A quick take on these paintings is that they retain the experience of a mild retinal burn. On a longer look, a primary line of sight with the painting becomes subject to what I would usually classify as the flotational aspect of peripheral vision. The activity of looking at the painting keeps coming back to second-guess itself. Martinelli's largest painting, *Untitled (#9626)*, 1996, might be too cramped to experience. It seemed to insist on dilating out from its surface - it felt aggressive in this space.

In all his works in this exhibit, Martinelli seems to be expanding his ability to build up his audience's hunger for the primary colors. The primaries become spectral presences and noticeable absences. Martinelli's palette has developed a range between cold colors and warm ones that is sensitive; the arbor of purple discs in *Untitled (#9719)* offers a fresh type of atmosphere rarely experienced in a painting today. I am grateful for its specificity.