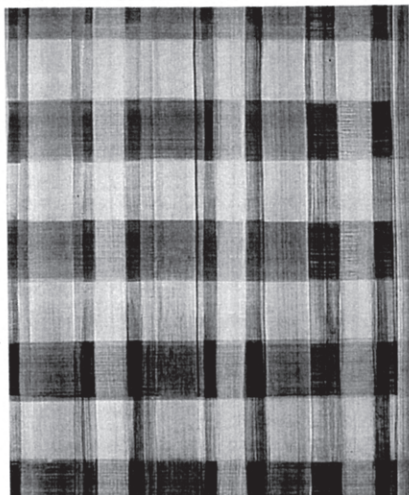


# ARTFORUM

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Susan Wanklyn, *By the Sea*, 1998,  
casein on wood, 50 x 42".

## SUSAN WANKLYN CHERYL PELAVIN FINE ART

Susan Wanklyn presents nine smallish paintings, all just a bit taller than square (and three watercolor monotypes), most of them immediately describable as loosely brushed plaids. But that designation is misleading for its superficial obviousness. Wanklyn is certainly no daughter of '70s Pattern and Decoration, the movement whose simultaneously weak but forward-looking compromise between modernism and an incipient postmodernism was predicated on the suitability of repetitive patterning to formalist flatness as well as kitsch decoration. That movement relied on the truism that, no matter what its components, a pattern (such as a plaid) can always be seen as reaffirming the facticity of the surface it covers—a truism precisely disproved by Wanklyn's paintings, which are intensely spatial.

Yes, the elements of which Wanklyn's paintings are constructed are ineluctably flat: horizontal and vertical bands, and then the squares or rectangles formed by their intersection. Yet she ekes out the maximum push and pull from her canny alliances of colors—a strangely warm blue next to a paradoxically cool pink,

or similarly disorienting mixes of sour with sweet, hearty with delicate. Such flavors are eccentric enough in themselves, but it's all the more surprising to find them juxtaposed harmoniously. Soon enough you forget about the immediacies of pattern; if anything, paintings this spacious end up feeling like highly formalized landscapes.

With their multiple weavings of translucent, atmospheric washes of casein, it sometimes seems miraculous that the overlapping colors don't just turn to mud. Instead each layer somehow seems sharper and clearer as it nears the surface—most astonishingly, to my eye, in *Little Rococo*, 1997, where off, almost nameless hues slide in and out of each other, both fusing and maintaining their particular identities. Although at first it might seem more straightforward, a completely tonal painting like *Untitled (Grey #2)*, 1999, must have been nearly as difficult to pull off. It's not at all obvious how a darker gray can get lost inside a lighter one, rather than the other way around, as happens in one passage here.

In a couple of recent paintings, *Beach Towel Bingo* and *Nunavut*, as well as in the monotype *Backyard Brooklyn #3*, all 1999, Wanklyn's grid loosens up and breaks apart, becoming more a fond memory than an imposing presence. In *Nunavut*, especially, the result is an engagingly sly, off-balance quality. Here, Wanklyn's taste for surprise is not veiled by the apparent regularity of a pattern, and her decision-making becomes more exposed, less anonymous. There is more awkwardness in these paintings, but also more of a sense of spontaneity, of improvisational panache, as shapes seem to form themselves, almost unbidden, out of a few casual brushstrokes. Wanklyn's equal ease with paint's material specificity and with its allusive suggestiveness recalls Mary Heilmann or Juan Uslé at their best. But her paintings open out to a light-besotted place that is very much their own.

—Barry Schwabsky