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ART IN REVIEW

John McAllister: 'Damned Sparkling Pomp'

By ROBERTA SMITH October 20, 2011

With increasing optical intensity John McAllister's smart, wryly elegant new paintings continue to negotiate a path between past and present, painting and photography, decoration and documentation, and modernism and postmodernism. In his fourth New York gallery solo Mr. McAllister's briskly painted images seem once more inspired by photographs. Each depicts an early modernist still life or landscape painting evocative of Matisse, Bonnard or the Fauvist Braque against backgrounds of geometric or foliate patterns that suggest exotic textiles, ersatz wallpaper or other artworks (including the early stripe paintings of Frank Stella). Sometimes additional paintings and tiled floors are part of the composition, evoking the between-the-wars studio of some School of Paris painter (O.K., Matisse).



In contrast the works' assorted patterns and paintings are tightly layered, alluding, it would seem, to postwar modernism's infatuation with flatness. This concern is wittily reiterated by the fact that Mr. McAllister's own stretchers are quite shallow, so that his canvases sit abnormally close to the wall. In the best paintings the palette takes a farther step toward the present by concentrating on a close range of colors (often lavenders, reds and purples) that have a monochromatic, irradiated and even, if vaguely, Op Art effect. Works like "Darksome Almost Dawn," "Under Spells Spelled Vital," "When Runs Silence" and "X and Province" especially might almost be hand-colored negatives, lighted from within. But they are in fact paintings, made by someone unafraid to embrace the medium or its history, or to toy with the ratios of hedonism and skepticism therein.