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Moira Dryer Project

By Roberta Smith
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Eleven Rivington
11 Rivington Street, near Chrystie Street,
and 195 Chrystie Street, near Stanton Street, Lower East Side
Through Feb. 22

This excellent exhibition is the first in New York in 20 years for the obdurate yet romantic wood-panel paintings of Moira Dryer (1957-1992). It arrives at a time when younger painters, many of them women, are exploring new ways of getting physical with their medium. Examples in the immediate vicinity of this show include Sarah Crowner's abstractions in painted and sewn canvas, at the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, and Ulrike Müller's plaquelike works in baked enamel on steel at Callicoon Fine Arts.

Besides making her panels big, Dryer tweaked and supplemented them to stress their physicality. She then contradicted this literalness with thin, sometimes streaky applications of close shades of one color. The results are both bold and restrained, with the paint application seeming more related to early American painted furniture or sign painting than to the frequent machismo of Modernist abstraction.

"Captain Courageous" is a field of sloshed greens with splashes of white — a wall of wild water. Toward the bottom, there is a niche, like a mail slot or a place for a plaque, that makes the painting seem small and intimate.

In "The Signature Painting," a two-part work, a series of concentric rectangles in shades of terra cotta suggest an old-fashioned rag rug, as do the brushy, almost fringed edges of the color field. Dryer's initials, large and curlicued, are a quaint, witty touch, and so is the jutting, slanting box just below the painting's bottom edge. It suggests an old school desk and is painted in more terra-cotta tones, with a freewheeling figure eight, such as a restless student might have made. Dryer did something different with support, paint and suggestion each time out in these works. The timeliness of her art is underscored by a group show at Eleven Rivington's second gallery that brings together the contrasting physicalities of paintings and paintinglike works by Mika Tajima, Jeffrey Tranchell, Julia Dault, Noam Rappaport, Mary Weatherford and Jackie Saccoccio, which are variously pertinent.