

Benjamin Butler

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ART IN REVIEW

ART IN REVIEW; Benjamin Butler -- 'Mountain Paintings'

By ROBERTA SMITH
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Team Gallery

527 West 26th Street

Chelsea

Through Jan. 4

The abject-art sensibility of the early 1990's is enjoying something of a resurgence, and in unexpected places. It tends toward a semiabstract, decorative mysticism in the hands of Benjamin Butler, a 27-year-old painter from Kansas. Mr. Butler's promising, slightly overhung solo debut suggests what might happen if Karen Kilimnik or Elizabeth Peyton suddenly turned to Thomas Nozkowski for inspiration; but Edvard Munch, Milton Avery, Alex Katz and possibly Laura Owens would seem to be Mr. Butler's real heroes.

His strange little paintings are at once conservative and experimental, and the best of them hold your attention more than you initially expect. Their mildly hallucinatory colors, economic brushwork and descriptive abbreviations counter the vast spaces implied by the artist's Northern Romantic subjects.

Proto-Cubism, Color Field, paint-by-numbers and thrift store art are also part of the mix, but the prevailing impression is of a personal vision that is coming steadily into focus. Keep an eye out for "Orange Stripes, Morning Light," "Ice Cavern" and "Poppy Mountain," to name a few. ROBERTA SMITH