

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

The New York Times

Mary Obering at Littlejohn/Sternau Gallery

Mary Obering's abstract paintings have always looked like an exotic form of sculpture. Incorporating gilding and succulent encaustic, each work was made up of odd shaped components strung out like mystical diagrams or exotic pieces of jewelry blown up large.

Her current paintings are, by contrast, stolidly rectangular and boxy, standing out about six inches from the wall. Although sheets of gold leaf cover their surfaces in the manner of Japanese screens, the clear reference here is to Italian altarpieces. For in addition, each piece is painted with two abutting monochromatic rectangles in tempera, that signature medium of the early Renaissance.

The contrast of matte and glossy textures is attractive enough, but what gives the work interest are Ms. Obering's complicated colors, which actually suggest close-up outtakes from painting: a rose-red veined with blue that might derive from the Virgin's dress, a cream touched with pink from an angel's wing. All of this takes a while to register, and its handling is far too deliberate to be transcendent, but it produces an unexpected emotional pull.

—Holland Cotter