

Poles of the Feminist Spectrum

By **STEPHEN MAINE**

Two exhibitions of paintings by women who work with words represent opposite poles of approach to facture, and wildly divergent ideas about what makes a painting interesting to look at. For all their differences, however, each demonstrates a feminist undertow, and both are distinctly New York. They represent flip sides of our schizophrenic metropolis.

The *gonster machers* of postwar New York painting collide with gay-positive pull-quotes from show-biz milestones in the new work of veteran painter Deborah Kass, whose "Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times" is on view at Paul Kasmin Gallery. In their polish, control, and unremitting cleverness, these eight paintings from 2007 (plus one from 2003) are as devoid of spontaneous invention as a Broadway blockbuster, and just as annoying.

The title of "You Made Me Love You" is rendered in cutesy script across five panels of black, white, purple, pink, and tangerine; Ms. Kass casts herself as Judy Garland to Ellsworth Kelly's Clark Gable. In "Nobody Puts Baby in the Corner," a passable version of a Kenneth Noland "Target" painting is emblazoned with the titular declaration, in electric blue on hot pink, swiped from the climactic scene from the iconic coming-of-age movie, "Dirty Dancing." The title of "Daddy I Would Love to Dance"

DEBORAH KASS: Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times

Paul Kasmin Gallery

DANA FRANKFORT: DF

Bellwether Gallery

is culled from Stephen Sondheim's lyrics for "A Chorus Linezz"; it is spelled out in black-and-white dripped block letters that evenly cover the surface of the painting's Warholesque, screaming-primaries camouflage ground and instantly evoke Jackson Pollock. Conflating the mythic icons of intuitive process and glamorous product, the painting seems to ask, "Well, who's YOUR daddy?"

Ms. Kass has a particular fondness for Warhol's work. Preoccupying her for much of the 1990s was "The Warhol Project," in which she produced Warhol look-alikes featuring images of cultural icons closer to her experience: Barbra Streisand in the "Jewish Jackie" series, for example, and Gertrude Stein's image in works titled "Chairman Ma." In her first New York solo show in over a decade, Ms. Kass is as prickly as ever.

A relative newcomer, Ms. Frankfort benefits from the gains won by Ms. Kass's contemporaries. Operating in a direct and unmediated manner, she seems to have her fin-

ger on the rejuvenated pulse of a brushy, overtly physical downtown-style paint handling, with juicy color and ad hoc composition. In contrast to Ms. Kass's jazzily-colored billboards, creaky issues such as gesture, mark-making, and emotionally evocative chroma propel Ms. Frankfort's show. In "LINES" (all works 2007), the title, loosely lettered in transparent white, stretches top-to-bottom and side-to-side across a soft-focus, yellow and orange ground. The artist confronts the painterly dilemma that a mark made with a brush is also a shape, regardless of how elongated that line might be.

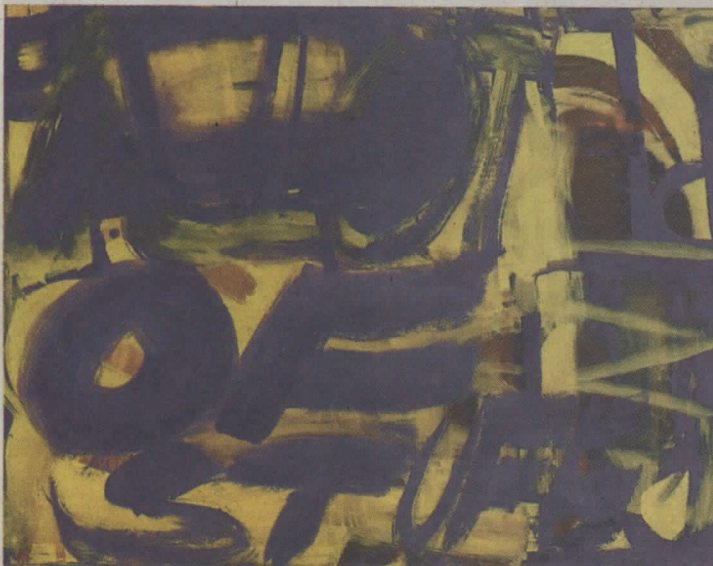
A Texan by birth, Ms. Frankfort is keenly interested in the swagger of a word, its measure, its haughty angularity or slithering approach, its essential physicality. A New York transplant, her layered phrases evoke flashing neon, overwritten graffiti, shredded billboards, the forest of signs that ceaselessly competes for the city dwellers' attention. The dissolving, barely legible title of "WORD," one of the show's biggest works at eight feet long, is slapped across spindly outlined letters, in dull blues and salmon grays, that wanly protest "it's just lunch," that faux-

innocent catchphrase of the predatory male in a position of power.

For sheer razzle-dazzle, the best of these paintings is "LINES (transformer)" a five-foot square pileup of transparent glazes in purple, mossy green, fluorescent yellow, and milky white. "Possibly Permanent," gorgeously jungly in pungent purple and blue against a throbbing orange background, goes as far as any of this work to suggest that these accumulated letterforms are strictly visual in import, nothing more than a formal conceit, a pretense by which the artist enlists a commonly recognized yet flexible vocabulary of shapes. It's possible that they are empty phrases signifying nothing, demonstrating yet again that you shouldn't believe everything you read.

The work in this show is less assured and more provisional, experimental, and open-ended than the paintings in "What's So Funny," Ms. Frankfort's remarkable 2005 solo debut at Brooklyn Fire Proof in Williamsburg — and that's just fine. The artist might easily have repeated herself, but instead she pushes her logocentric conceit in an uncharted direction. What a refreshingly unslick strategy that is.

Kass until October 13 (293 Tenth Ave. at 27th Street, 212-563-4474); Frankfort until October 6 (134 Tenth Ave., between 18th and 19th streets, 212-929-5959).



BELLWETHER GALLERY

Dana Frankfort, 'A Lot of Stuff' (2007).