



Carl Fudge: *Untitled J3.5 x 5*, 1996, enamel on panel,
42 by 60 inches; at Lauren Wittles.

Carl Fudge at Lauren Wittles

Among the disconcerting aspects of the pattern abstraction that began appearing in the mid-'70s was its defiant preference for decorative values over psychological or philosophical content. Carl Fudge's enamel paintings, silkscreened onto gessoed wood panels, take the pattern idea to a new extreme, and with much larger ambitions as to content. He begins with a reproduction of an erotic Ukiyo-e print, cuts it up into fragments too small to convey narrative information, recasts those fragments in axially symmetric "inkblots," and silkscreens the resulting grid-based pattern onto the picture plane. Each work is based on a black-against-white printing of this pattern, over which one or more versions of it in color may be superimposed. The large-format *Puce*, for example, has been given two silkscreened layers of color—orange and mustard—atop the underlying black. At a distance, you almost think you're seeing a textile, but the hard sheen of the enamel subverts that impression. And there are other oppositions at work here as well, many of them inherent in Fudge's painting process: representation and narrative are set against abstraction; color against black-and-white; the illusion of soft fabric against the reality of wood and enamel; the misleadingly gestural-looking effect of the enamel paint (famously Pollock's medium) against the closely controlled plotting of the silkscreened pattern.

The show included one series, "The Young Pines," consisting of six 20-by-15-inch panels, each with a different color scheme. The black silkscreened pattern is more aerated in these works, which seem positively buoyant compared to the larger paintings. *The Young Pines, J5* uses (in addition to black) yellow and red enamel; you'd only need to change the black to blue for the work to read as a nod to Johns's "crosshatch" paintings, which play flatness against depth in a similar way. Whoever designs patterned Formica for suburban kitchens might draw inspiration from this series, too, since it belongs to a Pop tradition—think of the Warhol flower paintings—that made provocative art out of vernacular, often kitsch, imagery and color. On the other hand, a work like *Hysterical Dissemination* is deadly serious, the largest and most disturbing painting in the show. Here the pattern becomes a dense lacework of the primary colors plus black—so closely laid down that the white background is thoroughly obscured. The result is an impassive and implacable wall of seething energy, derived (its now indecipherable figural origins suggest) from the repressed, dark side of eroticism.

—Alfred Corn