

Art in America

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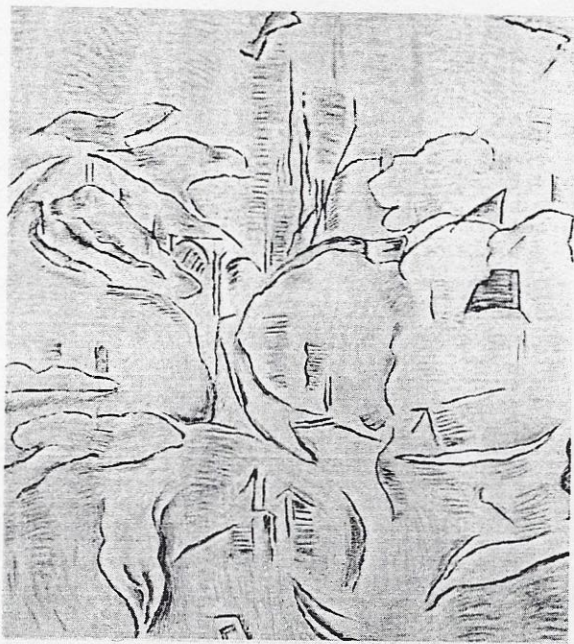
Joan Witek at John Davis

This show might startle the viewer who knows only Witek's earlier paintings in which repetitive black marks formed patterns broken only by an occasional irregularity, a "glitch." In this exhibition of three paintings and seven works on paper, all untitled, the white ground has come forward, pushing the old pattern apart. Marks in black, white and pastel form an undulating space in which black curves, jagged lines and vaguely organic shapes are placed. As her earlier patterns look something like Poons's early dot paintings or Bridget Riley's Op-art fields, so these biomorphic spaces

are a little like Gorky's while her hatching resembles Johns's. But these comparisons ultimately reveal little: Witek's art is very self-sufficient.

One drawing—and the picture it is a study for—is suggestive of landscape. Small, sometimes wispy cloudlike shapes hover over hilly terrain, while the flow of hatching in and around implied masses at times gives the impression of rivers. There are also vertical elements—series of short hatch marks one atop the other—that evoke tree limbs. Elsewhere, three works on paper executed last summer in Madrid have an open center and shapes that appear to extend across the picture edge.

Viewed close up, the repetitive marks in these works are brought into focus; at a distance, the overall pattern comes into view. The visual experience is similar to walking towards an Impressionist landscape where we view the image first and then the pigment. This mode of seeing provides the link between Witek's recent works and her earlier paintings. Just as the small glitches changed the appearance of a vast field of otherwise repetitive marks, so these areas of open black forms re-



Joan Witek: Untitled, 1986, oil on canvas, 48 by 44 inches; at John Davis (review on p. 132).

solve into a multitude of small-scale marks.

This is a handsome group of works in which the restricted range of colors permits diverse images to resonate, one against another. Witek is a gifted lyrical painter who uses repetition to play variations on a single theme, the visual relation of pattern to change.

—David Carrier