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Life's details revealed in stripes

By LEAH OLLMAN
Special to The Times

Danica Phelps makes abstract paintings that are utterly rooted in the concrete. Her art incorporates the practical, logistical and banal, and yet manages to be poetic. The work is transformative in the highest sense, for it alters conceptions of categories presumed to be fixed. After some time spent considering her enterprise, those polarities no longer make sense. Abstract and concrete become false distinctions. Same with the practical and the poetic. Phelps' art arises from her everyday life, and it feeds — simply, beautifully — into ours.

"The Brown Stripe Factory," at Sister, is a quiet but remarkable show. It consists of two drawings, five paintings and a modest installation. Phelps has long painted stripes, but they were typically part of larger drawings that chronicled the intimate and ordinary aspects of her life — running errands, making love, gathering with friends, caring for her dog. The stripes served as a visual accounting system: Each green stripe represented a dollar earned and each red stripe a dollar spent. Gray was for dollars owed.

When Phelps sold one house and bought another a few years ago, the financial transactions yielded large paintings of hundreds of thousands of stripes in orderly rows. She hired others to help with the work (painting the stripes in gouache and watercolor on paper to be cut into narrow bands and applied to wood panels), and this new, communal aspect of her enter-

prise has become central to her current work. She aspires, according to a gallery statement, to "create a stripe factory that spins labor into very dense matter."

She is taking orders for paintings and charging by the stripe, with a 20,000-stripe minimum. Two completed commissions are on view, as well as several sample paintings of different denominations. All employ the same palette of eight colors — sepia, shades of umber, gold, blood, grayish green.

Stripe paintings have been made for at least a generation or two (think Barnett Newman through Tim Bavington), and a production team is also not unique. Artists traditionally maintained workshops. Andy Warhol resuscitated the practice with his Factory in the 1960s, and contemporary artists such as Jeff Koons and Olafur Eliasson are not unusual in employing large support staffs.

With Phelps, the handwork of others is especially significant. The stripes carry no substantive spiritual or decorative weight. They are units of measure, units of labor, made in trade for currency of the more common sort. The author of each row of stripes signs his or her name to the paper. The right edge of each painting, where the paper strips wrap around the wood, bears a column of signatures.

The project is a model of organizational transparency. Phelps describes her process and her methods, implements them and displays the results. There is no mystery and thus no mystique.

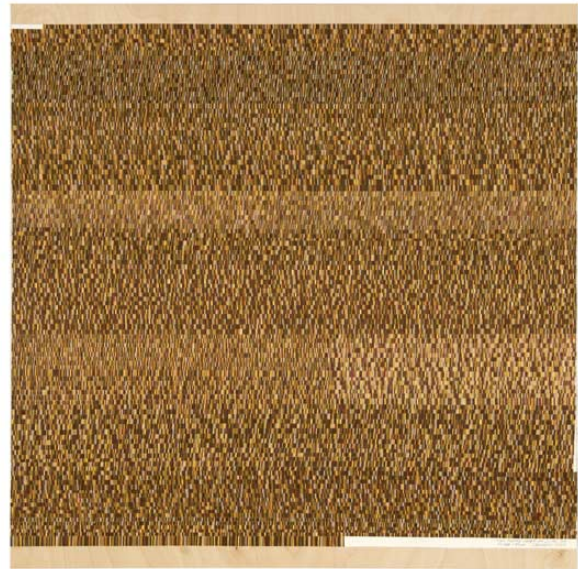
The plainness, the directness are what seduces — the importance assigned to the simple making of a mark, the complete ecology of the project. Phelps' paintings are commodities without pretense, geometric abstractions with a humble human touch.

In "Stripe Factory Drawing," she depicts women at work, concentrating on their pages or exchanging brushes. Their forms and the setting are described by contour only, in clean, lyrical line. Figures over-

lap, and multiple moments are portrayed at once.

A second, panoramic drawing (13 inches by 22 feet) chronicles the building of walls, from the delivery of lumber through measuring, cutting, fastening and, finally, painting. Everything about the drawing speaks of continuity — one movement leads to the next, one stage gives way to another. The labor of building unfolds as the roll of paper unfurls, a primitive film strip documenting a basic act of creation performed by a single individual, presumably the artist.

Phelps' line is never overworked but always pure and immediate. Similarly, her work is not overly intellectualized, yet its conceptual nature resonates deeply. Process is key. Each painting bears within it the record of its own making, and an installation of handwritten notes, work schedules, coiled strips of painted stripes, color charts and templates further fleshes out the process. Everything matters, and all of it is integrated — the art and the life, the process and the product, the hand and the soul underlying all that the hand creates.



STRIPES: Danica Phelps' stripe paintings have kept track of income, expenditures and debts. She has hired others to help. Her "The Brown Stripe Factory" exhibition is at Sister.

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120 E Broadway
NY, NY 10002
T F

www.brennangriffin.com
info@brennangriffin.com