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Julia Rommel: 'The Little Match Stick'

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ART & DESIGN

Art in Review

By KAREN ROSENBERG

*Bureau
178 Norfolk Street,
between Houston
and Stanton Streets,
Lower East Side
Through March 16*

Julia Rommel's second solo at Bureau is an unexpected throwback to the early days of post-painterly abstraction. Ms. Rommel, who quotes Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg in her artist's statement, insistently reminds us that a painting begins not with the sweep of a brush but with the stretching of a canvas.

After covering a stretched canvas with a uniform field of color, Ms. Rommel restretches it so that creases and staple marks from the first stretching are visible. Then she repeats the process, creating a pileup of incident and texture along the painting's margins.

In the small "Cal Ripken Jr. (Rookie Card)," the central midnight-blue plane is slightly askew, revealing flashes of mint green that once formed the edge of the canvas. Look closely, and you'll also see other stretch marks within the monochrome. The larger "Three Little Babes" plays up Ms. Rommel's process of "layers, labor and tool building" with bold orange-and-black borders that seem to be pushing a white rectangle to the right.

Even when color is muted, these are bracingly physical paintings. They draw you in close and then engage your peripheral vision, so that you feel yourself being pulled like the canvases. And although the stretcher-bar idea is not really new, the repetition in each work conveys a sense of productive frustration — of endless false starts that, together, amount to a painting.