

## Vera Neumann

ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

Sonia Delaunay's textile designs are seen as art these days, but that may be because she began and ended her career as a painter. In the 1970s, the feminist-inspired Pattern and Decoration movement claimed to undermine the hierarchical distinction between fine and



Vera Neumann, *Occasional Stripe*, n.d., watercolor on paper, 24 x 24". From the series "Abstracts," ca. 1960–90.

decorative art, and yet the practitioners of P&D always identified themselves as artists, never as designers—the dichotomy was still in force. In exhibiting Vera Neumann (1907–1993)—best known by her first name alone—as an artist rather than as the textile designer who became what this show's press release calls "a revolutionary icon of American design and brand development" and "one of the most successful female entrepreneurs of her time," Alexander Gray Associates bet that the distinction may finally be eroding.

To some extent, though, the gallery may have hedged its bet. "Vera Paints a Rainbow" was its second exhibition of her original works—underlining commitment to the cause—but like the previous one last year, this was a summer show, and summer is meant to be the season for lighter fare, not the serious stuff. In fact, Vera's works—or rather, Neumann's, if we are thinking of her as an artist rather than a brand—would be impressive any time of year. Those here were mostly in watercolor or watercolor and ink on paper, though some pieces feature tissue-paper collage; the majority are undated. In formal verve and at times almost reckless coloristic inventiveness, the best of them would not suffer in comparison with those by Delaunay, or by Matisse or Miró or Calder (whose work they sometimes echo too closely, however) or any of the other high modernists who might have influenced her.

In the gallery, it seemed entirely irrelevant whether a given design was conceived for reproduction on a scarf, a napkin, a plate, or whatever. Yes, some are just too cute, or vapidly cheerful. But many hold up as self-sufficient works of art. This is particularly true of Neumann's abstract designs; a watercolor of mostly orangish-red and pink vertical stripes interspersed with just a few slender blue ones possesses surprising force. The red stripe on the right boldly advances, as one would expect, yet somehow Neumann was able to induce the red stripe on the left to recede—no easy task. In another abstract piece, swooping black lines lightly attached to each other by umbilical drips seem to dance a pas de deux with some wildly energetic orange swirls on a backdrop of yellow and pale-blue forms; it has all the freedom and richness of good Abstract Expressionism, but with existential angst displaced by a sunny disposition. Neumann's floral compositions are at best a kind of disguised abstraction, a way of using repetition and pattern without much concern for mimetic specificity. They are mostly more subdued in effect than her pure abstractions. Weakest are the most representational pieces, often showing single things—a fish, a starfish, a bunch of carrots. Yet, to the extent that even these works give us a fuller picture of the range of Neumann's quotidian art, I would not have wished them away. Just as Delaunay could claim of her textile designs that "my research was purely pictorial and in plastic terms a discovery which served . . . us in our painting," Neumann had every right to say of hers that "they were always paintings first that were then transferred to other things." Again, the hierarchy between fine and applied art is troubled but fails to dissolve entirely. That just means we'll have to learn to see Neumann's work on both sides of the boundary at once.

—Barry Schwabsky