

# WESTERN ★ PROJECT

Selected press on Thomas Burke

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### **Around the Galleries**

by Christopher Knight

Times Staff Writer



**LABOR INTENSIVE:** *The geometric-patterned "I Want You to Want Me" by Thomas Burke was created with a spray gun, masking tape.*

### **At Play in the Postindustrial**

Thomas Burke is not afraid of pop fashion. In a fine solo debut at the new Western Project Gallery in Culver City, the young Las Vegas painter shows seven Hard Edge abstractions. Their titles - borrowed from underground and mainstream rock'n'roll, cult films and clothing labels - suggest a determination to position art squarely within an arena of enthusiastic sensuality and playful indulgence.

The paintings come in two formats. Their sizes are somewhere between an album cover and a movie screen: small squares (the smallest just 8 inches on a side) or big panoramas (the largest, assembled from four panels, reaching 6 feet high and 16 feet wide). Their painted geometric patterns appear to have been computer-generated. Brightly colored grids, rendered in interlocking designs, either swell like a bubble or ripple in waves.

These "pixilated" acrylic patterns were made the old fashioned way, using a labor-intensive spray gun and masking tape. Burke paints with crisp clear colors on very thin sheets of metal, which together emphasize the image as a surface skin. Burke gets a surprising visual effect of mechanized movement - of pieces falling into place with an almost audible clink. Inspired by pre-Conceptual art precedents as diverse as Bridget Riley's Op art, Lorser Feitelson's "space forms" and Frank Stella's protractors, the paintings nonetheless possess distinctive zip.

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*I Want You To Want Me*, 2003, acrylic on metal, 24 x 120 inches

**Thomas Burke** by Eve Wood

Western-Project, Culver City CA November 8 - December 27, 2003

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Imagine if the world was mutable, and everything in it subject to the constant fluidity of time and space. Imagine trying to walk a straight line in that universe, but then again we all know straight lines are predictable and never-endingly boring. Thomas Burke's newest paintings on view at Western Project exist in our world, if for no other reason that to subvert predictability. Preternaturally gifted with both form and color, Burke's strangely luminous acrylics on metal are less reminiscent of literal cityscapes that they are of fissures in the brain, of undulating journeys through a psychedelic terrain.

The grid pattern has been lengthened, elongated along the walls of the gallery, and these paintings seemingly go on forever, creating a dreamlike state for anyone who stands looking. Burke's colors are mythic, larger than life, and in the context of his imagery they very nearly become characters in a sleek and highly nuanced and seductive scenario. His reds expose the greens, and the whites are stark and unforgiving. These colors could be groups of people in a huge house with many rooms, all of them aware that there are others there, yet unable to connect directly with anyone. Burke achieves movement in stasis, and as the whites pop, the greens recede quietly. The precision here is carefully calculated, almost mathematical, each color held within a structure that moves and quavers even as it exists alone and unmoving on the wall.

These paintings could also be read as playful and oddly contemplative, each terminous offering a new beginning, and their funny wormholes of color leading back and into themselves. Science fiction could be an obvious association in that the shapes, the ordered matrix and intense colors work to create their own odd universe. Burke constructs a sense of warped dimensionality and movement through his use of complimentary colors and through his superb technique. In the epic and painstakingly detailed *I Want You To Want Me* (2003), colors are positioned very deliberately and in accordance with the movement of the painting. Color is a catalyst for mutability, accelerating the undulating dips and turns, like riding the Matterhorn inside someone else's brain. The title here is also vaguely ironic since the work could be seen as a very stylistic color-field painting, though if you probe deeper, the psychological content emerges. On the surface the painting would seem to have nothing to do with overt desire, yet it is loud, and it cries out for someone just to PLEASE NOTICE ME.