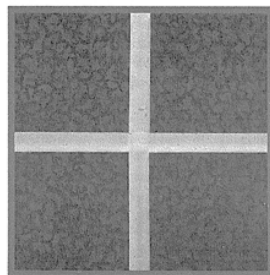
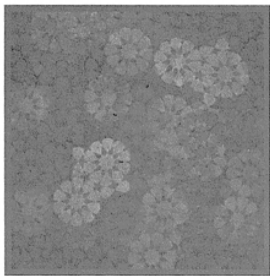


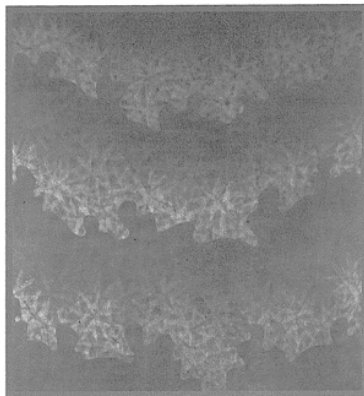
Top: Bonnie K. Neumann, *Aperture*, 2001, oil and alkyd on panel, 18" x 18"; bottom: Jamie Brunson, *Flutter*, 2002, oil, alkyd, wax on polyester over panel, 18" x 18" each, at Mills College Art Museum, Oakland.



'Surface Tension' at Mills College Art Museum

Surfaces are, in essence, superficial and external. They are boundaries, limitations, coverings, concealments, appearances. They are assumed to be what we need to get past to access something greater, more profound. They are perception's partner in deceit, affect's staunchest ally, advertising's *raison d'être*, government's Teflon, a relationship's first thirty seconds. References abound describing surface's elusive and often impotent consequence. Beauty is skin deep. Skim the surface. Skirt the issue. Skating on thin ice. By all outward appearances. The thin veneer of peace. The facade of civility. What is it about the "surface" that engenders such suspect responses? One answer is what surface supposedly keeps us from: a searching that leads to truth, reality, knowledge, meaning, understanding, enlightenment.

surface tension *n.*: a property of liquids arising from unbalanced molecular cohesive forces at or near the surface, as a result of which the surface tends to contract and has



Top: Francesca Pastine, *Curtain Painting: Silver Lining*, 2001, oil on steel, 50" x 44"; center: Reed Danziger, 99-7, 199, oil, pigment, pencil and shellac on paper on wood, 31-1/2" x 31-1/2"; bottom: Bill Bury, *Vortex*, 1997, oil and wax on Masonite, 24-3/4" x 24-3/4", at Mills College Art Museum, Oakland.

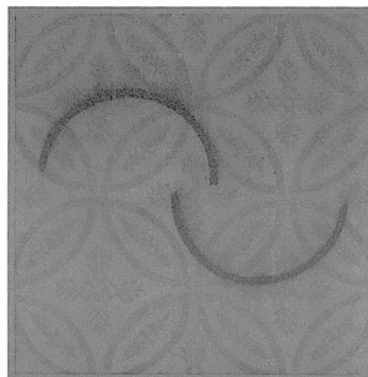
the properties resembling those of a stretched elastic membrane. (American Heritage Dictionary)

Surfaces, despite their cursory existence, are nearly always beginnings, points of departure, entrances to whatever is beneath and beyond, offering invitation or enticement to that which we might choose to examine. And here is where the tension manifests. When some previously perceived equilibrium—on the surface of things—meets an opposing condition that creates an "uneasy suspense" of judgment. *Surface Tension*, at Mills College Art Museum, approached this dilemma with solutions offered by seven Bay Area painters: Jamie Brunson, Bill Bury, Reed Danziger, Susan Dory, Bonnie Neumann, Francesca Pastine

and Roy Tomlinson. Individually, best at examining and provoking the show's titled premise were the paintings of Brunson, Dory, Neumann and Danziger.

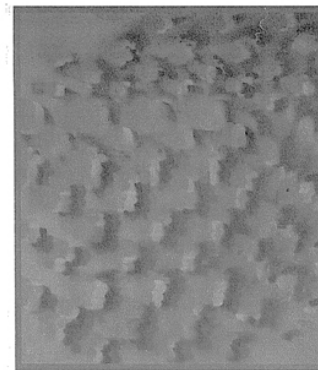
Brunson's work—oil and alkyd (some with wax) on polyester over panel—was a subtle seduction of repetitious patterns existing within an atmosphere of opaque film. Of particular note was the tone on tone mustard yellow *Shimmer*—Malevich-like with its sleight-of-hand play of almost imperceptible resonance between color and form. Dory's enamel on wood paintings presented both insinuation and illusion, suggesting abstracted, topographical mappings as well as the quirky, chaotic movement over time of linearly connected forms. Neumann's oil and alkyd on wood pieces offered, for want of a better word, a "buzzy" emphasis. The complexity of her rosette pattern prints exuded an intense in and out of focus quality, particularly the gold *Secunda Materia 9* and the purple *Secunda Materia 12*.

It was, however, Danziger's multimedia paintings—oil, graphite, pigment, shellac on paper mounted on wood—that I found most intriguing. Though this work expanded rather than contracted, it captured most of *Surface Tension's* explicit definition: unbalanced molecular cohesive forces at or near the surface. Each piece was a big bang constellation of playfully curvilinear, floral and geometric shapes and forms. Each painting's surface



was intensely and imaginatively occupied, leaving little room for the eyes to breathe or rest in one place. Every element was deliberately painted or drawn, even after seemingly unconscious consideration of placement.

As an exhibition, the forty-eight works covered a menagerie of formal



Above: Susan Dory, *pink*, 2001, enamel panel, 38" x 34"; below: Roy Tomlinson, *Untitled (17.04)*, 2001, oil and alkyd on canvas, 32" x 24", at Mills College Art Museum, Oakland.



considerations, in relationships confrontational as well as supportive. Accounted for but—and fortunately—not always present in each artist's work were the relationships between field/ground, chaos/order, pattern/abstraction, ornament/decoration, deliberate/accidental, 2D/3D and symmetry/distortion. Each painter attempted to deal honestly with the demands of the two-dimensional surface while at the same time realizing surface is there to have something done with it, whether decorated or manipulated. The less successful occupied surface and space for the sake of surface and space. The successful created, as

Neumann noted of her work, "oscillating space" which gave back energy and engendered curiosity.

—Sandy Thompson

Surface Tension: Pattern and Ornament in Contemporary Painting closed March 10 at Mills College Art Museum, Oakland.

Sandy Thompson is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.