

world of art

A New Ease and Grace from Debra Yates

By Hal Bromm

You have seen Debra Yates' work even if you haven't been to an art gallery. The multi-talented Yates is an energetic designer who creates stunningly crisp interiors and gardens, a ceramicist whose exterior mosaics adorn many a Key West wall and an abstract painter whose newest works on plywood, paper and canvas are now on view at Lucky Street Gallery.

Debra Yates' mosaics grace a seawall at Smathers Beach and a resort in Jamaica; her commissions include a mural at Miami Airport and countless gardens around town. Yates' works hang at a Tavernier sheriff's station, the Key West ferry terminal and at Orlando's Millennium Mall. A park project for the city of Palm Desert includes mosaic benches. Sculpture Key West exhibitions have shown her work.

A native Conch, Yates has studied and travelled widely, from New York to Italy to Brazil. She claims inspiration from her mentor, one of the world's most revered landscape architects, the late Brazilian artist Roberto Burle Marx, saying "he is with me in all of my work every day."

Yates is approaching her paintings with a sense of release and freedom, perhaps the reverse approach that she has brought to her designs, which seem disciplined and taut. Often approaching works as assemblages or constructions, she has incorporated diverse nontraditional



Untitled 2009.



Untitled diptych 2009.

materials into her paintings and drawings such as wood, bamboo and other, more unusual objects. Combined with a variety of shapes — circles, squares, diagonal

lines and related architectural elements — her earlier works were heavily structured. That style has begun to give way to a new lightness.

Yates avoids sketches or even preconceived ideas for her paintings. She says she has "no idea what I am going to do or how the work should look." For her, each

painting is an "evolution," creating what she hopes will be a "balanced, rhythmic, harmonious composition." Accepting that every piece won't always work, she is a good editor and able self-critic. Lately she has been "painting on the floor" to give herself freedom to move, to create a more fluid line. Filled with ebullient swashes of color and a newly found sense of space and air, the most successful of her new works have a spontaneous freedom and looseness. Feeling less tight and controlled, these pictures appear more buoyant and fluid.

Yates' show includes new pieces painted on canvas, paper and even plywood. While the white grounds of the canvas paintings are open and expansive, in the plywood pictures the surface texture and wood graining become part of the painting, usually to good effect. The juxtaposition of the raw plywood creates a tension and interaction with the artist's applied materials — acrylic paint, oil stick, graphite and more.

A group of paintings from her "Black Bamboo Series," not shown previously in Key West, are on view here with her new work. The bamboo pieces offer a look at an earlier sensibility that shows a more programmed approach. Her new pieces, featuring more paint and less applied materials, offer spontaneous gestures that are more open and exuberant, reflecting perhaps a personal view that is both engaging and welcome.