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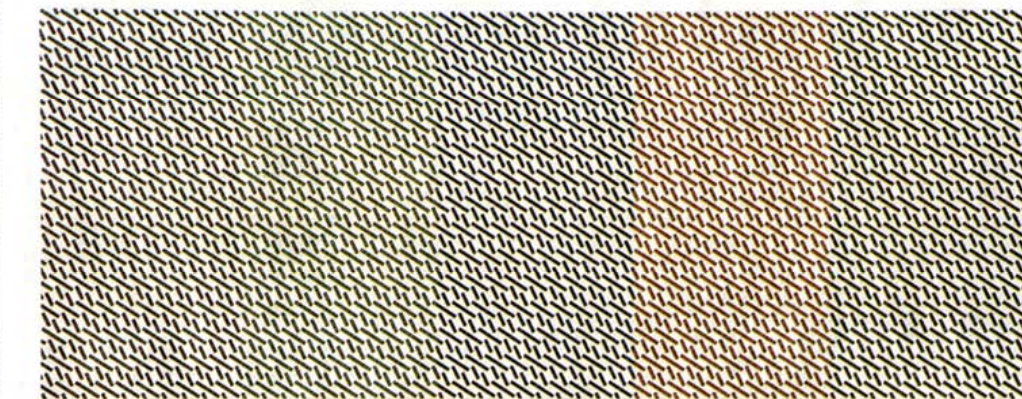
A pattern and a potency develop

By HOLLY MYERS
Special to *The Times*

The nine paintings in John M. Miller's "Now and Then" at Margo Leavin Gallery span 20 years, from 1986 to 2006, but you wouldn't know it from looking at them. If the show can be considered a survey, it is a survey of an extraordinarily concentrated career. Indeed, the only obvious change to have occurred over those two decades is a shift in palette from what looks like white (sometimes off-white) to what looks like black (sometimes very dark blue, green or red).

In every other aspect, the paintings are virtually identical: the same, wallpaper-like motif—a dizzying pattern of slightly skewed diagonal bars—rendered in the same clean, hand-painted manner, on the same shade of raw canvas, in some variation of the same dimensions (square or rectangular, sometimes in multiple panels).

An artist who relies on so few elements had better be masterful in his handling of them, and that Miller is. The show is basically flawless: nary a smudge, nary a slip, and—most impressively—nary a dull moment. Be-



'BANG': John M. Miller used optical contradictions to create an uninterrupted pattern that subtly shifts from black to green to blue to red to black. The 20-foot-by-7½-foot work, made from acrylic and resin on raw canvas, is the centerpiece of the show at Margo Leavin.

tween the fine technical execution and a meticulous balance of formal tensions—tonal, graphic and compositional—the works have a mysterious potency, each quivering at its own frequency against the white wall, creating a steady and weirdly hypnotic visual drone throughout the gallery.

The show's centerpiece, installed directly opposite the front door, is a massive, five-paneled work appropriately titled "Bang." Seven and a half feet tall and nearly 20 feet long, the piece is covered in uninterrupted pat-

tern that at a glance looks black but actually shifts subtly from one panel to the next: black to green to blue to red to black. The work is a tangle of optical contradictions: a single, fixed horizontal bar that breaks down into five softly pulsating vertical bars, then disintegrates at close range into a slew of tiny diagonal bars. It is soothingly stable, even serene in its monumentality, yet vertiginous and agitated in its detail. This and two single-paneled accompanying works are the most recent in the show, all dated 2006. The side gallery in-

cludes three smaller works from the mid-1990s. One is a single panel of black (or dark gray) pattern; the other two are diptychs pairing one black-on-white panel and one white-on-white panel. The three works from the 1980s, in the front gallery, are all white (or cream) on white.

In a world dominated by the consumerist principles of distraction, novelty, variety and convenience, there's something touching, even admirable about the repetition of so focused and meticulous an act: the application of a small bar of solid color

to the surface of raw canvas. And Miller has perfected it. But like so much work developed out of the minimalist enterprise in the last 30 years, it presents itself as a closed system, detached from human concerns, with access depending largely on sympathy toward an indoctrinated notion of optical purity. The primary payoff for gaining admission is the experience of a kind of sensory hum, which can be intriguing, even stimulating, but doesn't penetrate deeply and isn't especially sustaining.

The news release describes the paintings as "urgent," which is surprisingly apt, but one can't help wondering: to what end?