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JOE ZUCKER

Plunder From 1977 to 2008

Nyehaus

15 Gramercy Park South

Through Saturday

In lieu of the museum retrospective it deserves, Joe Zucker's eccentric Process-Pop painting career has been emerging one gallery exhibition at a time. The latest, "Plunder," unearths some of his best works: a fiendishly cheerful series of images made from 1977 to 1979. In them Mr. Zucker used his signature cotton balls dipped in a pigmented acrylic called Rhoplex, which he squashed onto canvas to approximate brush strokes.

Here they twist and turn like a kind of windswept mosaic. The pitch and yaw fits the seagoing subject: pirate-ship battles, a theme not unusual, as Mr. Zucker has noted, in paper placemats for children. A seductive Rococo palette (give or take a few black Jolly Rogers) adds to the sense of lightness, as does Mr. Zucker's deft stretching of the cotton balls to outline his cartoonish forms. Water splashes, sails fill, smoke puffs, cannon balls plop. Taste is banished; beauty is not.

Other works exemplify Mr. Zucker's latest excursions in painting, although they might also be new pieces by the Italian artist Nicolo De Maria, with their pure colors, small shapes and sense of inter-galactic space. The main news from these scroll-like works, painted on heavy paper, is that Mr. Zucker is exploiting both sides of his surface (back as well as front) and using a paintbrush, perhaps for the first time since graduate school. In "Cannonballs" he creates a carpetlike, walk-on painting by weaving together scrolls. An earlier interest in weaving and in the physical givens of painting — woven (cotton) canvas, for example — is what led him to cotton balls in the first place. Mr. Zucker's art is as consistent as it is restless and perverse.

ROBERTA SMITH