

# Review

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

October 1, 1997

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## Exhibitions

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### Gregory Johnston

Paintings

Stephen Haller Gallery through

October 28

BY J. BOWYER BELL

**T**HIS IS GREGORY Johnston's debut, his first display in the big time and the work is *BIG TIME*: a flash hit — elegant, highly finished, novel and spectacular.

Essentially Johnston melds the concerns of abstract paintings with traces of calligraphic symbols — letters which shimmer across the surfaces, mean something or everything, not purely abstract, but divorced from convention, from real words or the real world. There is a touch of Rome, not the real Rome, but that of shadows and light and recollection, the residue of all Romes. The surface — as might be expected with any work displayed by Stephen Haller — is glorious, almost too luscious. And yet it is not the parts that charm, the odd, muted colors, the all but perfect placement of line and action, and the dream quality of paintings from elsewhere arriving with but trace elements of an old and wiser culture, but the totality of the impact. They draw the eye, fill the room, fill the mind as well as the eye.

These works, large and small — and the small are deeply intense — are for reflection, a contemplation heightened by the zing and tingle of work well done and unexpected, work which is easy to recall, easy to recognize but hard to describe. Nothing is totally new, nothing is aggressive or clanging, no grit or grind or strident, and yet nothing sits too easily. They are easy paintings to like, hard to define, easy to go back to again and again.

How long do "agains" last? How long can elegance please? How will Johnston look tomorrow? Who knows? What is easy to know is that the first look at Gregory Johnston is not going to be the last. At twenty-eight all sorts of options are open: more content or less; more grit or elegance teased into baroque; more subject or less — or perhaps just more and more of these wonderful paintings sent to us via Haller, not from another time and place, but a painter whose objects radiate not just charm but substance. A really neat opening — and just perhaps an opening into the future for us all.