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ART IN REVIEW; Mark Francis

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Mark Francis's paintings are at least superficially beautiful; whether they are profoundly so is less certain. A 36-year-old Londoner having his third solo show in New York, Mr. Francis makes spare yet sumptuous abstractions consisting of flat fields of glossy, saturated color and distributions of spots, lines or grids. (Paintings in previous shows were restricted to a grisaille palette, as are two canvases in this exhibition.)

The compositions derive from photomicrographs, which adds a conceptual dimension; they evoke thoughts of chromosomes, viruses or cancer cells, and this creates tension between the lush surface and an implied, possibly scary underworld.

In Primitive 2, intensely blue, neatly smeared spots are scattered over an incandescent orange field; it is hard to tell whether the spots are random or in some grid, and this ambiguous pattern combines with the blue-orange contrast to produce a flickering perceptual experience. At the same time the spots and the heightened artificiality of the colors suggest the machine-aided view of some kind of genetic or microbial state or process.

In Growth, a lime green field is almost completely covered by chains of black spots, like bacteria proliferating in a petri dish. The techno-biological aspect of Mr. Francis's work shouldn't be overstated, though. He seems more genuinely interested in the formal possibilities suggested by photomicrography. What you have in his work is more polished design than deep vision.