



Carl Ostendarp
Elizabeth Dee Gallery,
through May 8 (see Chelsea).

Displaying his familiar distillation of minimalist abstraction and cartoons, Carl Ostendarp uses two bodies of work by Joan Miro as the conceptual underpinning for his current show. The grand scale of the "Mural Paintings" corresponds - to the inch - to Miro's 1962 series in which traces of pictorial information float in empty color fields. Ostendarp similarly adds bits of his signature Seussian detail to vast, flat swaths of sourball-hued paint. Conflating Miro's "Constellation" series from the early 1940s with actual astronomical constellations, six smaller paintings in the back gallery depict jaunty stars on aqueous, scrubby grounds. Part formal exercise, part wisecrack, Ostendarp's figure-ground relationships showcase two distinct visions of the cosmic void: one a chalky-bright vacuum; the other, a gestural nighttime soup.

While Dr. Seuss used humorous narratives and deft illustration to allegorize social issues, Ostendarp has no such ambitions. Instead, his merging of empty blanks (inherited from Barnett Newman and Robert Ryman) and whimsical image-flotsam feels tactical, as the figural snippets - Lorax furz, Sneetch-belly stars - comically undermine the hand-me-down historical romanticism of the vacant backgrounds.

But divining Ostendarp's ultimate purpose becomes anticlimactic, since he provides so few visual clues. He seems to suggest that painting consists of little more than intellectual strategies. While obviously referential, his allusions and in no way reverential and thus do not read as influences. Rather, they function as parts of a whole, cleverly assembled like pieces in a puzzle. The message of this playful show, delivered with a wink, seems to be: The joke's on you. -Jennifer Coates



Carl Ostendarp, *Mural Painting II Green*, 2004.