"SoHo: Provocations, Reflections and Abstractions"

From historic to spanking new, intimate to spectacular and minimalist to surrealistic, the art on view in the galleries of SoHo and the lower West Side covers a lot of territory.

A gorgeous, museum-like exhibition of works by members of the Zero Group, a loose association of 1950s-era European avant-gardists, is at Sperone Westwater, while giant, socially provocative paintings of young men in repose by Khloe Wiley are at Deitch Projects.

"Looking Back," at White Columns, offers one curator’s view of New York art in 2007, and "Perverted by Theater" at Apexart celebrates historic impulses in contemporary art.

For quieter viewing Tracy Williams, Ltd, has elegant abstractions on small sheets of colored paper by Ernst Caramelle, and Janet Borden displays cut-paper silhouettes by the multimedia artist Robert Cumming.

Peter Freeman has minimalist works from the 1960s by the German artist Charlotte Posenenske. The flowerstone has creepy-crawly fantasy sculptures involving insects, taxidermic animals and ugly fairies by the British artist Tessa Farmer.

Beautifully arranged is a mid-century series of small rooms at Sperone Westwater, "Zero in New York" features works dating from 1957 to 1966 by about 20 Europeans, including seminal names like Piero Manzoni, Arman and Jean Tinguely. Founded in the late 1950s by two Germans, Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, the Zero Group rejected personal expressionism in favor of radically new forms of abstraction.

The exhibition is a fascinating window onto a time when progressive artists believed they could start from ground zero, as it were, and it includes some exceedingly attractive objects, resembling Brancusi sculptures with electric lights built in. Piene’s lamp sculptures are worth a visit by themselves. Busby constructions of polished aluminum and textured glass by Nanda Vigo are sleekly crystalline. And Yves Klein’s panels covered by colored, granular pigments are vividly sumptuous.

(Speaking of important Europeans, there is a retrospective exhibition of works by the Italian artist Carol Rama at Maccarone. Ms. Rama scandalized the Italian art world with her erotic watertowers in the 1960s, and she went on to explore a dizzying variety of modes, from geometric abstraction to autobiographical symbolism, over the course of her six-decade career.)

That the Zero Group’s back-to-basics ethos lives on is evident in Tracy Williams’s show of works by Mr. Caramelle, who creates elegant abstractions using a technique so simple a child could do it. He partly covers sheets of ordinary colored construction paper with straight-edged edges of paper in exposing them to sunlight for weeks or months and then removes the masking. The geometric compositions of different shades of one color have a beguiling luminosity and an understated playfulness.

For another creative use of paper, see "Cronotopo" (1963) by Nanda Vigo at Sperone Westwater.

Robert Cumming’s exhibition “Recycle” at Deitch Projects is an exceptionally inventive painter, sculptor and photographer. Mr. Cumming has created a series of intricate, faux-Venetian silhouette pictures cut by hand from sheets of paper, packed with eccentric storytelling and intriguing symbolism, they were inspired by a visit to La Recoleta, a vast cemetery in Buenos Aires.

A more severely purposeful ambition animates "Prototypes for Human Production," a show of Minimalist works dating from 1965 to 76 by Charlotte Posenenske (1930-1985), a German sculptor and conceptualist, at Peter Freeman. The works in this exhibition examinegies geometric forms made of folded sheet metal and painted in black and primary-colored enamels — were intended to be mass-produced, sold at cost and displayed in public. Postenenske stops making art in 1969, when she concluded that it could not make enough political difference in the world, but her sculptures still have a bright Pop-Art-like presence. Formal rigor and moral rectitude are less prevalent in art today — judging, as Continued on Page S2