
ART IN REVIEW

James Barsness

*George Adams
41 West 57th Street
Through Nov. 13*

Working on canvases covered in rice paper, James Barsness, a resident of Georgia, makes elaborately detailed paintings that have the look and physical quality of greatly enlarged antique manuscript illuminations. Divinely ordered medieval cosmology meets God-forsaken modernity to mildly comic effect. In one case, Mr. Barsness has painted a mythic stack of animals — a tortoise on which stands an elephant topped by a ball of smaller animals — on a field of artificially aged bingo cards. In "Fox Hollow Road," a toylike suburban neighborhood is envisioned as a spherical world floating against a grid of stars. (Some of the houses have roofs that are actual little books that can be opened to reveal small, quirky works on paper.)

Mr. Barsness's pictures are entertaining, but one feels that his imagery could be more pointedly satiric or visionary; one wants something perhaps more Boschian. As it stands, the show's best piece is compelling more for formal reasons: "Little Gods" is a nine-foot-high cartoon of an Oriental rug, a precisely limned, symmetrical design of vines, flowers and goofy, humanoid or bestial faces. The delightfully playful, complex and sensuous patterning is enthralling to behold.

KEN JOHNSON