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ART IN REVIEW

Jenny Holzer: 'Endgame' By KEN JOHNSON

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Skarstedt Gallery 20 East 79th Street, Manhattan

Through April 7



32 oil on linen 80 x 62 inches, 2012

This bluntly provocative show presents the first paintings Jenny Holzer has made since her student years in the mid-1970s. They resemble her well-known silkscreened copies of censored military and intelligence documents related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the treatment of detainees at Guantánamo Bay.

But here the redacted areas are painted to resemble types of Modernist abstraction. One work, in white, black and red, refers to Kazimir Malevich. Others allude to Minimalists like Ad Reinhardt and Robert Ryman, and still others invoke Color Field painting. Uncensored text is replicated in gray letters on white backgrounds, and the top of every painting has the heading "Top Secret." On different canvases, you can read a description of waterboarding, guidelines for sedating detainees and a reference to "pain that is difficult for the individual to endure."

The equation of redaction and abstraction shifts the focus from government doings to conventions of art. In essence, these works accuse nonrepresentational painting of covering up and blinding artists and viewers to real-world problems.

The effectiveness of Holzer's indictment of aesthetics-first art depends on survivor guilt. It is hard to enjoy fine art in a fancy gallery when you are reminded that people are suffering elsewhere. But it is irritating to be hammered by such black-and-white righteousness, even if — or, perhaps, especially if — you agree with Ms. Holzer's crusade against government-sponsored cruelty. "It's complicated" may be a scoundrel's defense, but art without complexity risks defeating its own purpose.