Conventional wisdom has it that Wendy White has been emerging for a while. Her recent solo exhibition Up w/ Briquette featured playful, uninhibited, strident, single and multi-paneled paintings by an artist who has something engaging to paint about the urban setting (Leo Koenig Inc.: April 23—May 22, 2010). These works are structured around the forms of letters, leaving most of the remaining surface of the canvases abstract. Real or painted borders—both horizontal and vertical—complement the main action of her canvases. These recent works are more subtle than her earlier series. They rely less on the spray can's clear stroke, favoring the washes of the spray gun. She regularly types areas of her surfaces and uses cutout letters. Dippy areas of color meld with transitions from acid fluorescence to bare canvas with much grey and black. The meaning of the words is usually ignored, leaving them to function as structural signposts rather than conceptual markers. Words exist as retinal memories of the city's complicated face.

Invention is everywhere in evidence in White's paintings. Conceptually strong, this exhibition features the experiential detritus of someone who is crystallizing her vision. She has figured out how to blend urban detritus with the street, sky, crazy mixed-up words, and images over bricks and billboards in order to craft objects that recall the experience of being in the city. Yet, she keeps getting called an upstart.

White's paintings are exuberant. Take Pad, 2010, for example: the word “pad” appears in reverse across its surface, though the artist doesn't always make her titular words completely readable. A grey spray-paint field and spray-gun work surround the taped-off letters. Narrow fluorescent trapezoids contrast with the foggy winter sky of these grays and blacks. The fading and gradation suggest intangible and intense transitions between sunlight and night. Bare canvas borders the painting's right side as an added snap—or bonus.

You can lose yourself in the fading fluorescent edge of Breeder, 2010. You can also see the scrawls of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Joan Snyder in its grey field. More poignantly, however, you wonder at the way White materializes Allen Ginsberg's HOWL by calling up urban life—“angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night.” The fluorescence is kept in check. Sometimes, White actually covers it with a grey wash. At other times, she leaves it in evidence. Here, it reads as playful. The title appears reversed in the grey field, occupying the painting's left vertical long side. Yet this line of cutout letters functions compositionally, not linguistically.

The eponymous painting Up w/Briquette, 2010, gives the most hope for variety in the future of painting. Mismatched panels reveal in conflauding the grid as White leaves them slightly askew for the viewer. The excess of Pop's polish is cast aside for a hewing of “bad girl-ness,” giving us graffiti and mess as a relief from “girlish” painting. Think about the painting's title: what is a briquette but a fire-starter? The artist plays on the name by mixing painted and cutout fonts and using them as structural forms, along with the shaded slashes and the narrow monochromatic passages that make up the painting's complicated surface. White has realized an original vision of uneasy contrasts. These paintings deliver the much-craved wisdom of the street wrapped in a spray-painted ribbon.

—Anne Swartz