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Stephen Mueller

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ARTNEWS

AN ARTIST SELECTS: MATTHEW WEINSTEIN IN
NEW YORK

BY *Matthew Weinstein*

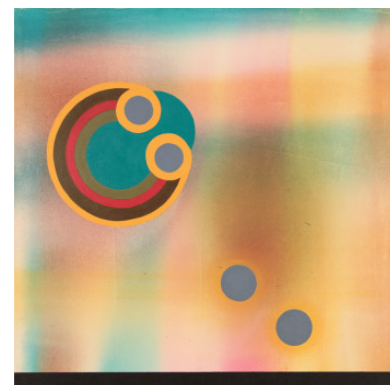
If I had a spirit animal, it would probably be a toaster. So the cloud of spiritual incense that floats around in **Stephen Mueller**'s paintings has always prevented me from enjoying them. My mind wanders when religious imagery demands to be acknowledged.

I gained a new appreciation of Mueller's work when I visited his current show at Lennon Weinberg, a survey of paintings made from 1988 to 2011, the year he died, too young, at age 63. The show charts a progression from a calligraphic yet earthy abstract illusionism to something very different: brightly colored plaids and gradients with flat shapes like fans and clouds slapped in front of them. What I love about his last paintings is their Pearl

River Department Store-ness. I'm not talking about kitsch or a kind of coded Asian-ness. I'm talking about a sense of wonder that one can only experience if one can reimagine history such that European Modernism *happened* but never *conquered*, and therefore flat things can float, optical tricks are a respectable artistic strategy, ornament has not been repressed, and items like cocktail parasols, origami cranes, paper poppies and painted fans are things not to be judged but to be wondered at, and desired. Mueller made paintings loaded with optical tricks and references to new age and ancient spirituality that are full of beauty, painterly logic and internal tension.

My earlier mistake, I understood when I took in this survey of his work, was to think of Mueller as singular, an anomaly among his 90s peers, abstract painters like Gary Stephan, Ross Bleckner, Shirley Kaneda, Jonathan Lasker, Bill Komoski, Andrea Belag, Karen Davie, John Zinsser, James Nares, Lydia Dona, Fabienne Marcaccio and David Reed. It is tempting to think of all of these painters as singular, but they had shared interests. They often created flotation by placing a flat shape in front of a blur or a stain. They tended to avoid the grandiose gesture in favor of modesty, looking for influence to Arthur Dove and other quiet examples among abstract modernists. They schematized gesture in more willful and intuitive ways than were de rigueur on the campaign trails of the formal painters of the '70s. Styles and artists that had been condemned to death— Abstract Illusionism, Jules Olitski, Larry Poons— were granted parole by the '90s abstractionists; Roy Lichtenstein's brushstroke became a mascot for Team Painting. '90s abstraction didn't wrestle with the demons of conceptualism; it preferred to play with those demons and back off if things got too rough, and out of that wise approach came flashes of brilliance, and beauty. Looking past the new age imagery, Mueller's work wasn't idiosyncratic; it was very much of its moment.

Today, Mueller's use of painting as a series of special effects looks prescient, a foreshadowing of the virtual representation of depth in computer rendering and animation. I recommend spending time with these paintings. Take *Rising Sign*, from 2003: What is it? It's a floating aggregate of intersecting rings with grey, eye-like circles hovering in front of a blurry plaid field. Our animal brains tell us that two dots in a circle is a face. But when two dots are not in a circle, they are just dots. That's good enough for me.



Rising Sign by Stephen Mueller.

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