

Stephen Mueller at Bill Maynes - art exhibition - Brief Article

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Stephen Mueller has always been something of a protean abstract painter, but this solo show marks an important watershed in his work. Gone is the atmospheric mix of Color Field painting and geometric abstraction that he has practiced for some 20 years. Replacing it are crisper, grid-oriented compositions, no less exuberant and mysterious despite their somewhat systematic format.

In every piece Mueller pits foreground against background, as though the two were created with totally different logic. But that's part of what gives the work its charge. The backgrounds consist of wide grids of color, brushy, often transparent, like wet checkered cloths. In the foreground are squares of bright, opaque color (think of greatly enlarged pixels on a computer screen) composed into oddly shaped, enigmatic silhouettes. Mueller doesn't deviate from this stylistic formula; instead, he varies the colors and the shapes in a kind of meditation on contrast. What results can be so optically challenging that at times the painting itself seems to be floating off the wall.

Hot Seat 2, a square canvas with a background grid of vibrant red and blue, features a vaguely towerlike shape (a bit like those Day-Glo castles you find inside fish tanks). We know the tower is in front of the grid--but just barely. That hot red background asserts itself aggressively and plunges our eye into a netherworld where positive and negative space constantly flicker back and forth. In Walls Can Fall, an irregular form that looks something like a pelvis bone hovers just off-center before a pale blue grid. Walls is a tamer canvas than most in terms of hue--this time the grid looks a bit like gingham--but still full of odd contrasts (metallic bronze near pink and green, for instance). Perhaps, with all these interwoven bands of color, Mueller is making reference to the warp and woof of the canvas itself. If that is indeed the case, viewers might well feel they've passed through this magnified weave into a shallow "Flatland" (referring to the 1884 book by Edwin Abbott) type of universe, where color and light are subject to an intuitive, dreamlike logic.

The artist, long interested in Eastern philosophy, bases those odd shapes of pixilated color on the attributes carried or worn by Buddha and bodhisattva figures (thunderbolts, mirrors, prayer beads); but he alters and abstracts them so thoroughly that even an expert familiar with this imagery would be hard-pressed to puzzle them out. Since these symbols obviously carry some weight for the artist, it's funny seems to render them weightless and immaterial. He prefers to keep their messages of transcendence a secret, dissolving them instead into the sensuous play of surface tension and optical illusion.

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