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## Stephen Mueller

**Maine, Stephen. NYFA Current, April 2010.**

**[http://www.nyfa.org/nyfa\\_current\\_detail.asp?id=17&fid=1&curid=845](http://www.nyfa.org/nyfa_current_detail.asp?id=17&fid=1&curid=845)**



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In the mid-1980s, new to New York and eager to decode its contemporary art scene, I relished the exhibitions of Stephen Mueller’s paintings mounted at the Annina Nosei Gallery. His large, freakishly gestural canvases pitted snaking, thickly applied brushstrokes against atmospheric grounds. The exaggerated theatricality of those paintings—not Neo-Expressionist, not Neo-Geo, not apparently keyed to French critical theory—was out of step with prevailing trends, and rooted in painting’s history. Therein lay their allure: their whacked-out romanticism was so wrong it was right.

Twenty-five years later, Mueller’s paintings look vastly different: smaller, tighter, more conceptually focused. As ever, they deal with the fundamental painterly concerns of color, space, rhythm, and the paradox of movement suggested by inert materials. Fourteen luminous canvases were recently on view at the Charles B. Benenson Visitors Center and Gallery at The Fields Sculpture Park of Omi International Arts Center, in Ghent, NY. The simply titled “14 Small-Format Paintings,” curated by the Park’s director, Bill Maynes, includes work from 2002 to 2009. All are square, acrylic on linen, untitled, and all but two are 24 by 24 inches.

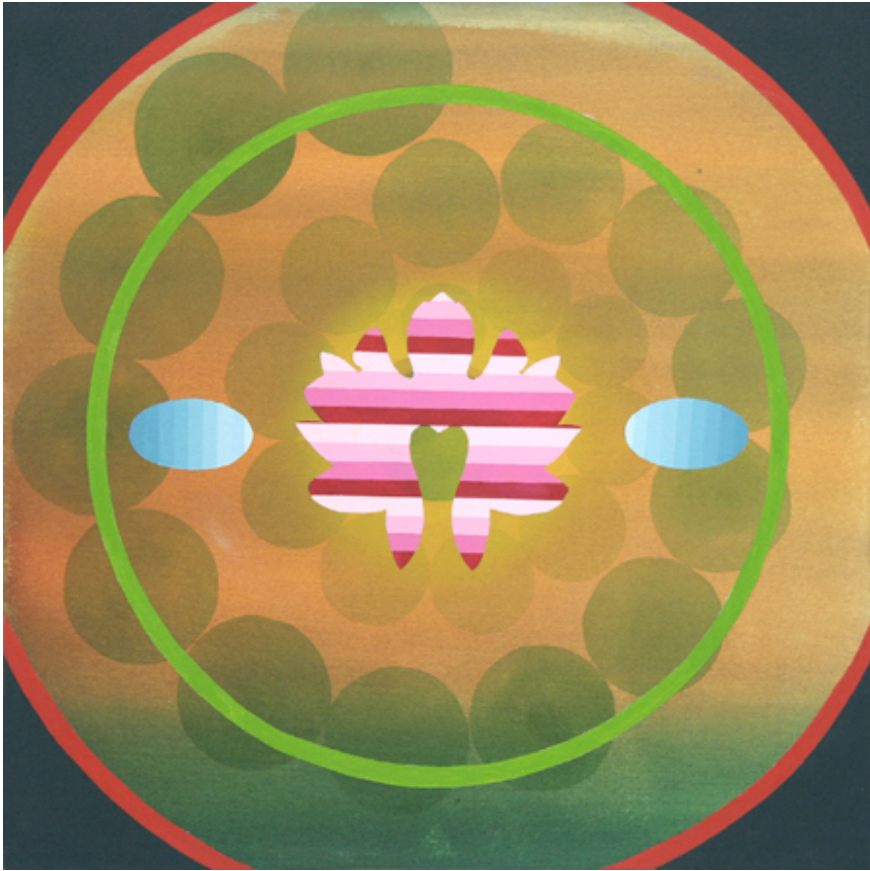


Stephen Mueller  
*Untitled* (2004)  
 Acrylic on linen

The earlier paintings reflect Mueller's involvement with a motif that can, for the sake of convenience, be referred to as "plaid," though that term doesn't do justice to the subtleties of his palette and touch. In one, three hard-edged shapes, possibly referring to vessels or hats, drift in an extravagant chromatic expanse of space consisting of washes of red, violet, orange, and yellow. At the lower left, the finely striped silhouette of a flattened dome enters the picture from below; in the middle distance, a cobalt blue shape recalling ceremonial or religious headwear is crisscrossed with a plaid of coral pink. At the upper left, striped in aqua and red, is a small sphere truncated at top and bottom to yield the suggestion of a vase or pot.

The painting recalls the abrupt rift between figure and ground of Mueller's canvasses from the '80s. It is also the only work in the exhibition that relies heavily on Western spatial conventions such as vertical perspective, by virtue of which smaller pictorial elements placed toward the top of the frame read as distant, while larger elements placed lower appear closer. Rather, most of the paintings are more Asian in spirit. Many are apparently influenced by Tibetan *tangka* paintings, in which groups of dieties, lamas, and other venerated beings are depicted seated on lotus flowers drifting high above the vast landscape.

The Buddhist influence extends to Mueller's vocabulary of shapes, which includes those resembling stupas, bells, daggers, and other accoutrements of Tibetan mystical practice. The plaid moves to the ground in several paintings, including one in which the pattern, in chalky pinks and blues, reads as a variegated gray from a distance (or in a photo). The main pictorial player here looks something like a candlestick or draft beer handle in lavender, studded with small diamonds in a family of tangy yellows. A few of these flecks, the same value as the lavender, buzz like lights as pairs of halo-like disks emerge from behind—one in dark green, others striped with orange and red, and with two blues. To the right is a shadowy dark blotch over which passes an unusual brushy streak of green. Along the left edge runs a column of squares alternating between olive green and, as it ascends, a gradually deepening blue. As such an inventory of pictorial elements might suggest, the paintings themselves seem like vessels containing scrupulously selected motifs.



Stephen Mueller  
*Untitled* (2009)  
 Acrylic on linen

The later paintings are configured differently, and refer directly to the mandala, a symbol of cosmic and earthly unity. In them, a region of rings or bands in limited hues surrounds a central nucleus of some kind. In one, that center, that seed, is a disk of dark orange encircled by a purple ring studded with thorns surrounded by bubble gum pink and a nebulous, but controlled, orange and blue striped ring. The corners, where the central disk doesn't fill out the square support, are a deep fuchsia. Mueller tames all this intense chroma by allowing his washy, silver-gray ground to show through interstices between the bands, giving the impression that the painting is dematerializing.

Mueller's trips to Mexico have stoked an interest in the Mexican tradition of hand-painted earthenware plates, and it's intriguing to consider the points of contact between decorative and sacred imagery: symmetry, centrality, unity.

Agricultural cultures venerate abundance, which would seem to be at odds with the Buddha's teachings. Yet Mueller attempts reconciliation in a newer painting featuring a central grape leaf, striped horizontally in red and three pinks and flanked by egg-like ovals in tints of turquoise. Green disks spiral out from behind the leaf, partially veiled by an orange wash countered by bands of red-orange and dark teal. Rather than a presence, a third mandala has a warm white void at its core where the paint has been wiped nearly clean. The flame-like contours surrounding the hub of this wheel are keyed to powder blue, lime green, and tangerine. It is sumptuous, partaking equally of stillness and motion.