

May 19, 2000

## ART IN REVIEW; Stephen Mueller

By HOLLAND COTTER

Bill Maynes Gallery  
529 West 20th Street  
Chelsea  
Through tomorrow

The times have caught up with Stephen Mueller. The kind of abstract painting he has been doing for decades turns out to have anticipated much of the work being produced by young artists now, in which notions like high and low, organic and artificial, cerebral and ornamental blend together.

Mr. Mueller's early work, with its opulent palette and soaked-in paint, cast an admiring but idiosyncratic eye on modernist predecessors like Helen Frankenthaler. A little later his forms firmed up, taking on a psychedelic spin and glow. References to Asian mysticism wove through everything, as subtle and sensuous as a Sufi chant.

The acrylic paintings in this show add new things. Versions of tantric emblems -- prayer beads, stupas, ritual instruments -- appear in silhouette, crisply resolved like computer-generated shapes. Most are composed of pixel-like grids of prismatic color, supplemented by silver and gold, and they float against wavy, soft plaidlike patterns to produce in impression of push-pull optical depth.

As in all Mr. Mueller's work, the result is mysterious without being mystifying, suave but sweet-humored, an art-savvy version of visionary. This is his first New York show in three or four years, and it's a welcome -- and prescient -- sight. HOLLAND COTTER