

Stephen Westfall

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SHARON BUTLER TWO COATS OF PAINT

Interview: Stephen Westfall in Industry City



Westfall Studio, 2015

Contributed by [Rob Kaiser-Schatzlein](#) / On a rainy day in November I visited [Stephen Westfall](#) at his Brooklyn studio. Among my young painter friends he has a reputation for being open, generous, and extremely smart, but I was still a little nervous. He warned me in advance that most of his work had been shipped to New Mexico for [an exhibition over the summer](#) and that only one painting was left in the studio. Nonetheless, when I got there, that single painting seemed to fill the whole room. His paintings comprise flat color organized in geometric shapes, replete with straight lines. The paint covers the canvas from edge to edge, and the highly saturated colors create a multiplicity of rhythms and tempos. Ultimately, the work seems playful but serious at the same time. We sat down and discussed his recent work, his friends, and his influences.

Rob Kaiser-Schatzlein: How do you start a painting?

Stephen Westfall: The difficulty in that question—and what's true for most veteran painters; I'm old enough now where

veteran is a nice way to put it—is that we are not starting paintings, we're establishing an ongoing vocabulary that is sort of morphing. Each painting is not a stand-alone, as it would be for say, a landscape painter: over here I'm looking at the city, over here I'm looking at the country, over here I'm looking at the beach and that is not the city.

You could just tell me the material beginnings, if you like.

Right, well I start with a drawing. A sequence or constellation of several variations on an idea about a pattern that is geometrically clear and locked into the borders of the canvas, even when it doesn't appear to be. A lot of work is about making it not appear like it is locked in. However with tools like [Photoshop](#), you can fix this point of measurement before you make the drawing. I still have to do everything by hand though. I don't use tape. Some people call me a [hard-edge](#) painter, but the only time I use tape is on the giant wall paintings, because you have to. But on the canvases it's all hand drawn and hand painted, the paint meets



Within You and Without You, 2008

the paint. I mix my paint up in large volumes in paper coffee cups; it's almost like a small can of paint. Every color keeps evolving because it's basic variations on my own flavor of primary and secondary and then maybe a light or dark in some colors like blue. Particularly blue. All the colors are cross-mixed with a touch of the complement of that color and a touch of white to add opacity. That is coming out of [Post-Impressionism](#) and early [Expressionist](#) and [Fauvist](#) painting. Starting with late Impressionism distilled with [Mondrian](#)-meets-[Stuart Davis](#)-meets-[Ellsworth Kelly](#). There's a real sense in my painting that I'm having a conversation with [Abstraction](#), [Minimalism](#), and [Pop](#). And memory— there's the question of how can an abstract painting have memory. Over the course of a century, it builds a memory. It's like having a conversation about painting, but not having its nostalgic invocation. It acknowledges that abstract painting is now a thing. So, paintings are not originary for me.



Scheherazade, 2013

What do you mean by that?

Like this painting, I make the drawing; an idea of pattern evolves that I have associations with, even though it is a very abstract pattern. Years ago I was known for broken grids, with twisted interstices. There was a kind of shimmy that ran through it. Basically the harlequin pattern is itself a part of a grid but I wanted the movement of the diagonal, and now they're much jazzier by leaving larger areas of white, or color.

So I've got the colors mixed up, I have a pencil, I have a big ruler, I know where the points are and I make the drawing. Then I look at the canvas and I can see it, because paintings come to me whole. Even when I was painting more singular images, I would dream them. I don't know why this is, it just is. It's partly because I see paintings in

real space, real architectural space. I don't see the studio as the place where the painting is finished; I see it finished in the place where it is installed. So I start the painting with the drawing, and then I make initials in the area where the color is going to go.

And then the color just goes in, it's as dumb as [Stella](#) was doing with his stripes. That's just the beginning, though, because you have to get a certain surface. It takes as many as eight coats of paint, and the colors subtly shift. I have a hard time getting the right concert of flavor with the color. All these colors are named: white, yellow, light blue, black, red but there are little cross mixes and compliments. That doesn't mean the yellow itself isn't going to be too cold, too warm and need adjustment--it's rarely too warm but my whole taste leads to warmth.

The white has mixtures of red, yellow, and blue in it, the red a little chromium green oxide in it plus maybe some yellow ochre, the yellow is a mixture of cad yellow light and yellow ochre and Williamsburg Provence violet red, again the warmth. The black is Ivory Black but also a black I make with Ultramarine Blue, Van Dyke Brown and Payne's grey. What's happens is that you have all the colors in all the colors, reflecting. Even the cross-mixed colors are colors from cups of previously cross-mixed colors. So the green that I put in the red has a little red--it's like a sourdough culture.

Backslopping is what they call it in fermentation.

Some of these colors have DNA that goes back years and years and years. One of the most demystifying things I ever read was something on [Bill Jensen](#). He was asking [Guy Goodwin](#), "How do you get all your colors to go together" and Goodwin "Well I just keep all my brushes in the same jar of turpentine." Well, basically that's all you have to do. So I don't start a painting, I start seven paintings, or I insert a painting into a group of paintings that is already in progress as an addendum to a conversation that is already happening. You can even see right here where I was working on designs and stuff [referring to a roll of paper about three feet across and couple feet long that looks like it was inkjet printed with myriad five by five inch designs] and applying those.

They're like sketches?

Kind of like sketches, but I always switch things up. These were actually done for potential

monotypes. And you can imagine how crazy it is to make monotypes in "hard edge." I just did a whole set for the [Brodsky Center](#). Jeez, that's another thing I did this year. I've been kicking myself for not being in the studio, but I was actually crazy in the studio through May. I am a studio creature basically, so it is unusual for me to be out of it for so long. But I have had alternate things going on, with the wall paintings and monotypes and stuff like that. Anyways, that's how I start a painting.

You're saying that it's not that one painting or one series arises from one idea, but that they all reference a larger idea that guides your work.

Yeah, every three to five years there's a real break and shift, but that doesn't mean that what I was doing before that stops. In the overlap there may be another idea. That's how it's working right now, but who knows. I'm so amazed how often so many of us can work for years and then suddenly, based on some inspiration or some point of experience, just blow everything up. In part, I think that painters are always looking for an opportunity to keep painting. That's one of the reasons why we work in series, because it allows us to paint. Because painting itself is an immensely pleasurable thing.

The tools have changed. I sometimes use Photoshop but only for getting a general idea of color distribution. Not shape distribution because that's already inherent in the grid. Also Photoshop is just measuring. I can take this whole thing and shift it sideways so that nothing lines up, according to the proportions of the rectangle, and maybe tilt it a little bit so it torques. That's a really queasy, crazy thing but you don't know where the points are. So Photoshop will just go like "Oh the points here, and the points here" and this is how many centimeters or how many inches. Once you have your basic outline you can use your ruler again and do the same intersections.



Reclining Harlequin, 2015

The broken harlequin grid paintings have an element that is a new development inside this developing language of my painting, which I am looking forward to pursuing. Though right now I am kind of locked in to this sense of torqued space. That's the space that is straight edged in some sort of way but tilting or careening ever so slightly off the frame. Implying a continuing plane that goes much larger than the frame. The ones with the horizontal lines that I showed you-- which I call *Reclining Harlequin*, which is one of my favorite titles, it's so stupid--both those paintings are quite large paintings and this plane is not as locked in as it is here [the painting in the studio], although I really love this painting. This other thing is interesting me too. I think I yearn for a little bit more free-handed stuff. But I don't know how architecturally decisive that would be.

If it stopped being architecturally decisive would you be less interested?

I don't know, I just don't want to veer too close to the lyrical, I'm so lyrical. In general, and I'm deeply suspicious of my motivation for setting up a funny kind of narrative. A painter I really love is [Kimber Smith](#), but then I also really love [Blinky Palermo](#) or [Mary Heilmann](#). Mary Heilmann is somewhere between Kimber Smith and Blinky Palermo in a funny way.

How do you know when you're done?

When there is a kind of creaminess to the light and to the way the colors are fitting together. Which also corresponds to a fullness of surface. And that's when I know I'm done.

You start looking for it when you are around eight coats?

I start looking for it when I'm at three, knowing that it's not going to happen until at least five and at eight I'm tearing my hair out. But I'm also listening to really good music on my iPod and having good coffee from downstairs. I have three studios that are all about the same size. This studio is dedicated to the larger painting. There's a studio at my loft which I'm using for gouache and small paintings and then there's a studio upstate in my little country cottage near [Bard](#), but I'm only up there in the summer time. I don't have a [baronial castle](#) like [Baselitz](#). The work is kind of divided from itself. But

I'm usually pretty good at retaining the tactile memory of what's happening from one place to another.

Like an organ transplant courier, ferrying ideas between venues.

Yeah, packing the little paintings on ice and to bring them to the studio where the big paintings are and graft the idea on.

When's the best time to work?

I tend to work late at night because there's just less distractions. During the day I want to be out looking at work and I want to be in daylight. Probably like anyone else with seasonal affective disorder. But when it's crunch time I'm happy to be working around the clock. When I was in Rome making a show at the [Academy](#) of wall paintings and canvases I worked around the clock for a week, basically in my pajamas on the scaffold at seven in the morning, having not going to bed the night before.

So whatever it takes.

Whatever it takes, but I'm getting older and I am appreciating the value of working more in daylight. Then there's also school. I teach at [Rutgers](#) during the year and Bard during the summer. Doing a little less at Bard, I've been there a very long time but still I'm very committed to my students. So, like any family man I have to work around things.

Anyways, night is better because it's quieter but it also has its disadvantages because you turn into a zombie after a while. I mean, everybody should be in bed by one.

What's most recent painting that you've done?

This year I've done something like eight or nine shows, so that's why there's only one painting here right now. And it's part of a series that came out of a giant wall painting I did two years ago for [Art OMI](#).

The most recent stuff has been on many material fronts: paintings, wall paintings, textiles, accordion books, and some things that have ended up being sculpture. Obviously I'm a lifer as a painter, but since 2007 I've been doing wall paintings, which sort of puts architecture into material play. And I've always been interested in how painting interacts with architecture.

I've been doing these Harlequin diamonds [showing me pictures of a wall painting on his iPhone]. This is from a show of paintings I had up at Art OMI two summers ago. What I did for the first time was to open up spaces in the Harlequin grid. Now instead of a forty-five foot wall painting, this painting is part of a series where I've done the same thing.



Canterbury, 2014, latex on wall, 180 x 540", Art OMI

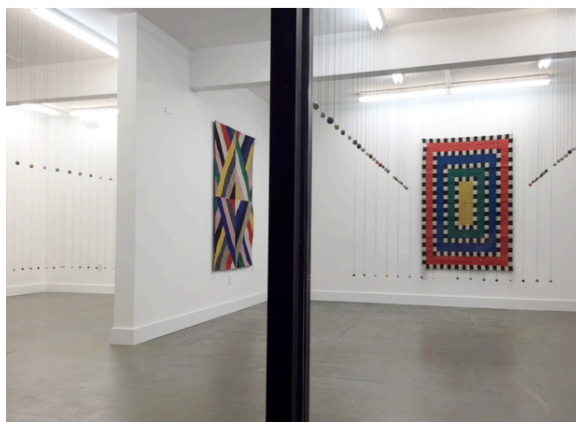
Is this painting based on a section of the wall painting?

No no, it's based on the idea of opening up the white space. It turns out that it does really interesting things. The white space becomes quite figurative, rather like [Cezanne's bathers](#) or [Matisse's Dancers in the Barnes Mural](#). They are in a show right now in Santa Fe and these will be part of my show at [Lennon Weinberg](#). This painting in the studio is part of that group.

These were all in the studio up until May, when they got shipped out to New Mexico. I'm also doing tapestries and rugs--they're in this show at [The](#)

[Suburban](#) [showing me pictures on his phone] with [Polly Apfelbaum's](#) ceramic beads. We just installed it, and it's a stunningly beautiful show. Polly and I are old friends; we set each other off in this interesting way. Since '82 we've been calling each other then emailing each other then texting

each other like three times a day, like "Have you seen this? Have you seen this?" and I am not exaggerating. I think that part of it is that we're both interested in a sensate semiotics of visual components. Meaning things that are like signs but are not language, they lean back toward the visual, the perceptual, the phenomenological. And indexical color and the indexing of materials in some way. So color as tactile color. Once you register color as tactile you register it through other senses, like taste.



Installation view at The Suburban, Westfall & Apfelbaum

Indexical in what way?

Like a making a chart. Primary, secondary, and hitting those points, kind of a like diagram. Then having it being so much more than that. Coming back to the specificity of sensual experience, so the diagram is only a model and something that is absolutely integral to being inside the body that happens in the perception. Polly is a sculptor of fabric, found objects and I'm more of painter of a rectangle in the studio. But we both think a lot about architecture too. Her husband is the architect [Stan Allen](#).

And you always have.

Yeah, and world literature. But world literature that is say, meta. It's just an endless sharing of

enthusiasms.

How long do the paintings take?

They take months. Sometimes they take a year. I work on many at once, and different colors dry at different speeds. I've noticed the cadmium reds take much longer to dry, for instance.



Untitled, 2014, gouache on paper

Do they all have to finish at once?

No, they're all sort of lifted out of the slipstream. This is a year where everything got lifted out all at once because of the quantity of calls that I was answering. Something that is really critical in these paintings is that the paint touches the paint, so that there's no trough of fetishized trench space between one color and the next. They're flat next to each other. With oil paint and no tape. I use sable brushes and it is a slow sensual process. There is also a lot of preparation before the painting process even starts. Just even in terms of preparing the surface.

What's a compositional problem you remember resolving?

Well, what to do with corners and what to do with some of the colors going there. For instance this painting has black on the lower right, which is an [Arnheim](#)-ian no-no because optically you feel this heavy weight pulling you down. I had to counterweight it with a lot of lightness in the two-thirds upper center quadrant. The heavier counterweight is up near the top on the left. It has to do with a question of reading the painting. Even in cultures where you read right to left, pictures are read left to right. There is a sense that if something is too heavy on the lower right it's like the sad trombone, you know, "wahmp-wahmp." And then you have to fight to not make a narrative out of it.

Does it have to be balanced for it to be finished?

No, there has to be a kind of rhythm. Yeah, no, I can't live with symmetrical balance as it turns out. I went to abstraction from an exposure to abstraction at [Agnes Martin](#)'s retrospective in '73. That was just at the moment when I was seeing pictures in international art magazines here and there of Blinky Palermo, I was in California at the time. We weren't even thinking of Blinky in California, he may have already been in New York, but he wasn't getting written about. Which was part of his disappointment in life. But I was completely turned on by him from one or two pictures I saw in

magazines. Again I see paintings as being figures in the space of architecture. Even if they're abstract they're still figures. That desire for the figure is still held by the painting.

It's just not in the painting.

No, the painting is it. Then it breaks down into a funny movement of figures inside. But I have never been able to live with straight balance, straight symmetry. I have all those spectrum things, I'm dyslexic, I have mixed dominance, I have terrible speech problems, and I'm synesthetic. I sometimes wonder if I have an incomplete bicameral mind. What happened was that I loved Agnes Martin so much that for fifteen years after that I refused to paint a grid. Then I painted a grid, and found out I couldn't. I made a couple gridded watercolors before that and I didn't like it, it was too even. So I found I couldn't make an Agnes Martin. For one thing I didn't want to be responsible for pencil line. I didn't want to be a lyrical drawer like [Paul Klee](#), whom I love, and was such a big influence on Agnes Martin. Instead of a line, I made a band, so that it had shape value as a bearer of color. But the bands couldn't be straight because if they were they looked like every bad graduate school minimalist painting from my generation. Nobody's making those paintings anymore, right? It's just too meaningless, too dead. It was some kind of appeal to the ancient geometric orders that took itself way too seriously.

What I found was that if I broke the grid and twisted the interstices, and left open spaces in the grid I could get movement in it. In terms of space I was thinking more like [Matisse](#) and in terms of color I was thinking like a color field painter. What I got from Blinky Palermo back in the day was a sense of scale. That something could be twelve inches square or six feet square and each of those things could charge an entire room, the space people move around it. They had to be clear to do that though, they had to be so clear you couldn't take your eyes off of them. You can be clear and be totally ambiguous, and that's what's so great about Blinky or Agnes Martin is that they're all about ambiguity. It's all about finding spatial relations inside their clarity, that unfold and you can supply whatever narrative you want to that. They're still associative; think about how much Martin's paintings are like weather, for instance.

Any other tools you use that I wouldn't notice?

Well I am making these rugs with a weaver in Oaxaca and making wall paintings interior and exterior with different kinds of paint. You know what? You know what I really love, that is less classic-heroic-artist in the [New York School](#) sort of way, is that I'm having more fun painting with gouache on small pieces of paper now than almost anything. I'm making lots of gouaches. I'd like to collect them all and do a show of just those. Because gouache is already premixed to an idea of color that I have always held. I didn't always do bright color though, I went through a period of looming sort of pale pastels that were a little polluted in this melancholic way, but those were the years when I was drinking, so the romance of all that. Think about [Morandi](#), funny sort of palette, the grays. Most of us go through a "gray" period, like [Brice Marden](#) did.

Favorite tactile experience in painting?

I enjoy the whole process, but the only thing that gets me motivated is deadlines and there is nothing that I hate more than deadlines. I love being in the studio. I have two iPod classics each of them has 160 gigs, 28,000 songs. I hit shuffle and it's like the world's greatest radio station and I'm just painting. There's that thing, someone asks someone else when's the best time to fish and the person says, "Whenever you can get away." Maybe you're thinking the best time to fish is five o'clock in the morning, but it's not because the point of fishing isn't to catch any fish—it's something else.

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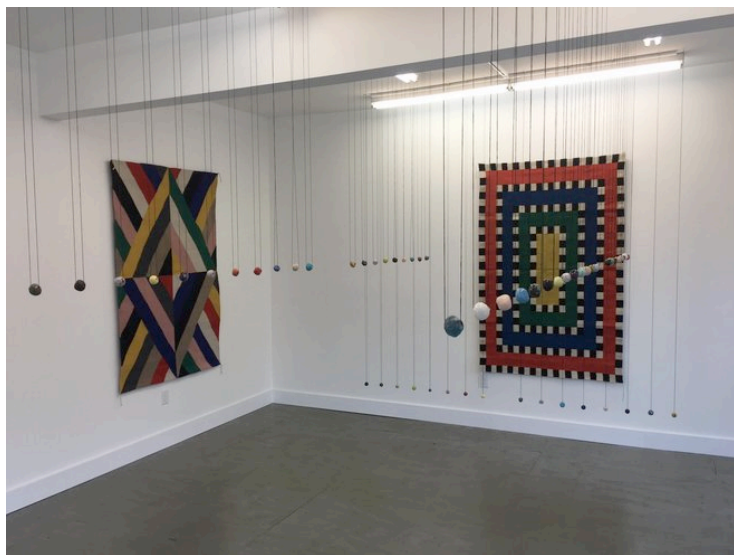
Stephen Westfall

McAdams, Shane. "Apfelbaum and Westfall Unpack Abstraction at The Suburban," *Journal Sentinel*, December 14, 2015.

<http://www.jsonline.com/entertainment/arts/apfelbaum-and-westfall-unpack-abstraction-at-the-suburban-b99633891z1-361806061.html>

JOURNAL SENTINEL

Apfelbaum and Westfall unpack abstraction at The Suburban



Courtesy Shane McAdams

Polly Apfelbaum and Stephen Westfall at The Suburban in Riverwest.

The Suburban, a gallery that's recently moved from a garage-like structure in the Chicago suburbs to a white cube fashioned from a former laundromat in Riverwest, has rolled out its second show, a collaboration between two very established and respected art world practitioners: Polly Apfelbaum and Stephen Westfall.

Apfelbaum is known best for her "Fallen Paintings" – dyed arrangements of pieces of fabric that have spilled out luxuriously across the floors of institutions the world over. Westfall's large-scale geometric abstractions applied to walls and canvases find extraordinary variation within what would seem to be very narrow parameters. By looking to sources as wide ranging as Roman terrazzo flooring and modernist skylines, he has managed to make profound statements about the language of painting with the sparsest of vocabularies.

Both Apfelbaum and Westfall share an interest in the structural integrity of formal art making and how simple contextual tweaks can utterly reposition entire lexicons of form. That's why, as long-time friends and sounding boards for each other's ideas, it's curious that they have been rare collaborators inside a white cube, a fact that becomes all the more surprising after one experiences their compelling choreography in the current exhibition.

Apfelbaum's colorful, walnut-sized ceramic beads hang from black nylon strings like planets in a grade school diorama of the solar system. It's a departure from her most familiar work, but not unexpected given her willingness to experiment. Her recent understated triumph at the Lumber Room in Portland, Oregon tossed off expectation by filling the cathedral-like space with large, flowing, richly colored wall hangings and hanging beads. That exhibition felt somewhat airy and celestial, where her work here seems more grounded. Even comical. The hand-fashioned, knucky beads hover statically at eye-level throughout the Suburban's interior, in biting contrast to the perfectly plumb, evenly spaced, sleek, vertically rising suspenders. It's both a graceful visual statement and somehow an art world version of a Vaudevillian fat guy/skinny guy routine: the Abbot and Costello of the Bead Belt.

In addition to playing it straight, the strings create an accidental architecture within the gallery, parceling it into rows that subtly direct traffic flow. As with installations by the minimalist installation artist Fred Sandback,

viewers find themselves ducking and shimmying around the most insubstantial and delicate textile barriers as if they were studs, joists and I-beams.

Apfelbaum's architecture naturally steers the viewer toward the walls where Westfall's woven rugs hang. Their geometric patterns echo that of his paintings, and anyone who knows his work in advance will recognize the colorful combinations of wedges, diamonds, zigzags and chevrons. But given the medium here, associations with Navajo and Hopi rugs are unavoidable. Westfall in fact collaborated with a traditional craftsman in Oaxaca, Mexico to assist in the production of the work for the show — specifically, a master weaver of master weavers named Geronimo. One wonders how much Westfall's imagery is directly influenced by traditional motifs, or is simply a continuation of the formal vocabulary from recent works on canvas. Most likely both, given his omnivorous interests. Still, it's satisfying, knowing his thoughts about language, to consider the possibility that the similarities are a convergent evolution. Imagine: two extraordinarily unique and divergent modes of making (hard-edged formal abstraction and indigenous decorative patterning) arriving at the same optical coordinates, governed by completely unique meanings and purposes. How many traditional Anasazi weavers braiding a signature diamond pattern into a rug in 1000 AD could have imagined the intellectualized rhetoric formalist art critics in the 20th century would apply to the same visual motifs?

Both Apfelbaum and Westfall practice in a world that has inherited the ghosts of essentialist, formal art theory, but have remained agnostic in the face of it. They've sought breadth rather than height, continuing to search and evolve kaleidoscopically over the years, sharing an abiding faith in the potential for abstraction to unpack more significant truths. But ultimately it is self-awareness, openness and expansiveness that has grounded their work in this collaboration, even as it soars in spite of itself.

Westfall and Apfelbaum manage to do visually what the Suburban has aimed to do socially and institutionally by trying to give the exclusive and elevated art world some needed grounding and humility. We'll see how that goes, but this is a fine sophomore effort.

Shane McAdams is an artist, writer, curator and a relatively transplant to the Milwaukee area from the heart of the art world, the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. He is also an Art City contributor.

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Stephen Westfall

Lebowitz, Cathy. "Exhibitions: The Lookout - Stephen Westfall at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.,"
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<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/exhibitions/stephen-westfall/>

Art in America

EXHIBITIONS THE LOOKOUT

Stephen Westfall

at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.,
through Jul. 29
514 West 25th Street



Stephen Westfall's exhibition of sharp and subtle abstractions, titled "Crispy Fugue State," finds him returning to the canvas after recent major mural projects—notably, a forty-five-foot piece at Art OMI in upstate New York and a painting that covered all four walls of the University of California Santa Barbara's Nachman Gallery. Westfall, a contributing editor to *A.i.A.*, achieves the expansiveness of monumental painting in his recent works through implied movement. A slight perspectival skew to the grid of boldly hued diamonds in *Amors* (2016) turns the constellation of color into a piece of something larger, like a skin glimpsed in passing. The fleeting effect counters the concrete reality of Westfall's consistently solid, hard-edge surfaces. *Delta* (2016), a tall, narrow painting in a gallery filled with large rectangular works, commanded attention. Its close-up view of the interstices between rows of diamond shapes like the ones seen in his murals and the other canvases evokes a sort of intimacy.

—Cathy Lebowitz

Pictured: Stephen Westfall: *The Future Advances and Recedes*, 2015, oil and alkyd on canvas, 78 by 66 inches.
Courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., New York.

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Stephen Westfall

Rhodes, David. "Diamond in the Smooth: Stephen Westfall at Lennon, Weinberg," *Artcritical*, July 28, 2016.

<http://www.artcritical.com/2016/07/28/david-rhodes-on-stephen-westfall/>

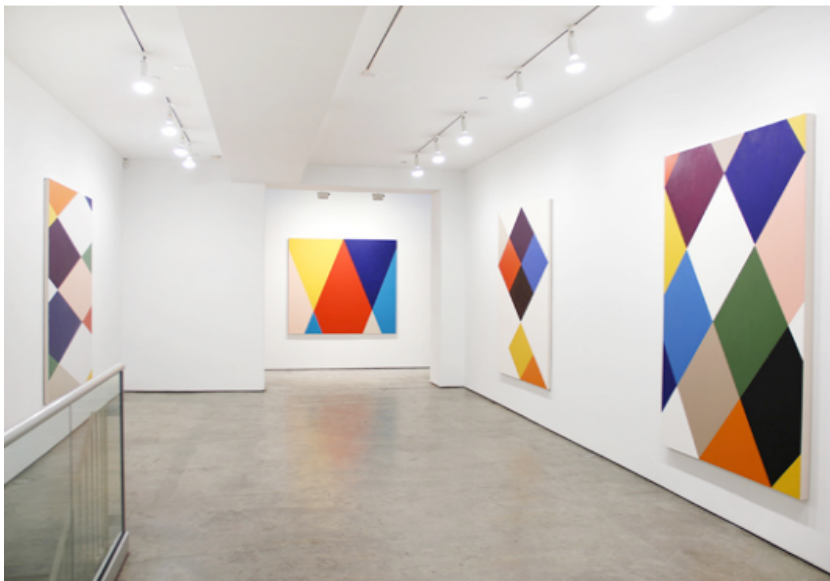
artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

Diamond in the Smooth: Stephen Westfall at Lennon, Weinberg

Stephen Westfall: *Crispy Fugue State* at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

May 12 to July 29, 2016



Five medium-sized paintings in the rear of the gallery break with Stephen Westfall's familiar practice. Unlike more characteristic paintings such as *Cortona* (2015), with their coolly satisfying symmetry, the structure of these newer works display a strongly asymmetrical and relational pictorial composition. This exciting departure is a result of the artist's experience of mural scale wall painting completed over the past several years where he has begun to break with pattern, to an extent, and has increased the role of white as a color. The site-specific murals

completed at Art OMI, Ghent, New York, in 2014 are examples of these.

There is also a faux comical undermining of seriousness, both in the titling of the show and in the deadpan paint surfaces. For a Modernist like Westfall, the strategy of linking high and low cultural narratives—constructivism and graphic signs—proves expedient in deflating grandiosity and productively opening influence to the vitality of quotidian environment. But originality is not dependent on novelty of technology and media. Westfall has achieved a singular style of painting that stands out for all the right reasons—it is compelling, arresting work—whilst not straying from already existing modes.

The diamond shapes, though recalling a harlequin design, represent an ostensible pattern that is broken through changes of hue and value. There is one color per shape, often now with the addition of white diamonds that when adjacent to each other create a context of figure/ground with the chromatically varied diamonds with which they cohabit. These consistent shapes, edited actively at the edge of the paintings' rectangular limits, are converted into triangles of various sizes in proportion to the over all size of a particular painting. In *The Future Advances and Recedes* (2015), a central diamond shape is



Delta, 2016

made up of four smaller diamonds, two aligned vertically, the top one deep purple, the lower one black. The horizontally aligned diamonds are a cadmium red and cobalt blue and can be read as eyes in a Paul Klee-like geometric head balancing on a diagonal of orange and yellow. The orange is a triangle formed by the lower edge of the painting bisecting what would have been another diamond. The orange and yellow flip to read also as a three-dimensional roof-like shape. The remaining triangle, taupe in color and to the left of the geometrical head as I describe it, skews what would have been otherwise a general symmetry of composition.

Color is liberated to function in a kinetic way through the simple devise of geometric shape. Thus articulated, color moves and reorganizes, as we perceive it, like a mobile turning through space. Like Stanley Whitney, an artist who structures color through geometry in a similar way, nothing is static in these works. Pages could be written simply to address what color does as one looks at it, the sensations it causes and the thoughts it elicits. An added quality is the perspectival lean that happens in a steeply vertical painting like *Delta* (2015): the narrow format and large scale of the contained shapes fragment the composition in such a way that there is no complete diamond visible, creating an almost sculptural column. That so much is possible still in the field of an expanded,

inclusive modernism and its visuality is evident in considering this exhibition. Westfall's change in direction only serves to intensify and enlarge his subtlety and range.

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Yau, John. "Stephen Westfall Unscrews His Grids Even More", *Hyperallergic*, June 26, 2016.

<http://hyperallergic.com/307144/stephen-westfall-unscrews-his-grids-even-more/>

HYPERALLERGIC

Stephen Westfall Unscrews His Grids Even More

by John Yau on June 26, 2016



Aeolian, 2014, 72 x 66", oil and alkyd on canvas

Ten years ago, in an interview that I did with Stephen Westfall ([Brooklyn Rail](#), April 2006), he said that he was interested in a skewed grid because it looked as if "the whole thing could tremble and be knocked over." In 2007, Westfall did his first wall paintings at Solvent Space, Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond, Virginia. In 2009, he won the Rome Prize Fellowship and spent a year in the Eternal City. Always keenly attuned to sign culture and the patterns that are part of the background of our daily life, Westfall discovered Cosmatesque mosaics.

Developed by the Cosmati family during the 12th and 13th centuries, the mosaics are made of inlaid marble and glass. However, whereas tessellated floors are commonly made of similarly-sized square tiles, Cosmatesque floors are made of variously-sized triangular pieces of glass and stone against larger, geometric white marble shapes. In

paintings Westfall did on the wall and on canvas that were influenced by Cosmatesque designs, his use of different-sized triangles always felt moored, despite whatever trembling and optical flicker took place within their borders.

In his current exhibition, [Crispy Fugue State](#), at Lennon, Weinberg (May 12 – July 29, 2016), there are eleven paintings dated between 2014 and 2016, with most of them done this year, ranging in size between 26 x 24 inches and 84 x 60 inches. In the best paintings, which are towards the back of this long, narrow, railroad-flat-like space, Westfall has unmoored his compositions, breaking down the border between portable painting and wall. In fact, it is as if the further you walk into the gallery, the more everything loosens up, moving away from the constraints that he has used to such powerful effect in his earlier work.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the differences between three modestly scaled paintings from 2015-16 ("Fugue," "Bower," and "Cortona") and such larger paintings, such as "Aeolian" (2014), "The Future Advances and Recedes" (2015), and "Delta" (2016). In "Fugue" (2016), a grid of squares divided into fitted triangles of either red and white or blue and umber triangles, is laid out in a checkerboard pattern. This is something Westfall knows how to do well. It is possible to rearrange the pattern in the mind's eye, isolate a diamond made of blue and white triangles, for example, but that kind of looking doesn't necessarily give you much to reflect upon.

While the figure-ground relationship shifts in tandem with our changing focus, and the painting stays active, I suspect Westfall got understandably tired of doing this, no matter how good he got at it. In the end the restraints that provided his platform became limiting, and, to his credit, he didn't want to stay with what he had mastered. You might say that once Westfall constructed his prison, he decided that, instead of constantly redecorating it, he would move elsewhere. It wasn't a process of building upon what he mastered, but unlearning it and breaking loose. If we go by dates (and why shouldn't we?), "Aeolian" (2014) is a breakthrough painting. On the left side, a black triangle extends down from the top edge, like a geometric stalactite, to join a configuration consisting of a red triangle to its left and a cerulean diamond attached at its bottom point. The lowest tip of the blue diamond is balanced on the painting's bottom edge. On the far right side, a black triangle is pointed into the bottom right corner, and rests comfortable there, while a yellow triangle juts in from the painting's upper right side.

Separating these clusters of colored diamonds and triangles is a wide, white zigzag running, like a geometric lightning bolt, from the canvas's top left edge to its center bottom. One might initially think the painting is unfinished, that the artist hasn't decided what colors and shapes (triangles or diamonds) to put there. At the same time, the white of the painting links it to the gallery's white wall. Is the white zigzag part of the painting or part of the wall or both? Is it the ground on which the other colors have been laid down, or a purposefully painted white geometric shape equal to the ones around it? Is it a sign of incompleteness, or evidence of architecture and the surrounding environment invading the painting?

One might have concluded that one could go no further than the shaped paintings of Ellsworth Kelly, that he had all the bases covered. After him there was only the possibility of parody and pastiche. Or so the narrative of postmodern goes. For years Westfall has worked in the vein of geometric abstraction. At times, he has tilted toward the representational; other times, he has been more purely abstract. His inspirations have ranged from lesser-known American Precisionists, such as Ralston Crawford, to Shaker quilts, to the Harlequin pattern we see in early Picasso paintings. He has also written beautifully about the work of Ward Jackson, Elizabeth Murray, and Jane Wilson. He is someone who loves and believes in paint, but that doesn't necessarily mean that he would be able to move into territory that is all his own. For much of his career, he has been pushing against the historical conventions we have long associated with hard-edge, geometric abstraction. His wall paintings seemed like an extension of what he had done before, geometry on a larger, immersive scale.

What I don't think Westfall expected was how making wall paintings might lead back to portable paintings with a fresh eye. In "Aeolian," "The Future Advances and Recedes" and "Delta," he no longer relies on establishing a stable part-to-whole relationship. The diagonal orientation of the partial rectangles (or eccentric shapes) – with their edges cropped by the painting's physical edges – breathes instability and incompleteness into the composition, almost making the work seem like a fragment. This instability is enhanced by the torque of the colored shapes, suggesting they are detached by a hair's breadth from the picture plane. This is fresh territory, a domain that Westfall has started to define for himself. It doesn't look back, as some of his earlier paintings did, but forward, acknowledging that disruption and dissolution are inescapable features of daily life. Nothing, we should have learned by now, is ever secure.

[Crispy Fugue State](#) continues at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc. (514 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 29.

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Stephen Westfall

Plagens, Peter. "Silk, Diamonds and a Chicago Girl – Julie von Eichel, Stephen Westfall and June Leaf in this week's Fine Art." *The Wallstreet Journal*, July 1, 2016.

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ART REVIEW

By PETER PLAGENS

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Aeolian, 2014, 72 x 66", oil and alkyd on canvas

Stephen Westfall: Crispy Fugue State

[Lennon, Weinberg](#)

514 W. 25th St., (212) 941-0012

Through July 29

Geometric abstract painting generally

has to have a theory behind it, or at

least some sort of system at work, to be

more than mere decoration. The prime example is Piet

Mondrian's "neoplasticism." Even so, there is such a thing as

serious geometric abstraction based on taste. And the newest

work of Stephen Westfall (b. 1953) is a good instance of this sort of art that's worth thinking about and looking at.

Although the art-history-savvy Mr. Westfall, who teaches at

Bard College, acknowledges a debt to Mondrian (and to Matisse, Stuart Davis and some art from ancient Rome), in these 11

paintings, done during the past three years, he's very much his

own man. As he told an interviewer for the blog "Two Coats of Paint" last year, "paintings come to me whole," and via a pencil, ruler and some Photoshop for "a general idea of color distribution" they make their way onto canvas.

Most of the pictures in the exhibition, which range from 2 to 7 feet on a side, are emphatically oriented on the diagonal (brightly colored diamonds and triangles are Mr. Westfall's favorite shapes), with the inclusion of generous areas of white. In the artist's felicitous phrase, they make the pictorial space "mentholated." The show's overall flavor is that of brainy sensuousness—relatively rare in today's gallery fare.