

HYPERALLERGIC

Stephen Westfall's Breakthrough

by [John Yau](#) on December 29, 2013



"High Plains" (2012)

I went to Stephen Westfall's exhibition, *Jesus and Bossa Nova*, at [Lennon Weinberg](#) (November 7, 2013–January 4, 2014) twice on the same day. The second time I walked through the gallery's long narrow space verified my initial thought, which was that the layout of the exhibition could be read as a narrative that revealed Westfall's movement from pattern and repetition to a far more complex and engaging compositional possibility.

Westfall — who is an eloquent champion of hard-edge, geometric abstraction and Precisionism, and of less-celebrated artists such as Ward Jackson and Ralston Crawford — first gained attention for his use of skewed and layered lattice-like grids. However, instead of settling in and refining this motif into a signature style, he has proved himself to be a probative painter who keeps testing possibilities, pushing against the historical conventions we associate with hard-edge, geometric abstraction, as if it could be opened onto new horizons. This has been Westfall's gambit from the outset of his career and it has paid off. It is something he shares with the older

artist, Harriet Korman, whose paintings from the past decade may have inspired him.

In an [interview that I did with Westfall](#) in the *Brooklyn Rail* (April 2006), he described his interest in the skewed grid because it looked as if "the whole thing could tremble and be knocked over." Westfall went on to say: "I like that it flickers back and forth between whole and fragment. There's this back and forth between seeing the whole and then only being aware of fragments and being aware that the whole is made up of fragments."

What happened between this interview and the current exhibition is that Westfall won the Rome Prize Fellowship in 2009, which enabled him to spend a year in Rome. While there, he found the Cosmatesque mosaics that decorate the floors of many of Rome's churches spellbinding. Developed by



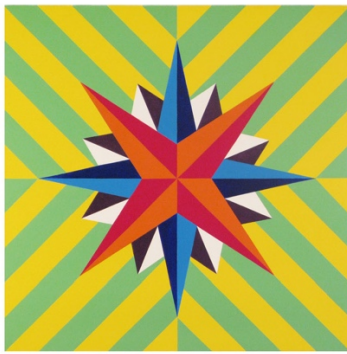
"Time Tells Us What to Do" (2013)

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the Cosmati family during the 12th and 13th century, the mosaics are made of inlaid marble and glass, but they are different from tessellated floors where the tiles are more-or-less the same size. In Cosmatesque floors, the triangular motifs are made of different-sized pieces of colored glass inlaid against larger, geometric white marble shapes.

“High Plains” (2012) is the first painting the viewer sees on the right wall when entering Lennon, Weinberg. Arranged into four columns, comprised of interlocking small, medium and large triangles, with the first and third columns done in tan, black, green and white, and the second and fourth done in red, blue, green and white, the painting is visually pleasing but not much more. It is modernist abstraction that alludes to Navaho blankets. The problem, as I see it, is that once the pattern is decided, the artist must methodically fill in the color.

In a number of the paintings that follow – but not all – Westfall moves away from what I think of as a coloring book, fill-in aesthetic to a much more complicated and visually engaging possibility, from a stable image to one that is simultaneously stable and unstable — a composition that sustains and complicates the “flicker[ing] back and forth between whole and fragment”, he referred to in our interview.



“Star” (2010)

In “Star” (2010), the oldest painting in the exhibition, done while Westfall was in Rome, the artist centers a boldly graphic starburst, composed of two four-pointed stars layered on top of an eight-pointed one, in a field consisting of quadrants of diagonal stripes (green and greenish-yellow) radiating from the center. By dividing each of the star’s points along its axis into two flat, distinct colors, he flips the form ambiguously between two and three dimensions.

Both “High Plains” and “Star” are emblematic signs, which in this media-saturated world isn’t enough. This is the issue that Westfall has to address: does he want the painting to be a stable, post-pop, abstract image — a geometrically broken up field of seemingly random colors derived from a limited palette (a coloristically aggressive, abstract version of Edvard Munch’s “The Scream”) — or does he want to open up a reflective space in which viewers see

themselves seeing the painting?

“Scheherazade” (2013) is Westfall’s breakthrough painting, the one that stands above all the rest in this exhibition. It is the most complex both in composition and color and, more importantly, its overlaid, interpenetrating structures can be assembled and disassembled by the viewer in myriad ways. The other complexity is the color placement, which follows no logic or order, suggesting a newly gained freedom.

I am reminded of the freedom that Stanley Whitney gained in the 1980s when he established a grid format that enabled him to become unpredictable in his use of color. It is the realm of the random that Westfall has entered, and he has done so by elevating the complexity of “Scheherazade’s” geometric composition far beyond anything else he has ever done.

Compositionally, “Scheherazade” is a square painting made up of squares and rectangles, all of which are comprised of differently colored triangles. Structurally speaking, the centrally located triangles group together visually according to relationships of color and value, forming a large square that has been rotated inside the painting’s physical square so that it becomes a diamond whose four corners touch the midpoint of the paintings’s outside edges. Within the rotated square Westfall has nestled a square whose sides are parallel to the painting’s physical square — a square within a square. Within this square there is another, smaller rotated square, with each of its four corners touching the four sides of the square within the square. To



“Scheherazade” (2013)

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recap, beginning from the center and working our way, “Scheherazade” is a diamond within a square within a diamond within a square. The central diamond is made up of four triangles, each a different color.

There are also four squares nestled in each corner of the painting, which are made up of four equally sized triangles. Between them, along the outer edges of the canvas, are four rectangles that forms the wings of a cruciform whose center is the square within the square. There are eleven colors, with each used at least than twice and one color used four times. The tension, playfulness, structure and freedom running through the painting compel the viewer’s attention to constantly refocus. Sometimes two adjacent areas can be read as a single, volumetric form, but that soon dissolves.

“Scheherazade” is absolutely lucid and completely bewildering, which is one of its many delights. When we put the forms together, discerning how one fits within the other, as it affects adjacent areas, it becomes apparent that there is no key — no dominating structure or image. The placement of colors seems to follow no pattern. The shifts between fragment and whole within a larger whole keeps changing, like a kaleidoscope. Seeing becomes its own pleasure, especially since there is no destination. It is in this painting that Westfall breaks free of repetition and pattern, and, in authoring a new chapter in his development, becomes a singular artist.

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