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abstract *critical*

for abstract art

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Purism Off Kilter: Stephen Westfall as painter and curator

Written by David Cohen



Stephen Westfall, Wise One, 2011, 36 × 36", oil and alkyd on canvas. Courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

In the first of what we hope will become a regular quarterly strand, David Cohen, Publisher/Editor of the New York-based *artcritical* magazine and moderator of the Review Panel, will be taking a look at who he feels to be among the more innovative and influential figures on the current New York scene. First off the work and curatorial activities of abstract painter Stephen Westfall...

The last thing you expect of cognitive dissonance is a harmonious feeling, and yet that is what you get when you consider Stephen Westfall's mode of painting and his way of conducting himself in the world. Rigorous, cool, hard-edged formal abstraction is his painting mode whereas his activities as an educator, critic, essayist

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and (this season) an especially busy curator of group exhibitions are marked by ecumenicism: warmly inclusive and boundary-breaking in the people he selects to write about or to exhibit with/together, he often makes unexpected connections across mediums and styles, generations and allegiances. His approach is non-dogmatic, suggesting that pragmatism rather than idealism lies at the heart of his aesthetics.

This season he has been the subject and instigator of three New York shows. His sixth solo exhibition at Lennon, Weinberg, his Chelsea dealer, titled *Seraphim* for one of the paintings in the show, opened at the end of April and followed on from an exhibition at the American Academy in Rome, where he had been a fellow, in Summer 2010. During his residency in the eternal city, Westfall became mesmerized by mosaic flooring in early medieval churches. The result – an extended series of diamond-shaped bands of color, formats that recall Sol LeWitt, Jasper Johns and Frank Stella but in ways that, to paraphrase Klee, take the grid for a walk – captured praise from the influential husband and wife critics Roberta Smith and Jerry Saltz. For Smith, in the *New York Times*, Westfall's "syncopated progression of hues, which is more intuitive than systematic, creates a wonderful, jangling destabilization, warping space and confirming scale (not size) as the living energy source that it is." For Saltz, in *New York Magazine*, "it feels vibrantly alive, quirky, open, ever-mutating, and popping with color... Westfall's work has never felt so free, confident, and his own."



Starburst for N.K., 2009 Oil on canvas 38" x 44"

Ghost in the Machine can be read as a kind of manifesto of "impurist" geometric abstraction in which popular culture and humor are celebrated as extensions of abstraction rather than its enemy. "Some people think that artists deploy geometry as an austerity. It ain't necessarily so." Westfall wrote in a statement accompanying the show. "All the work here stands for more than one thing: swoony craft, optical dazzle, compression and expansion." John McLaughlin, the Boston-born Californian whose proto-minimalist paintings have been the subject of recent rediscovery, might seem closest to a purest aesthetic with its allegiance to Mondrian, Malevich and Zen. Even he allows his color and spatial decisions to be inflected by a Californian aesthetic of gloss and ease. Jennifer Riley, one of the younger artists in the group, and a former student of Westfall's (he has taught for years at Bard College and at Rutgers, both important centers for abstract painting on the East Coast) makes the connection between her crystalline forms and a Pop aesthetic explicit, if extremely coded, in the title, *Starburst for NK*, (2009); NK is Nicholas Krushenick (1929-1999), also represented in the exhibition and held by many to be the father of pop abstraction.

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Stanley Whitney Aix, 2011 Oil on linen 60 x 60 inches

If Ghost is a manifesto, Reverie is a visual poem; in place of the rigorous organizing principle of geometry – whether subversive or subverted – this show allows for greater diversity of touch and process, ranging in its modes of abstraction from monochrome (Julia Rommel) to gestural (Andrea Belag) to minimal (Sylvan Lionni) to organic (Patricia Treib). Its presiding eminence grise was the Paris-based veteran Shirley Jaffe, represented by a monumental, tapestry-like collage of glyphs and decals, while another “lifer” – to quote Westfall’s witty euphemism from his supporting statement – was Stanley Whitney, whose gutsy grids are composed of wobbling lozenges of sharply contrastive colors and gently differentiating textures. Whitney’s found grid stood in instructive contract to the meticulously preplanned rigor of Westfall, but rather than suggesting an opposition, it seemed that Westfall enlisted Whitney to say that he, too, arrives at his patterns through feeling and whim as much as any formal logic.

Westfall has been known for years for his penchant for cheery, upbeat geometric abstraction that simultaneously registers order and disruption. At first his compositions strike the viewer as well-behaved structures of pattern with decorative correlates in the applied arts, such as plaid, herringbone, chevrons. Good humored populist titles like “My beautiful Laundrette” or “Candyman” and raucous color schemes hint at subversion of prim minimal grids or Color Field-redolent arrangements of parallel stripe. But his visual wit goes beyond mere reference to recent abstract art history. A key element in his vocabulary is the disruptive kink he will admit into his patterning that sets it off kilter; never quite subverting the flatness of the picture plane, he nonetheless allows a breeze or ripple to run across the composition.



Stephen Westfall, Magnolia, 2011, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches

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The references to other art and the broader culture, coupled with his funky palette, might sound like Westfall belongs simply within the pop or deconstructive camp of Neo-Geo and its derivatives, making him a bedfellow, say, or Jonathan Lasker or Peter Halley. And there are generational connections, as there are with other abstractionist wits like Mary Heilmann. But somehow, in Westfall, the attachment to the positive, energetic, affirmative aspect of pattern and decoration always seems in earnest; the subversion is within pattern, rather than of pattern. He recalls Ruskin's dictum that "All beautiful lines are drawn under mathematical laws organically transgressed." He leaves viewers feeling that his intention is to invigorate abstraction rather than to debunk it. And this makes sense of the community he establishes around himself of fellow abstractionists, and workers within other styles, for whom wit is important but irony is to be avoided.

David Cohen is Publisher/Editor of artcritical.com and Moderator of the Review Panel

Stephen Westfall, *Seraphim: Paintings and works on paper* was at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., 514 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001, April 26 to June 11, 2011.

The Ghost in the Machine, Curated by Stephen Westfall: John McLaughlin, Nicholas Krushenick, Don Christensen, Harriet Korman, Don Voisine, Stephen Westfall, Jennifer Riley, Rachel Beach, Jackie Meier, Thomas Raggio is at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., June 23 to August 19, 2011.

REVERIE, Curated by Stephen Westfall: Andrea Belag, Shirley Jaffe, Alix Le Méléder, Sylvan Lionni, Julia Rommel, Patricia Treib, Stephen Westfall, Stanley Whitney, at Zürcher Studio, 33 Bleecker Street, New York, NY 10012.

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