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BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ART

INCONVERSATION

Stephen Westfall with John Yau

by John Yau



Portrait of the artist. Photo by Christine Hadzi, 2006.

John Yau (Rail): You've said that Agnes Martin's work got you interested in the grid. And yet, the way you use the grid is to skew it, and the skewing gives you a way to paint inside the grid and deny all-overness. Your grids consist of parts and patterns that give the paintings a fragmented structure inside of which drawing in color takes place.

Stephen Westfall: I think it's because—well for two reasons. I think there's perhaps a biological orientation on my part for segmentation. I have ADD and symptoms of dyslexia that have never been diagnosed. I predate diagnoses of dyslexia, sadly. (Laughs). But what it means, basically, is that I tend to do things in parts and segments. I don't have the concentration to devote myself to one painting over a long period of time. I work on several paintings. I build structure in segments. I've never been able to exist with the grid as a unitary form and my own physiology is symptomatic—it's

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what's known as mixed dominance, which means I do some things left-handed and some things right handed, which is not the same as ambidexterity. There's always this physiological schism that's deeply subliminal in every thing that I do. I think that that's why I had to start breaking up the grid to make it work for me. I didn't see the grid in Agnes Martin as a hegemonic structure, something that powerfully organizes a painting, but as a kind of face for a painting in a Paul Klee-type way. I saw the grid as an architecture that could be both timeless and a geological strata, and also be incredibly delicate and humble; it was the humility of Martin's process which spoke to me as a way into painting that the finish of Mondrian—while I admired that as a kid, before I ever thought I could be a painter—I found intimidating as an emblem of a process. Agnes Martin was like an open door.

Rail: Humility is an interesting term because one doesn't think of the grid and humility as necessarily being in the same sentence.

Westfall: Except with Agnes Martin. Then you make this connection between Agnes Martin and Paul Klee that is very makeable. Her use of pencil, her very early biomorphic work, which then led into the first, very fragile stabs at a kind of serenity that would begin to emerge as an homage to clarity, but coming out of this delicate biomorphism which comes from Klee and Miro.

Rail: It seems to me that vulnerability is in your work. We think we see your painting all at once but then we must disassemble our seeing and see the parts and how they fit and don't fit. It's a delicate and vulnerable structure.

Westfall: Yeah, like the whole thing could tremble and be knocked over.

Rail: Delicacy, fragility, and vulnerability.

Westfall: Right, which I guess you don't really associate with planar abstraction.

Rail: Yes, except perhaps Agnes Martin. The vulnerability makes one's eyes move through the painting differently. The striking thing about your paintings is their quivers, which can be structural, coloristic, optical or all three.

Westfall: 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. It's like, humility is both a great and awful word because nobody can wield it in reference to himself or herself and be humble. You can't advertise humility as something that exists in one's process, so you say this vulnerability is there. I believe there's such a thing as a generous irony as opposed to a cynical irony—in fact we know there's many different kinds of irony, and we live in an ironic way. But that means there's also a compensatory irony that is the awareness that there's a doubleness to things that have history. What I would hope is that when we look at planar abstraction, the other thing that we get, via Matisse, is a celebratory quality that can feel commemorative on a certain level. So we have this celebratory aspect coexisting with the shakiness and maybe a kind of humor comes out of the combination.

Rail: *Look Around* is a painting defined by its contention between smaller black and white rectangles and large open, colored rectangles. And the colors, the muted red, green, blue and mustard yellow, don't they also obliquely refer to Buddhism?

Westfall: One of the funny things about abstraction is that for an abstract painting to work, a tremendous amount of distillation is involved. And yet, it's impossible to make an abstract painting, I think now, that doesn't spring from and evoke sign culture. So absolutely Buddhism, whose contemplative exercises are called tantras and that's also there, because to stare at that yellow in the center of that painting while everything else moves around is very much a tantric exercise. It's a mandalic structure. The other thing is that the black and white squares come from the Viennese designer Joseph Hoffman. So you get this combination of a devout, mystical sense of high culture, a mysticism that comes from outside of art. Then low culture—Hoffman was brilliant. In my work, there's Navajo rugs, Walker Evans, and NASCAR scoreboards. You see this stuff and then you go back to start thinking about a structure that has all that without advertising any single one of those things; a structure that might breed another structure in and of itself, and all those things are in it.

Rail: In *Look Around*, it's east and west; it's Hoffman and Tibetan Buddhism.

Westfall: Oh yes. And it's both Hoffman's—I mean there's push-pull there.

Rail: So you're an impure purist artist.

Westfall: Yes, yes. The mirthful aspect of my work—I hope it's there—is about accepting impurity as a kind of fullness, as enrichment—not as defilement.

Rail: There's an intellectual humor in having two Hoffman's and Buddhism together.

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Westfall: Right. It's funny, but I want to be very clear. It's not like before each painting, I'm doing a little bit of this and a little bit of that. It's really a visual idea and I search around for visual ideas that get me going and it's a continuation of the language that was set in motion years ago. But with the hope that it could lead to—what Clement Greenberg called an infinity of aspect—much like a landscape painter can turn around 360 degrees and see a different tree, a different bush, a different time of day, and that the structures in a rather indexical distribution of color can invoke very specific associations, and because Bob Dylan says you open your ears and you're influenced. You accept the pastiche of your own memory for what it is and then you play the game of distillation, but you got to do it with a high sense of love. It's not a game like, oh, it's just a game. It's maybe like the bead game, done with love and compassion. Painting can do all of this all the time.

Rail: Do you know the Borges story of forking paths where every choice eliminates other choices? It seems to me that you're taking a path not to eliminate, but to see if you can also then go down the other path in a different painting. *Speedway* walks into a wall called representation. It asks the viewer, what do you need to have representation? And then in *El Norte*, for example, there seems to be a pattern, but you can't figure out what it is. The longer you look the more you wonder why you, the viewer, need a safety net.

Westfall: Right, right. It almost goes back to why is there not nothing. It's like, at what point does structure utterly break down into free form and then there is a moment where a subatomic particle, a structured measurable thing, emerges out of the cosmic foam. In *El Norte*, the white serves as this foam.

Rail: You're really going in two different directions without saying which is the answer.

Westfall: There's no overarching ideology behind this push. If I have any ideology, it's no ideology, please. What I enjoy about what I do now is that I can make *this* painting in this frame of mind and then *this* painting in this frame of mind, which is different from the first painting. At the same time, I want the entire body of work to encompass these directions that you outline. So that you look at each painting and go, wow—this painting was clearly a product of will. I swear if you look closely at some of them you could say it's actually a product of suffering, but it's mixed with pleasure and impulse and a sense that these possibilities are not mutually exclusive and that the work can go in different directions and still remain indicative of a singular sensibility. At the same time, I would hope that one could look at my work and say, nobody else could have really done that. Every artist hopes that I'm sure, but I'm trying to it with a variety of image structures.

Rail: You makes images and structures. You don't separate them from each other, and you don't have a single kind of source. The viewer feels it's rooted in experience, not in an idea about abstraction, though ideas about abstraction play into it. It is also about resisting style and that every painting that you do has a kind of structured or combination of geometric elements, but that they don't become constrictive. You are trying to open it up and see what you can embrace.

Westfall: Yeah, and while not being an industry. I have a wonderful assistant that prepares my canvases, but nobody works on my surfaces but me. Not that there's anything wrong with the other method but as of now I can't do that. I reserve the dubious pleasure of making each painting for myself.

Rail: A number of your recent paintings evoke place, *Kyoto*, *Orchard Street*, and *Springs*, where Pollock and Krasner lived.

Westfall: I'm not sure if I should give this away, but the painting would've been up a couple of weeks before this comes out. The gag is it's derived from Pollock's studio window. That's the mullion pattern of his window, which I turned it into a Harry Holtzman painting. It was such a pleasure because I've always liked window mullions as active grids, as potential compositions.

Rail: Did you know that Myron Stout used his bedroom window as a source?

Westfall: Myron Stout is an early avatar. I love the *petite maites*. You know Myron Stout, Morandi. And of course there's that insider, outsider aspect too. You think of Myron Stout and Forrest Best, who've been shown together. Does that make Stout an outsider or does it make Best an insider? Then think about James Castle and how brilliant he is at using the architectural grid and making us feel its animate quality by having the line as an animate conscious agent that fills out even a band, like a support beam. For anybody else that would be a diagrammatic mark. So it's the idea of somehow using color to dimensionalize, make space. What's so funny about *Speedway* is how sad it is.

Rail: Well, it's a forlorn combination of muted colors broadcasting nothing.

Westfall: It's melancholic. It's desolate and yet, once you see it as being funny...

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Rail: Funny with tears...

Westfall: It's rehabilitated into something bearable as opposed to unbearable. All this takes place presumably in a subliminal nanosecond, but there's that sense of going through the stages of grief or flicker that we were talking about earlier between Gestalt and fragment, between interpretive matrices. But I look at everything that way.

Rail: The thing about your paintings is the muted color, each of them sitting exactly right in relationship to the others. I mean that also comes from a lot of different sources.

Westfall: Yes, and I think the sense of place the titles refer to, often refer to senses of color that are attached to certain cultures that I've had experience with. There's the mountainous Southwest where I lived in '78 and '88 and return to endlessly. That culture mingles in my mind with photographs of William Eggleston and Stephen Shore that show vernacular architecture, and that flips over to Walker Evans' photographs. And that flips back to James Castle in Idaho, and the colors of Germantown yarn and a Navajo rug from the 1920s and how the acidness of that color has mellowed. Or the colors of a Nepalese or a Tibetan tangka, and those souvenir signs on I-40. As soon as an artist says, "I can't use that," they cut off a piece of themselves.

Rail: You can put it in or leave it out. You want to put it all in.

Westfall: At the risk of claiming too much for a culture that I was born into, I think this is what makes it American. The European use of abstraction was always towards a utopian idea about distillation. Like, we would all agree somehow. I love what de Kooning said about communism, "When they get up in the morning and they want a cup of coffee they say 'The people want a cup of coffee.'" (Laughs) The European idea is that we are all going to agree somehow. Of course that's never happened. The American idea is, Ok we'll agree to disagree. Except with our current regime. Somehow the idea that you can agree to disagree, that it's as they say, principles not personalities, becomes this enigma to purists or to any of us. Wouldn't it be great if you could make a distilled art out of that inclusiveness?

Rail: That's what you're asking yourself?

Westfall: Yeah, and have that distillation be recognized as a sensibility.

Rail: What about Nicholas Krushenick? Did you think of him when you came to New York?

Westfall: I thought about him when I first decided to be an art major. I came to school as a literature major. At the College of Creative Studies in Santa Barbara, they showed me how to stretch a canvas. I was taking an art class just to take an art class, which isn't to say I didn't love painting. I did. And I got some idea of what a painting was right away. Like a painting was a body in a room and a room itself is a cavity in a building. So when they suggested I become an art major, I spent the summer thinking about it and I went to the art library every week to catch up with contemporary art. I would read books and American and European art magazines. They would have Konrad Klapheck paintings that combined surrealism, pop and minimalist monumentality. I was always aware of how pop art at its weirdest could be this mix. And Krushenick had wonderful comic book-like outlined forms. The forms were uncontainable bio-explosions that made no sense, except as fragments of monsters that you would see in an old Jack Kirby horror comic book. Fragments in their fragmentation were totally abstracted. And they would have funny organizational borders around them too. Every time I saw him, I would think, I'd think, "this stuff is great."

Rail: He was one of the first to synthesize both pop and abstraction.

Westfall: Yes, with a real devil-may-care approach to surface. It looked like they would go in one or two coats and he would move to the next thing. I tend to be more of a fetishist. The other thing I think about is, of course, those glorious Lichtensteins from the early to mid 60s, all those things about the doubleness of painting space. You'd look at those paintings and think this guy is one of the greatest philosophers about painting of all time. And they're delivered with such charm that they can make you weep, for the beauty of the mind. There's nothing sentimental about how they are painted.

Rail: You've used the word imagination, and it has a philosophical aspect to what you're talking about. If the emphasis on the discourse of painting has been literalism, you say no, there's another side to painting that shouldn't be left out, imagination.

Westfall: Absolutely! I feel that artists who work with systems are constantly coming up against what they won't allow themselves to do. That seems to be a small form of soul-murder. The system—if there is a system there—should be a doorway to a reopening.... I'm using words like 'should' and they scare the hell out of me, but you know what I mean.

Rail: I don't think you're being authoritarian, you're saying it as a way to talk about yourself—"you should."

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Westfall: Yeah, I should. Because, you know, I accept the system the way I accept the goad of a deadline in writing an essay. It helps get the juices flowing.

Rail: Without being too dramatic, I would say that you are struggling with how to follow impulses and not listen to the censorious voice, the voice that says *don't* do this.

Westfall: Absolutely, I think that anybody whose work has matured into a shaping style, that's not the end of the story, there's at least a second or third stage, in the development of their work, where they begin –if they're good humored about it, to see it as impish, and if they're not good humored about it they see it as being beset by demons. But there is the daemon involved, and the daemon is saying *no, you're going to screw it up*. How much can you get out of this and still have a shred of what you started with? At the same time, you've never mastered your style, really, if you're going into the deep structure of your style, so one of the reasons why you stay with a style is because it allows you to go deeper into what you've started.

Rail: That's why it's not a style.

Westfall: Well, then I don't know what else to call it, then –a *practice*, or...

Rail: I would call it an *approach*, because style is a form of consumption.

Westfall: That's funny, because I think it's sort of like irony, the term. It could be something bad, and, in another context, be something that we all acknowledge as a state of vivacity and maturity. There's such a thing as high style, perhaps.

Rail: The poet Robert Kelly said 'Style is death.'

Westfall: Yeah, but he's talking about style as a thing that constricts the imagination, as opposed to becoming a platform for it.

Rail: So what you're saying is that you're working in a way where you can embrace more.

Westfall: Yeah, the subject of *Speedway* is silly, right?

Rail: Yeah.

Westfall: Anybody that knows me knows I'm not a Nascar fan, but I am a structure guy. This is probably the most political painting in the show. It's a definite post-9-11 painting. It's not about the World Trade Center, it's about Bush and the emptiness of that whole culture. It's also about the joy of making abstract paintings. It's like thumbing your nose twice; even while making a terribly melancholy painting, I'm going to make a beautiful Westfall at the same time.

Rail: One question many political artists never address: What pleasures did the person get in making this, and can he or she own up to it?

Westfall: Well, if I don't get pleasure out of making my paintings, then the terrorists have won. (laughter) Of course, it's not political in the way that Thomas Hirshhorn is so devastatingly political. As a painter, I'm a kind of lifer, inside the practice.

Rail: You believe in painting culture.

Westfall: For painters, yeah. At some point, if you've been doing it long enough, you decide you're going to continue doing it. This is true for writers, this is true for people who play the piano. If you're a pianist, you're going to do it. It gives you such pleasure even if you're not performing. And you're going to do it if you're a writer because you might write a small poem that has something of what you love about poetry, whether or not you're publishing books. And if you do it long enough, you know there may be two years between each time you hit that note, but it will come around again and again. So you don't say 'no, I've stopped doing that.' If you're really involved with a practice, that really does become your culture, to the point where there's this social accountability to the practice that you have by putting it out there and having the opportunity to put it out there and taking that opportunity. So painters who've had a lot of shows are now –whether they like it or not- painters. It helps if you like it. One thing that happens now is that other than keeping up with the news, I don't have any emotional distinction between talking about Caravaggio and talking about James Siena.

Rail: That's the world you live in.

Westfall: Yeah, you get painters together and the conversation could go from Claude, Fra Angelico and Veronese and skate right up to Mary Heilmann.

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Rail: That's true among poets.

Westfall: It's also true across cultural boundaries and languages, and I think that that's also true for painters. Non-Buddhists can look at a tangka, and they may not be getting the original intent of that painting, but there are tangka-masters, and they look at them, and maybe they're getting something that is similar and analogous to what they're getting out of a Mondrian. Which isn't to say that they have the same intention, but it's not an art-historical fallacy to read them as manifestations of an energy that's continuous. There's a difference between intent, as it's focused by a specific culture, and the energy of visuality that emerges. Why do I paint these paintings and write about Elizabeth Murray or Martha Diamond?

Rail: Well?

Westfall: Because I think that what's called expressionism is just a categorical shorthand for this release of the imagination. And that there's a structure to expressionism, and that structure is analogous to the structure that's in geometric abstract painting. That it's *analogous*, it's not the same. There's not a direct corollary, it's not something you can lay over as a pure line. But in my work, there's never a pure line of any kind. So all this stuff is at the service of feeling. I think it's a question of animism. For an animist, everything is alive. Certain atheist scientists would say, that's just stating a childhood fantasy. But we know everything is alive with energy –and I'm not being an intelligent-designist to say that it's possible to be aware of that energy that's coursing through everything. Sometimes, for someone who's physiologically divided and has to do things in segments, I can feel the energy that someone like Elizabeth feels in a contorted form. For myself, I can feel it in myself more clearly when I'm confronted with a pathetic attempt at an industrial form. So the geometrical form is alive in the same way that a basket of fruit is alive.

Rail: In *Jerome*, there's both an optical and graphic juxtaposition, with something happening both horizontally and vertically. Both possibilities can be in the same painting.

Westfall: The base of each vertical line is actually nested in the crook of the horizontal line below, almost like in an arm.

Rail: If you think about you, Siena, Nozkowski, Chris Martin, or Harriet Korman, there's a visual busyness that's not the kind that existed fifty years ago. It subliminally acknowledges how much information is in the world and how much of it is accessible.

Westfall: Right, the paintings become very crowded, with all their open spaces. They're crowded with perceptions.

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