

# ALEXANDRE



## Something of this World

by Barbara Weidle

New York painter Stephen Westfall is widely known for colorful abstractions that add a new twist to the classic grid format. *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith called them "delicately calibrated destabilizations" in a review in 2001. More recently, Westfall has opened up his repertoire, bringing narrative and figurative elements into his abstract paintings.

Westfall was born in 1953 in Schenectady, N.Y., and studied in California before settling in New York, where he has worked as an art critic and teacher (notably at Bard College and the School of Visual Arts). He exhibits with Lennon, Weinberg gallery in SoHo – the gallery plans a move to Chelsea soon – and a new body of work opens at Paal Gallery in Munich on Oct. 21, 2004.

Before the paintings were shipped to Europe, the artist and I sat down in his West Broadway studio for the following interview.

**Barbara Weidle:** The grid has become part of your personal style as a painter. How did you come to use this format?

**Stephen Westfall:** I think inspired by Agnes Martin I started very simply. I would make arithmetical divisions in the horizontal and the vertical and begin with that. What I quickly found was that I could not live with a simple grid. What is characteristic of my grids is that they dance and move and twist and turn. That has partly to do with some physiological make-up within me. I have "mixed dominance," which is unlike ambidexterity in that it means that you do some things with your right hand and some things with your left hand. I paint and eat and write with my left hand and do all music and sports with my right hand. So there is a kind of balanced asymmetry in my make-up. I couldn't live with the strict grid in this kind of almost somatic way. I found it very restricting.

**BW:** You are showing nine paintings in Munich that are rather different. Each work needs a lot of space around it. What is your concept for the show?

**SW:** In my recent shows, my work has had obviously modular elements, which recombine into different descriptive spaces. Some of the paintings are more abstract in the sense that they are nonreferential to a kind of space that the body can enter. And other paintings are more descriptively pictorial, even though they are made up of the same elements as the abstract paintings. So it has always been an objective of mine to make the work more diverse.

**BW:** You don't want to fulfill expectations?

**SW:** I want to show it all. And I don't want to repeat the same image, I don't want to have 10 or 15 variations of a grid painting like *Wonder Wall* in a show. I could do that but then I am just putting a constraint on my imagination. At the same time, I think, you can spot one of my paintings in a crowd. No matter what kind of painting it is. So that whole idea makes me crazy that someone would want me to do the same thing over and over again. It isn't that I don't repeat the images. Every sort of format that appears in my work is a product of some kind of repetition. The elements themselves are observably repetitive. They are modular.

The wager is that out of this repetition a kind of deep-structure evolution takes place. So the changes when they come are profound. But the changes don't mean that I just drop what I have been doing and then just repeat that change. Rather, it becomes another element in a group of possibilities that I reserve the right to retain, not put down in favor of the new thing. So, at any moment now the work can go in any number of directions. It's like if you are a pitcher in baseball, they say you are a good pitcher if you have three pitches. But what if you have like 11 pitches, or 15 pitches? Nobody can conceive of that in baseball, but I think you can conceive of that in art.

**BW:** The openness of the composition of your paintings, especially, the grid paintings, is evident if we look at *Wonder Wall*, for example.

**SW:** In a sense it's open, but it's also contained.

**BW:** Yes. There is a certain tension, a concentration in the middle.

**SW:** In other words, the grid could not continue beyond its openness because it's a wider proportion right at the edge. You can't imagine where the next line is going to come down. So it all comes in into that center group of eight contain squares. But in a funny way that puts you back into a sort of descriptive space. Like for instance the green and black horizon below the yellow or the red, the black and red horizon below the green. Then it really does become wide because you are sort of pushed back into the center, back into deep space each time you follow the horizon line.

**BW:** Your painting also has a lot to do with cityscape, especially with New York.

**SW:** Absolutely, aerial maps, vertical skyscrapers. Also, New York is a very worldly city, you see so many cultural images, all the cultures mixed together, and global patterns in buildings, in architecture. I am in New York but, for instance, my contact with the Indian community makes me think of India. You wouldn't see a six-part documentary like *Phantom India* in a city other than New York. And so even without traveling to India I am aware of those buildings in India where every story of the building has a different color. New York is so cosmopolitan and so many cultures here live together that it is just impossible to filter out. And you would not want to. It's impossible to filter out all that experience and information coming in.

**BW:** Do you try to find a certain order with your painting, to sort visual impressions? Working through the chaos?

**SW:** Well, yes, I think so. I think there is a sense of the studio as a kind of place that is not a sanctuary from the chaos but rather a place where the chaos gets processed into a clarification, an order, a kind of music that's coherent. So yes. The studio is the place where a kind of coherency takes shape. I am not thinking in the studio, "Man, I have to sort all that stuff out." What I am thinking is, "Oh, this is going to look really beautiful." And I am thinking a lot about beauty and humor.

**BW:** You find humor in the way you use color? Or in the way you let pop culture enter your work?

**SW:** What I mean by "pop" is not a visualization of a product but a use of sign graphics and sign color. Like the kind of color you see on billboards. Design elements that I can find on the street go into the

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painting. Grillwork, for instance, went into the painting called *Uptown*. That grillwork, which is very Viennese, I saw on a series of windows on a large apartment building on 88<sup>th</sup> Street between Fifth and Madison. Obviously, I took the elements and I refined them.

**BW:** So, what did you do, exactly?

**SW:** I made a quick little hand sketch on the spot. Then I used the arithmetical system to do a dumbed-down version.

**BW:** What system was it?

**SW:** It was a 24 by 24 inch canvas. And 24 by 24 is divisible by both 4 and 3. And so it's easy to create a kind of moving space within 4 and 3 and using 4 inch and 2 inch intervals. You get certain proportional shapes that can interlock and create both near and far space in terms of overlapping. The colors are primary and secondary. I think my paintings proceed into cultural complexity from the same sort of elements of simplicity.

**BW:** One also could compare it to ancient cultures? How they found their patterns of composition?

**SW:** Absolutely. No question about it. I always thought about Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies as they are imaged in Indian miniature and tanga paintings.

**BW:** Your color combinations sometimes have to do with Tibetan and Chinese Art, especially your use of green, red and yellow together.

**SW:** I am a poor practicing Buddhist.

**BW:** What do you mean by that?

**SW:** It means that I have received initiation. I don't do a lot of ceremonies religiously. I meditate when I can. Which in New York is often hard. But I try to take a Buddhist worldview, which is both compassionate and detached. And I almost never succeed. That's what I mean by saying that I'm a poor practicing Buddhist. But it has helped me to learn to reorder my priorities, what to hold on to and what to let go of on a day-to-day basis.

The most abstract or metaphysical philosophical concepts in Buddhism are discussed and explained in the sutras in a wonderfully humorous and enthusiastic concrete way. Such as form and emptiness, which you also can translate to figure and ground in painting. The way form and emptiness is discussed in the Pranaparamita Sutra is hilarious. They talk about how nothing has any independent existence. All existence is interdependent and dependent on relative conditions.

So nothing arrives independently. It's always connected to something. And I think in my painting that is one of the design's ethos, that everything is connected to everything else. Everything is adjacent and flush. There is no empty space. So emptiness in Buddhism does not mean emptiness in the way we think about emptiness in the west. It means, maybe, the state before we begin to interpret things; so that we allow things to be what they are before we interpret them.

**BW:** There are also traces of Native American art in your work.

**SW:** I lived in Santa Fe in New Mexico in 1978 and in '88. I have collected Navajo rugs and pueblo pottery.

**BW:** Some of your recent paintings have a narrative quality, balanced between figuration and abstraction that is also supported by the titles. There is a poetic context.

**SW:** Yes. I write poetry. I see the title as an opportunity to add a kind of field of mood or feel to the work. The paintings for Munich – five of

them you see now in my studio. There's *Signal*, and *Señor Stack*, which reminds me of a Spanish blanket. The painting with the two columns is *Canaan*. The big painting is *Wonder Wall*. I was thinking not only of the Oasis song *Wonder Wall* but also, for my generation, "Wonder Wall" was the title of the wonderful album by George Harrison, which came out around the same time as "Magical Mystery Tour." It's a great record. The painting with the flags and the roofline and the telephone wires is called *Western*. The painting with the Viennese pattern is called *Uptown*.

In a sense the titles are all about me. They are all about specific associations that I have and they describe something that is going on in the painting, too. They are really fixed on how the image might be interpreted. You see this landscape behind these two columns. And you can't quite get that because the two columns are there. That is like Moses looking at Canaan, he never gets there. It's a kind of sign version of a pleasant landscape with the big field with these gentle clouds. But it's also just about the rectangles. And the ziggurat roofline in *Western* is like those old rooflines that you find in western towns, Dodge City for example.

**BW:** Even without the title, *Western* creates a certain atmosphere. The blue color field evokes the sky and the brightness of the colors makes it sunny.

**SW:** Yes, exactly. And at the same time, the painting has other cultural references, too. The elements in that painting can also be found in, say, photographs by Stephen Shore and William Eggleston, who at about the same time were traveling around America making their color photographs. And color is so important for my work. I am from California, spent a lot of time in the Mountain West, and I am very interested in deriving a formal language from landscape and also finding landscape within a formal language.

**BW:** Some critics compare your work to the Precisionists, especially Charles Sheeler and Ralston Crawford.

**SW:** I think it's interesting to put Sheeler and Crawford together. I mean, *Canaan* is a kind of formal homage to Klimt. I was thinking of the vertical elements in Klimt's landscapes. And how dark with little jewels they are. It doesn't look like Klimt at all, but if you think about it, the painting can seem Viennese because of its design relationship to the architecture of a painting being somehow resonant with architecture in general. It is something that I am really interested in.

On the other hand my sensibility is classically American. And I have always felt that there is this sort of continuity of sign culture that begins with the post-Stieglitz American abstractionists like Stuart Davis and Ralston Crawford. And you can locate it in Marsden Hartley's abstractions, too, in his American Indian paintings, for instance.

Let's say like some of Hartley's abstractions and then go to Ralston Crawford and Stuart Davis and then you can find it in early Rauschenberg. The photographs of Helen Levitt, who finds geometrical shapes on the street, Ellsworth Kelly, Pop. Then makes it a point to isolate these geometric elements in a minimal sort of way. You know, Pop's relationship to Minimalism is evident.

**BW:** You would say, then, that

American culture in painting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is more important for your development than European culture?

**SW:** Well, I talked about Klimt. I didn't talk about Mondrian. But Mondrian obviously has major importance to my work. I cannot tell you how many times I went to see that Mondrian retrospective when it was at the Museum of Modern Art a few years ago. What I do would not be possible without Mondrian, but what I do would not be possible without Matisse, either. I think about the European artists of the first

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half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all the time. I think about Braque, about Matisse, Picasso, Mondrian. But I don't think about them in a way that says, "Okay, I can use this language and put it in a kind of overtly visible way into the surface of my painting," for instance.

My whole relationship with the paintings addressed to architecture is more direct. Think about Matisse's *The Red Studio*. For a lot of viewers, *The Red Studio* was the first painting where color was liberated from shape, where color could be the whole field. But then what happens is that Rothko and Newman take that idea and they turn color into the whole figure, they make the painting into the figure against the ground of the whole gallery or the whole wall.

*The Red Studio* still has figure-ground but it takes an American at the mid-century point to say, "Okay, the painting is the figure. And the world is the ground." And that kind of emblematic standing forth through the painting as an image object really takes place within American art first. Obviously, artists like Günther Förg and Imi Knoebel are very adept at it now. But I think it was an American idea. And that's my culture. That's what I grew up with.

When I was a teenager, before I ever knew I was going to be an artist, I would go to the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco and see American painting there, in architectural space. They would have things like a big Gene Davis or a big Al Held or a Rothko or a room full of Clyfford Still. There I got it. I got that a painting was this very direct address towards a public space, a space that could also be in the mind, like it could be an address to culture.

In my studio I am thinking about painting culture. And so all these artists and all these traditions are recombinant in the work. Some other artist might be in his studio thinking about the torment of his personal life. That doesn't interest me so much. Tolstoy said something like, "All happy families are alike." I think that all unhappiness is alike. It doesn't mean that I don't have tremendous periods of unhappiness in my life. But it does not occur to me to make it like that an image of my artwork.

**BW:** So you try to carry forward painting tradition.

**SW:** Yes. And I become aware that with any kind of historical distance things like Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism and Pop can be seen through the distant lens of history as having shared formal ideas and actually shared metaphysical ideas. And so a kind of humor can be found in the fact that something like Pop can coexist with abstraction, which ordinarily is held to be so purist and transcendental, while Pop is so very much of this world. One thing I try to do in my work is create the conditions for both -- like something of this world that also has an element of the transcendental in it.

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