

ALEXANDRE

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Stephen Westfall

Lennon, Weinberg
560 Broadway, at Prince Street
SoHo
Through June 2

Artistic originality can strike early or late, fast or slow. In the case of the painter Stephen Westfall, who is 48, it has arrived gradually over the last decade or so. His 11th New York show may be characteristically quiet, but it is a quiet knockout.

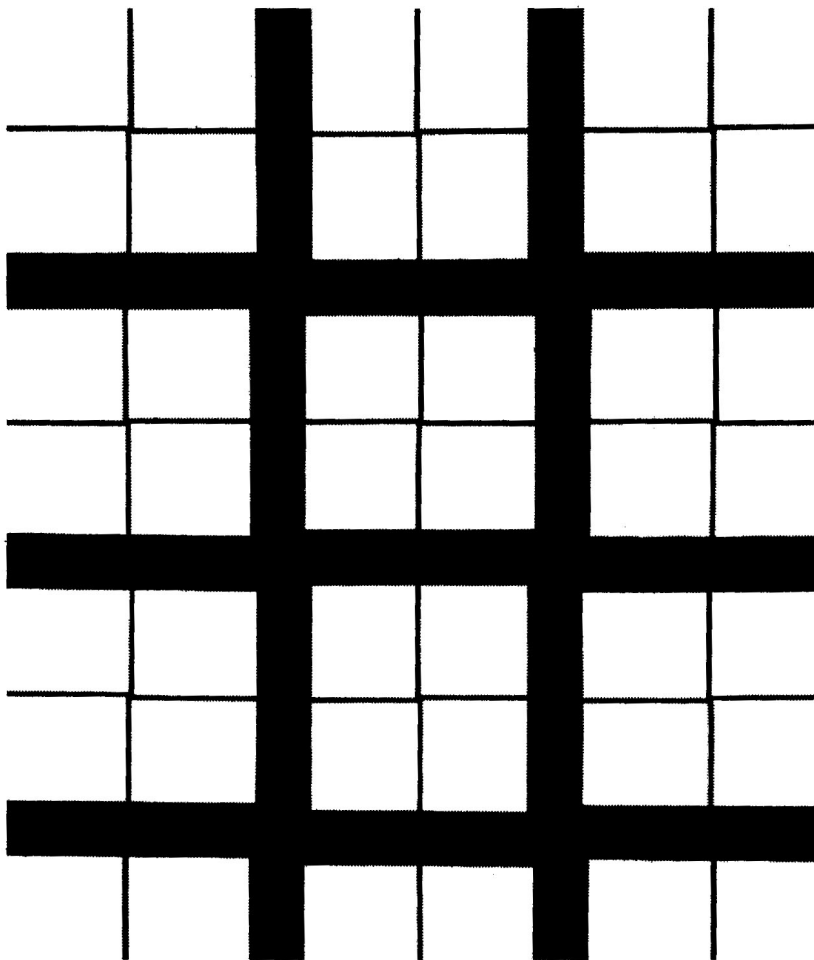
Delicately calibrated destabilization is Mr. Westfall's trademark. Over the years he has used it to revive the tired vocabulary of modernist abstraction, in particular the Mondrianist ideal of grids and color blocks. But he has also infused this vocabulary with just the right amount of worldly reference and postmodern play.

His tattersall grids have jagged intersections; his colors tend toward off-key, either pale or a little rich; his corners never square. With everything slightly ajar, a subtle yet marvelously optical jostling of form and space sets in.

In Mr. Westfall's latest work, this jostling has increased almost to the point of breaking into dance. Colors are stronger; the grids are sometimes doubled, which makes things more than more twice as complicated. Two big works, "Pranaparamita" and "Dogwood," are dominated by grids that expand into wide bands of blue or red, respectively; suddenly they read as fields of solid color, interrupted by infinitesimally irregular window-paned squares. These fields affirm that even the spindliest of Mr. Westfall's grids flip back and forth, reading first as lines, then as background color seeping through the cracks between the nestling squares.

More dramatic, the tiered compositions of "Bye Bye Blackbird" and "Underworld" include actual fields of solid color, freestanding verticals and, most evocative, an enlarged partial grid inserted across the canvas's top edge. This last device adds the odd domestic suggestion of sliding panels, cabinet doors or (even) a geometricized dust ruffle. In "Blackbird" especially, in which the partial grid is orange edged in black, it contributes to the sensation of peeking through someone's living room window to see only carpet and furniture legs.

ART IN REVIEW



Lennon, Weinberg Gallery

Never quite straight or square: A large detail of "Dogwood," an oil on canvas by Stephen Westfall in his show at Lennon, Weinberg in SoHo.

Mr. Westfall's paintings have always been spiced with allusions to the real world; in this show the wide-spaced triangles of "Grand Opening" evoke the strung-up pennants of a new store. Nonetheless, the degree of spatial depth and interior décor in "Blackbird" are new for Mr. Westfall. They seem borrowed from the paintings of John Wesley, but they have been put to good use, to multiply further the double lives that his paintings have always led.

ROBERTA SMITH

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