



Stephen Westfall, *In the Trees*, 1998, oil on canvas, 58 x 72".

Stephen Westfall New Paintings at Lennon-Weinberg

by Dominique Nahas

In his first exhibition at Lennon-Weinberg, Stephen Westfall continues to create sophisticated paintings that speak to an entire generation of painters who are fascinated with the grid, yet who aren't ready to hand over the reins to a retreaded Minimalism with angst. If anything, Westfall seems to be using the tight structure of vertical and horizontal bars to get away from the restrictions of the grid, whether seen as a mapping of territory or space or a transfer or measuring device, or as a theoretical model for architectural or societal space, while asserting that these associations will enhance any other readings he can slip into this pictorial device. Westfall's nuanced use of the overlaid or ever so lightly skewed grid is tempered by a delicate intuition as well as knowledge. If these are programmatic works, it's because he knows the limitations

and the richness of his subject matter, formally, iconographically, historically.

Westfall is a top Abstract painter because he recognizes that his works have to oscillate between theoretical or abstract models of space, and literal or figurative models. He takes his work far because he makes it difficult for the viewer to determine whether his marks are more additive than reductive. And this level of confusion adds to the mystery and intellectual velocity of his work. It looks senile in reproductions; the surface values are so subtle, they are half the message. In *North*, 1999, for example, a blue grid and another grid with lighter blue lines seem to mesh at some points but not at others, and the smudges and hesitation in coloring are in direct contrast to the pristine, controlled image one gets from afar. Westfall's

strength is the play between regularity and irregularity, the play of uniformity and an optical residual effect like disrupted overlaid panes of glass or twisted rope lines. The sensation of seeing a hand-painted object versus one made by machine is a game played here, and wonderfully and skillfully so by the artist. The stakes are raised by Westfall's seemingly deliberate hesitations and irregularities in the surface control of his paint, which recalls the effect of seeing the quivering surfaces on the bars of Mondrian's grid works close at hand. In this regard, the small *Bijou*, 1998, in the back window gallery, speaks directly to Mondrian, with its black, pink, light sandy ochre coloration. Understatement is often a virtue and Westfall's work has plenty of it. It recalls Mondrian's sentiments in 1937: "If all real art is 'the sum total of emotions aroused by purely pictorial means' [the non-figurative artist's] art is the sum of the emotions aroused by plastic means," yet Westfall's stance is to reject Mondrian's additional words: "That which distinguishes [the non-figurative artist] from the figurative artist is the fact that in his creations he frees himself from individual sentiments and from particular impressions he receives from the outside, and that he breaks loose from the domination of the individual inclination within him." Westfall wants "sentiments" and "impressions... from the outside" to co-mingle with a historicized rendition of so-called non-objective art where the once inviolate whole of form and content of non-objective art is carefully broken asunder.