
STEPHEN WESTFALL

PEOPLE SAY THAT STEPHEN WESTFALL MAKES GRID PAINTINGS, but it's more precise to say that he makes paintings that make *use* of grids. His grids are scaffolds in a can-do utopia; his modernism a pragmatic American one in which abstraction is not as much about reducing things down to their bare, mystical essences as a matter of finding and employing structures for expression. It's a clean job—the light is bright, and nothing baroque, no shadowy corners. There is a sanguine industriousness to the image of Stephen Westfall, coffee cup in hand, greeting a canvas in the morning for the day's work, but his process is artisanal, not industrial: he sits in front of an easel and builds up painting layers slowly, just a tiny drip or under-painting barely visible here or there under the clean edges and deliberate colors, colors that will be worked up to an eventual chromatic intensity that broadcasts from across the room.

Like all modernists Westfall gets excited about how commonplace things look, from gas station signs to firehouse facades to ice cream sundaes, but his paintings are forged in the synchronous time of modernism and postmodernism, as conscious of vernacular architecture as they are of sublime space. As he said in a 2006 interview in *The Brooklyn Rail,* "There is a doubleness to things."[1] So I don't think it's a stretch to begin by looking at his grids as actual signs for the objects that they resemble, like shelves, scaffolds or houses. You could view them as matter-of-factly as you might the shelves in a Haim Steinbach or the furniture in a Franz West. Westfall's paintings on canvas are roughly the size of cabinets, and they are sturdily built and fashioned with a pragmatic modularity. And they hold a lot of stuff—they do double, triple, polymathic duty as containers for shifting visual signs.

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1. *The Brooklyn Rail,* "In Conversation: Stephen Westfall with John Yau," April 2006.

But here is precisely where the idea of their *work* ends and their sense of *play* comes in. Westfalls are pictures, and moreover flattened pictures that drive toward the abstracted space of pictorial signification—they are signs. As the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary in semiotics, a Westfall painting starts to become a painting precisely in the play between sign and meaning. They are deeply at play in an open field of meanings and complexly punning, flipping, shifting, sliding images.

Sometimes his paintings are signs for things they *are* (a wall or window) and sometimes they are signs for things they are *not* (a dust ruffle, a used car lot, or a face). Sometimes they are stand-ins for pictures of signs (an abstracted billboard in a minimalist desert). Usually they traverse from one kind of sign to another as they go along, in a shifting scale that expands and contracts from abstraction to figuration, from anecdote to synecdoche, and back again. For instance, what first looks like the simple meeting of a blue and a green in a comic book panel may come to seem like the ultimate horizon at the back of the world, only to be flattened back again momentarily into a modernist two-tone.

This is just *one* way they work. Meanwhile, they oscillate by means of their famously jiggling grids, with edges akimbo, blinking on and off, in and out, back and forth. These paintings just won't stay put. As they toggle back and forth in a kind of hyperkinesis, meaning shifts too. They mean one thing and then the next, referring to one thing and then another. You think they're flags and then they're breath. You think they're architecture and then they're comic book panels. You think it's a Buddhist temple, then it's a rug. Or all of that at once. As Westfall puts it, his paintings are "crowded with perceptions."[2]

Part of the visual paradox of Westfall's paintings is what happens between the closure of their painted forms to the openness of their effect. In his 1892 essay *The Stream of Consciousness,*[3] William James observed, "We ought to say a feeling of *and*, and a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*."

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2. Ibid.

3. *The Stream of Consciousness*, by William James, chapter 11 from *Psychology*, 1892.

And we ought to view Westfall's paintings as accumulations, built from a combination of prompts—objects, poems, paintings, buildings, jokes, ideals, tactilities—forged or housed together in a factual manner but lit from within by a kind of jittery nervous system.

Then again, these accumulations are pictured in serene and still spaces, unafflicted by the laws of entropy, in a place where the center always holds. Their imagery is positioned exactly between the dichotomy of the deep background and tactile foreground, or of the *here* and the *there*.

In Westfall's "haptic objectivism" (a term I am borrowing from Rosalind Krauss's essay *Agnes Martin, The/Cloud/*[4]), the paintings center their operations in front of a seemingly objective, unblinking perceiver, and their scale is made to his or her measure pragmatically, to what she or he can see or could touch. Everything is either *here* at arm's length, or else *there* at vision's edge on the very depth of the field, or halfway between here and there, with space extending levelly out in front or just above you, as if the world really *is* square and still. These are not vertiginous spaces; they don't tilt or whirl, dip or tumble. The ground is never pictured far below, nor at an angle, nor in an irregular or moving space. Instead, the action of these paintings occurs as in solo confrontation with a window, a wall, a mirror or the face of another person. While the monkey mind may be rattling the tree, the ground is still.

Westfall's paintings take place facing a threshold of void space. In theory, a threshold is a liminal space where transition and change can occur, and it is this container of open space and its potential uncertainties that gives rise to underlying emotional intentions in the work. Westfall wants us to move back and forth in a contemplative and psychological time of projection and memory, where time is just another kind of painting space. But the threshold here is configured through the reassuring planes of the architectonic, so the possibility of upheaval seems to lie offstage or underneath this world. Their primary form of motion is not in their physical conditions, but in their

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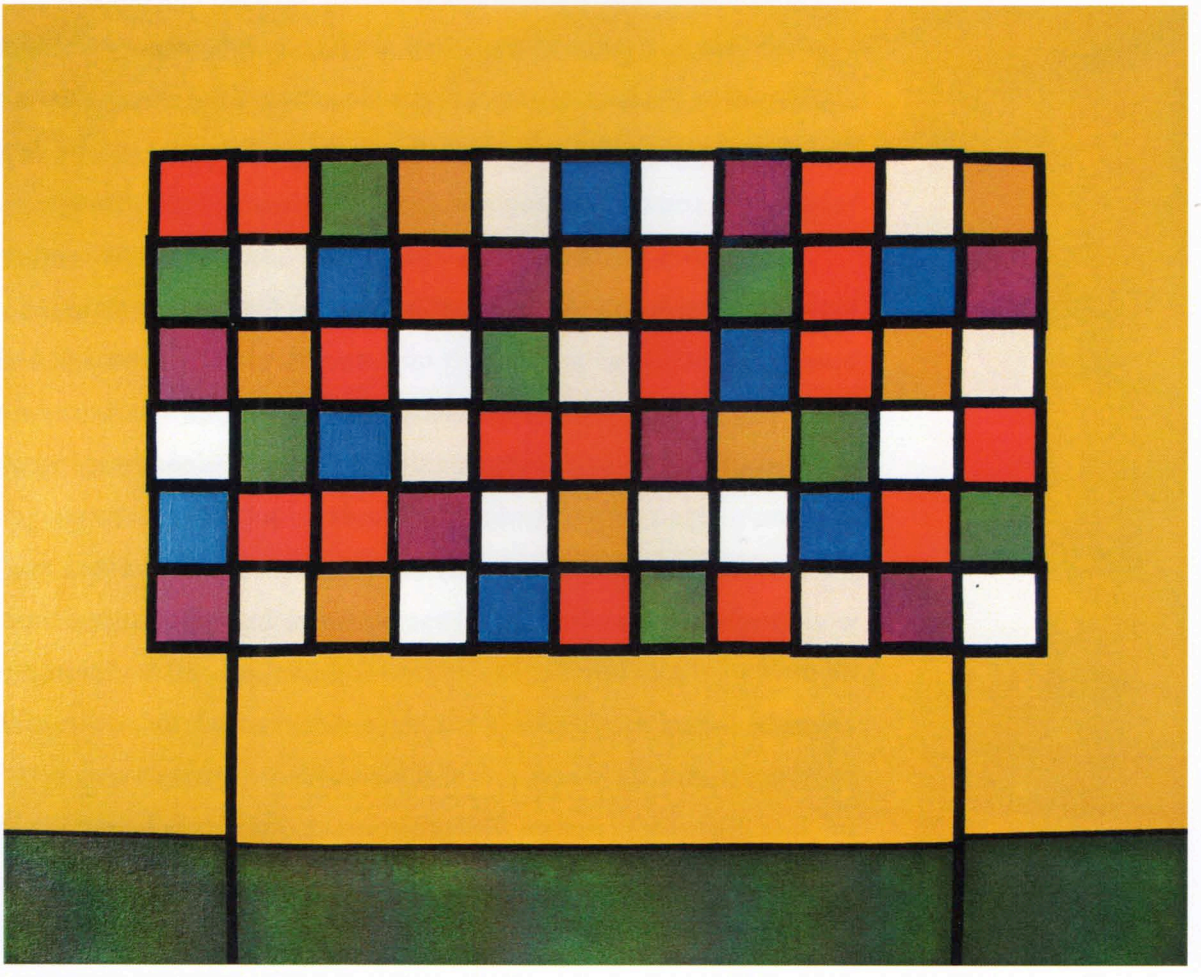
4. *Agnes Martin: The/Cloud/*, by Rosalind Krauss, 1993, reprinted in *Bachelors*, MIT Press, 1999.



LOOKING WEST

2006, 24 x 30 inches, oil and alkyd on canvas

implications as puzzlers—in the double entendres and pictorial paradoxes which animate these even horizons, and in the emotional and mnemonic associations that radiate out from them.

For example, in the painting *Looking West,* (2006) there is a full-spectrum tiled game board grid, made of cherry-orange-persimmon-mustard-blue-green-white-pink Rubik's-Cube-style units, suspended above and in front of you like a big billboard against a flat highway. Longing and romance are implicit in any western sunset space, but here the sky is a cheerful French's mustard yellow and the ground is a green from the valley of the Jolly Green Giant. The grid is propped up by the precise vertical risers of its own structure. This billboard is, of course, a painting-within-a-painting, both a classic Westfall painting and a self-reflexive quote of one. (What also comes to mind is the famous Stephen Shore photograph of a photographic billboard of a landscape in a landscape.) The horizon line under the billboard is jigged slightly off-kilter in a little trompe l'oeil shuffle, where you can no longer tell whether you're looking at a thing or a place. In fact, when I asked him about the painting-within-painting structures of *Looking West* and *Speedway,* both from 2006, Westfall was positively gleeful at the notion that *all* of his paintings, even the simple abstract plaid ones, could be paintings-within-paintings, but ones whose planes are stretched to the exact measure of the canvas itself, so you can't see their punch lines. Such is their wit, their play. This is what Westfall means when he says that his paintings contain "a generous irony, as opposed to a cynical irony."[5] And it is in these generative realms where Westfall orchestrates his greatest circuitries, where his paintings are at play in a synchronic time and an oblique light that plays between signs, figures, figures of speech, and us, their beholders.

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5. *The Brooklyn Rail,* "In Conversation: Stephen Westfall with John Yau," April 2006.

Amy Sillman is a painter who lives and works in Brooklyn and Tivoli, New York. Her work has been widely shown in the United States and Europe, and she occasionally writes about other painters.