

# ALEXANDRE HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

## Paintings Glimpsed from a Taxi

Stephen Westfall seems to be the geometric painter who cannot do variations on a motif, which gives his work an interesting twist.



John Yau September 23, 2018



Stephen Westfall, "After Sunrise" (2018), oil and alkyd on canvas, 41 3/4 x 49 3/4 inches (all images courtesy Lennon, Weinberg)

I met Stephen Westfall around 30 years ago, though I cannot remember the circumstances. At the beginning of this century, we both taught in the Bard MFA program for two summers. Currently, we teach in the visual arts department at Mason Gross School of the Arts (Rutgers University), occasionally passing each other in the hall. I would define our relationship as respectful and affectionate colleagues.

In 2006, I [interviewed](#) Westfall for *The Brooklyn Rail*, and in [2013](#) and [2016](#), I reviewed his exhibitions at Lennon, Weinberg, which has represented him since 1997. I see Westfall as part of a constellation of artists interested in the use of geometry to section off the painting's surface (Linda Besemer, Harriet Korman, Odili Donald Odita, Gary Stephan, and Don Voisine). Collectively, this group's accomplishment — no small thing — is to establish different sets of constraints that widen the purist approach of artists such as Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, John McLaughlin, and Barnett Newman. As their work has borne out, they have attained a surprising amount of wiggle room where there was thought to be none.

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Stephen Westfall, "Mitra" (2018), oil and alkyd on canvas, 42 1/2 x 42 1/2 inches

As Westfall stated in our interview, he did not see the grid as “a unitary form.” For him, “Agnes Martin was like an open door,” rather than one that has been closed and locked. This is what he shares with the other artists I have cited. What distinguishes his work from theirs is the particular pressures he applies to skew the grid, so that it would appear as if, in the artist’s words, the “the whole thing could tremble and be knocked over.” Vulnerability infiltrates imperviousness, in a way that reveals the extent to which it had been there all along.

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Stephen Westfall, "Solid Gone" (2018), oil and alkyd on canvas, 72 x 18 inches

Over the past decade, two things seem to have brought Westfall's desire to skew the grid into stronger focus. In 2007, he did his first wall painting and has gone on to do a number of public installations and commissions, including the recent opening, in June 2018, of three murals in laminated glass for the 30th Avenue elevated subway stop in Astoria, Queens. In these commissions, Westfall begins to make incomplete patterns against a white field.

The other inspiration emerged in 2009, when he spent a year in Rome on a Rome Prize Fellowship and discovered Cosmatesque floor mosaics, which were developed in Italy in the 12th and 13th centuries. Whereas tessellated floors are customarily made of similarly sized square tiles fitted together, Cosmatesque floors feature different-sized triangular pieces set against larger geometric shapes that are often made of white marble — further evidence that the ascendancy of open and closed grids seesaws throughout history, with artists and architects never arriving at a perfect resolution.

In his current exhibition, *Stephen Westfall: The Patchwork Veil*, at Lennon, Weinberg (September 14 – October 27, 2018), the artist seems to be pushing

a particular possibility, absorbed from the vital lessons of his public commissions and year in Italy, in each painting, with some works being more visually captivating than others. Permeating the entire exhibition is his restlessness, underscored by the different formats he uses to paint on, from a square to a diamond to horizontal and vertical rectangles, including tall, narrow, totem-like canvases. He seems to be the geometric painter who cannot do variations on a motif, which gives his work an interesting twist. He is on the other end of the spectrum from geometric artists with a signature approach.

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In “Solid Gone” (2018), which measures 72 inches by 18 inches, Westfall has fitted together two sets of isosceles triangles and right triangles at the top and bottom of the painting, forming two right trapezoids. A wide white diagonal band rising from left to right separates them, as well as echoes the white gallery wall behind the canvas, isolating the color shapes further. Painted blue and yellow, the top trapezoid flips between two triangles sharing one side to a pyramid with a blue and yellow face, night and day. However, instead of mirroring the top pairing, at the bottom Westfall adds two smaller scalene triangles, very different in size to each other, to one side of the larger black triangle, which locks the pink one into the lower left-hand corner.

The larger of the two scalene triangles is cerulean blue, while the noticeably smaller one is orange. In terms of color, they seem to be reacting to the larger black and pink triangles beneath them, but the viewer is not sure how. The pairing of the two triangles forming the trapezoids (blue and yellow at the top and pink and black on the bottom) is binary, dark and light, with the dark larger shape holding the smaller lighter one in place. And yet, even as you notice this symmetry, you also recognize the ways Westfall has undone it, from the variety in the color pairings to the addition of the scalene triangles.

The geometric painter Kenneth Noland wanted to make paintings that could be seen in their entirety in an instant. Westfall wants to slow the viewer down. In “Tune in Tomorrow” (2018), which measures 60 by 36 inches, Westfall paints a yellow diamond in the upper right quadrant, with its right point touching the canvas’s right edge. Blue and green concentric bands separated by white space of equal width partially surround it. The left point of the green, diamond-shaped band touches the left edge, directly across from the yellow point touching the right side. We seem to be getting a glimpse of something that we cannot see in its entirety — the interruption feels very urban, like a storefront glimpsed from a taxi.

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The painting invites you to think about the relationship of the forms to the format. The placement of the yellow diamond, with its bottom point resting on the invisible horizon line dividing the painting into equal halves, is one of the ways that Westfall enables us to consider the internal relationships. Another is his placement of a red isosceles triangle in the lower left-hand corner, suggesting that there is a much larger band of red surrounding this partial view. Meanwhile, a green triangle is wedged into the upper right-hand corner, further anchoring the forms within the painting as well as underscoring their incompleteness.

In “Wild Card” (2018), which is twice as high as it is wide, a fleshy pink diamond, floating in the middle of the canvas, is the only complete form within the varied color pattern of diamonds holding it in place. It is impossible to discern an underling pattern to Westfall’s color choices, in which most of the major shapes (other than the white, which could be read as a cropped diamond or a blank field, and the small yellow and orange triangles) do not seem match. This refusal to match colors is a rejection of the visual comforts offered by the grid and by pattern and decoration. In the nearly square “Veil” (2018), the plane formed by the differently colored trapezoids and triangles seems to tilt away from the picture plane as well as warp slightly in space as it rises from the bottom edge. The pressure exerted against the edges of these tightly fitted geometric shapes is not uniform.



It seems to me that by deploying his geometric forms to twist the picture plane, and by refusing to establish a repeating pattern of colors and shapes, as he does in a number of the paintings, Westfall has reconfigured possibilities associated with Op Art, Pattern and Decoration, and 1960s geometric abstraction, taking the unitary organization inherent to these styles into a fresh territory. In Westfall’s paintings, the parts begin to gain parity with the whole.

[Stephen Westfall: The Patchwork Veil continues at Lennon, Weinberg](#) (\$14 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 27.

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