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**THE BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ARTSEEN

STEPHEN WESTFALL

*Jesus and Bossa Nova*

by Robert Berlind

LENNON, WEINBERG, INC. | NOVEMBER 7 – DECEMBER 28, 2013

Now that it has been a full century since the advent of non-representational painting in the West, and after so many styles since its loss of historical authority, what are the chances of an “alternative modernist, abstract vision of plenitude?” These words are Stephen Westfall’s in “The Hard-Edge Sign,” his *Art in America* article of last April. The phrase referred to the work of California artist Karl Benjamin, but it succinctly signals Westfall’s own aesthetic. The bright, snappy designs and colors of his exhibition at Lennon, Weinberg declare an emphatic, optimistic confidence in the ongoing modernist tradition. And they are entirely contemporary.

Westfall deploys grids, diagonally placed squares and parallelograms, bold stripes, and chevrons in finely tuned formats that contain multiple gestalts. The six-foot square “Scheherazade” (2013), for example, shows simultaneously: two nested, diagonally disposed squares, an upright four-quadrant square within the larger square of the canvas, and a cruciform arrangement leaving four squares at the corners. The whole surface is composed of equilateral triangles. Color interactions further complicate “Scheherazade’s” presentation, producing a succession of readings. A signal feature of this and others of Westfall’s paintings is that, despite the initial modular, symmetrical format, colors are normally assigned free of any imposed regularity. (There are two exceptions to this general rule in the show). As a result, unpredictable groupings and what I’ll call “secondary” and “tertiary”



Stephen Westfall, 'Scheherazade,' 2013. Oil and alkyd on canvas, 72 x 72". Image courtesy of the artist and Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

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compositions emerge as you stay within the painting. The palette of intense and subtle hues, always opaque with uninflected surfaces, achieves various effects of translucency, overlapping planes, a Hofmann-esque “push/pull,” and alternate or multiple readings that in some cases emerge only after sustained attention. Westfall uses color both to intensify and to undermine the frontal, otherwise symmetrical immediacy.

Color-based geometric abstractions of most artists tend to conform to a consistent formal structure, at least within a given period of their work. Think of the otherwise dissimilar Josef Albers, Ad Reinhardt, Ellsworth Kelly, Gene Davis, and Anne Truitt. Since making an extended series of the cannily off-kilter linear grids for which he first became known, Westfall has produced an extensive array of diverse geometric formats. His various designs may call up Islamic or Italian tile work, Native American weaving, Tantric art, graphic signage, or architectural façades. His precision of execution is in the service of a wide range of cultural references and metaphors. Some earlier works conjured buildings seen through a window, as though to reverse the familiar process of abstracting from an illustrative description of the “real” world. At other times he has gathered several contrasting motifs into one painting, patchwork fashion.

A singular painting, “Star” (2010), stacks two centrally placed four-point stars on an eight-pointed star peeping out behind them against quadrants of diagonal yellow and green stripes that radiate from the center. Each star segment is divided into two colors, giving it the illusion of three-dimensional solids, the only such suggestion in the show.

The exhibition is titled after one of its paintings, “Jesus and Bossa Nova,” (2013) evoking a religious orientation and a lively Latino *sabor*, one energizing the other by their conjunction. Or, for some, both terms will be exotic. It and other titles—“Djinn,” (2013) “Cherbourg,” (2013) “Time Tells Us What To Do” (2013)—may indicate orders of content not immediately evident from the paintings themselves. But the many variations suggest that Westfall is responding to a wide range of imagery, information, art historical awareness, and, of course, personal impulses. Such associations are not a matter of appropriation but rather, of working within a greatly expanded contemporary visual and semiotic frame of reference. If one of his goals is immediacy of impact, another is a subsequent richness of contemplative experience that motivated spiritualists such as Mondrian and Malevich, and the creators of Eastern mandalas. The work moves between a meditative orientation and everyday, vernacular readings. Westfall’s paintings, while rigorous in visual concept and exacting execution, are idiosyncratically allusive and expressive. His invention and execution of new work within a field of apparent contradictions is a masterful balancing act.

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