

## Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

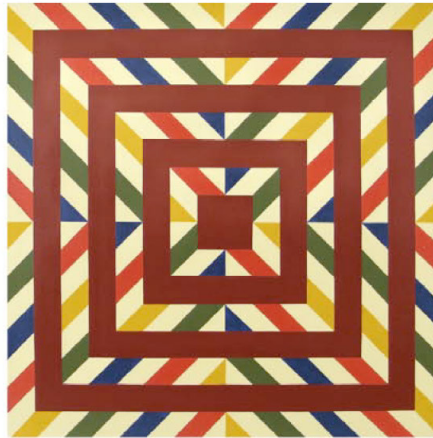
APRIL '09

### STEPHEN WESTFALL LENNON, WEINBERG

Stephen Westfall is a veteran abstractionist, a kind of practicing Mondrianist and one of the few artists still able to get fresh juice from a formalist approach to painting. His latest show further refines the major themes of his recent work. All the paintings in the show are oil and alkyd on canvas and of a small to medium size, except for a 104-inch-square wall painting in bold acrylic, *The Truth is Marching On (For Albert Ayler)*, 2008.

Westfall's paintings remind the viewer of some other piece of art, or of something often seen (window, door, billboard) or otherwise strangely familiar. These associations prove to be short-lived or even false as one slowly realizes that the work rests on shifting ground and will not be pinned down by expectation or philosophy. Westfall is an aficionado of most forms of Western culture (including pop songs and improvisational jazz) as well as an admirer of Eastern (particularly Buddhist) thought and visual art. This combination of knowledge of art history and philosophical curiosity contributes to visual experiences marked by edgy stasis or prolonged elation. He doesn't hesitate to imbue the layout of a '60s Frank Stella with stunning mandalalike presence.

Several paintings in the show operate using the repeating chevron device familiar from late-1960s post-painterly abstraction. But Westfall's paintings always perform with unexpected shifts. Edges don't quite square up, "horizon" lines toggle up and down, and meaning jiggles. *Too Much Love, Within You and Without You and Dharma* (all 2008) similarly position the chevron in a composition divided into four quarters. Bands alternate in color and angles point toward the center. The chevron arrangement is then overlaid with



Stephen Westfall: *Too Much Love*, 2008, oil on canvas, 30 inches square; at Lennon, Weinberg.

a system of concentric squares made up of mostly single-color bands. Determining what is underneath and what's on top quickly becomes a dizzying conundrum as hues and values shift between the stripes and the system of squares. The paintings are like mad heraldry.

Especially distinctive is the artist's deployment of color. What might be just another skillful hard-edge painting is often made magical and always musical by his concentrated mixing and application of amazingly specific and odd hues. No color in the paintings is what it first appears to be. White is never exactly white; it lists toward buff or blue. Reds go strangely orange, and blues feel brownish. Westfall's working knowledge of the interaction of color makes for a singular experience that sneaks up wearing an ordinary disguise.

—Stephen Mueller

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