

ART PAPERS

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In "A B C Art," her 1965 essay about minimal art, critic Barbara Rose begins with a discussion of the influence of Malevich's "Slavic soul" and Duchamp's "rationalist mind," and goes on to posit that minimalism is a "curious synthesis" of these two artists' work. While Malevich's practice was a search for the absolute, and Duchamp rejected that very notion, both artists practiced repudiation and elected formal severity. These characteristics informed minimalist works of the 1960's, establishing minimalism as both an end and a means. While minimalism was, for a moment, radical and somewhat strict, it was also filled with numerous possibilities for play and deconstruction. So much so that, for forty years, its influence has led artists to create an astounding range of objects. In recent years, New York painter Stephen Westfall has assuredly and thoughtfully infused aspects of minimalism with a pop sensibility. The spirits of Duchamp and Malevich inform his recent project *Grand Opening* and entertain the viewer [Solvent Space; October 12 - December 1, 2007].

The title alludes to the painted rows of large, strikingly-colored pennant forms that cover both the space's largest wall and a second narrower one. Methodically painted by graduate students at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) following Westfall's directions, the interior of Solvent Space became a hybrid of minimalism's systemic, hard-edged painting and the festive marketing schemes of a used car lot. Such a fusion of high art with an everyday American consumerist icon would please Duchamp for at least four reasons: first, because it's fun; second, because it's directly appropriated from an existing painting- Westfall's *Winslow*, 2005; and, fourth, because of the site's industrial connection. The smallish box-like building that houses Solvent Space was, in fact, part of an industrial complex where Philip Morris cigarette cartons were printed. But Duchamp would have found one thing missing: the erotic. This lack may be the legacy of Malevich's solemnity: although Westfall's expedition into irony and humor signals a welcome attitude change or a broadening of this practice, he remains a painter of utmost seriousness and eminence. Westfall's work exemplifies a demanding attachment to minimalism's severe geometry, a critical engagement with the history of painting, a light-



installation view

heartedness and, at times, a mischievous opticality that make him a smart and skillful practitioner of post-historical painting. His ability to simultaneously embrace and escape formalism is uncanny. Riffing on Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's post-structuralist take on art's latitude, Westfall's paintings play with minimalism because they're not minimalism. He knows this, he knows minimalism, and, quoting Derrida, he knows that "deconstruction is... always already contained within the architecture of the work."

The second major component of the installation is a large chevron. Composed of broad stripes of bold color that begin to repeat themselves in sequence, this familiar yet striking figure simultaneously suggests outward and inward movement. More dialectical than paradoxical, this large-scale form seems to represent the conceptual kinetics of Westfall's creative process and critical mind- a linked circuitry that balances the integrity of self-critical painting with the pleasures and amusements of popular culture. Accordingly, his paintings promote an aesthetic and conceptual stance that simultaneously focuses on the painting as a self-contained structure and its link to the history of painting, while acknowledging the undeniable, if understated presence of human emotions and the outside world.

-Paul Ryan