

HYPERALLERGIC

Stephen Westfall Unscrews His Grids Even More

by John Yau on June 26, 2016



Aeolian, 2014, 72 x 66", oil and alkyd on canvas

Ten years ago, in an interview that I did with Stephen Westfall ([Brooklyn Rail](#), April 2006), he said that he was interested in a skewed grid because it looked as if "the whole thing could tremble and be knocked over." In 2007, Westfall did his first wall paintings at Solvent Space, Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond, Virginia. In 2009, he won the Rome Prize Fellowship and spent a year in the Eternal City. Always keenly attuned to sign culture and the patterns that are part of the background of our daily life, Westfall discovered Cosmatesque mosaics.

Developed by the Cosmati family during the 12th and 13th centuries, the mosaics are made of inlaid marble and glass. However, whereas tessellated floors are commonly made of similarly-sized square tiles, Cosmatesque floors are made of variously-sized triangular pieces of glass and stone against larger, geometric white marble shapes. In

paintings Westfall did on the wall and on canvas that were influenced by Cosmatesque designs, his use of different-sized triangles always felt moored, despite whatever trembling and optical flicker took place within their borders.

In his current exhibition, *Crispy Fugue State*, at Lennon, Weinberg (May 12 – July 29, 2016), there are eleven paintings dated between 2014 and 2016, with most of them done this year, ranging in size between 26 x 24 inches and 84 x 60 inches. In the best paintings, which are towards the back of this long, narrow, railroad-flat-like space, Westfall has unmoored his compositions, breaking down the border between portable painting and wall. In fact, it is as if the further you walk into the gallery, the more everything loosens up, moving away from the constraints that he has used to such powerful effect in his earlier work.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the differences between three modestly scaled paintings from 2015-16 ("Fugue," "Bower," and "Cortona") and such larger paintings, such as "Aeolian" (2014), "The Future Advances and Recedes" (2015), and "Delta" (2016). In "Fugue" (2016), a grid of squares divided into fitted triangles of either red and white or blue and umber triangles, is laid out in a checkerboard pattern. This is something Westfall knows how to do well. It is possible to rearrange the pattern in the mind's eye, isolate a diamond made of blue and white triangles, for example, but that kind of looking doesn't necessarily give you much to reflect upon.

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While the figure-ground relationship shifts in tandem with our changing focus, and the painting stays active, I suspect Westfall got understandably tired of doing this, no matter how good he got at it. In the end the restraints that provided his platform became limiting, and, to his credit, he didn't want to stay with what he had mastered. You might say that once Westfall constructed his prison, he decided that, instead of constantly redecorating it, he would move elsewhere. It wasn't a process of building upon what he mastered, but unlearning it and breaking loose. If we go by dates (and why shouldn't we?), "Aeolian" (2014) is a breakthrough painting. On the left side, a black triangle extends down from the top edge, like a geometric stalactite, to join a configuration consisting of a red triangle to its left and a cerulean diamond attached at its bottom point. The lowest tip of the blue diamond is balanced on the painting's bottom edge. On the far right side, a black triangle is pointed into the bottom right corner, and rests comfortable there, while a yellow triangle juts in from the painting's upper right side.

Separating these clusters of colored diamonds and triangles is a wide, white zigzag running, like a geometric lightning bolt, from the canvas's top left edge to its center bottom. One might initially think the painting is unfinished, that the artist hasn't decided what colors and shapes (triangles or diamonds) to put there. At the same time, the white of the painting links it to the gallery's white wall. Is the white zigzag part of the painting or part of the wall or both? Is it the ground on which the other colors have been laid down, or a purposefully painted white geometric shape equal to the ones around it? Is it a sign of incompleteness, or evidence of architecture and the surrounding environment invading the painting?

One might have concluded that one could go no further than the shaped paintings of Ellsworth Kelly, that he had all the bases covered. After him there was only the possibility of parody and pastiche. Or so the narrative of postmodern goes. For years Westfall has worked in the vein of geometric abstraction. At times, he has tilted toward the representational; other times, he has been more purely abstract. His inspirations have ranged from lesser-known American Precisionists, such as Ralston Crawford, to Shaker quilts, to the Harlequin pattern we see in early Picasso paintings. He has also written beautifully about the work of Ward Jackson, Elizabeth Murray, and Jane Wilson. He is someone who loves and believes in paint, but that doesn't necessarily mean that he would be able to move into territory that is all his own. For much of his career, he has been pushing against the historical conventions we have long associated with hard-edge, geometric abstraction. His wall paintings seemed like an extension of what he had done before, geometry on a larger, immersive scale.

What I don't think Westfall expected was how making wall paintings might lead back to portable paintings with a fresh eye. In "Aeolian," "The Future Advances and Recedes" and "Delta," he no longer relies on establishing a stable part-to-whole relationship. The diagonal orientation of the partial rectangles (or eccentric shapes) – with their edges cropped by the painting's physical edges – breathes instability and incompleteness into the composition, almost making the work seem like a fragment. This instability is enhanced by the torque of the colored shapes, suggesting they are detached by a hair's breadth from the picture plane. This is fresh territory, a domain that Westfall has started to define for himself. It doesn't look back, as some of his earlier paintings did, but forward, acknowledging that disruption and dissolution are inescapable features of daily life. Nothing, we should have learned by now, is ever secure.

[Crispy Fugue State](#) continues at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc. (514 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 29.