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Fresh Geometry: Gary Stephan and Alina Tenser

by John Yau on March 27, 2016

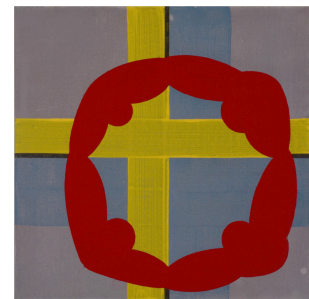


You know something is going on when you stare at work hanging on one wall and forget to look at what is on the gallery's other three walls. This was the case with Gary Stephan in the two-person exhibition, [Gary Stephan / Alina Tenser](#), at Susan Inglett Gallery (March 17–April 23, 2016). Seventeen square, abstract paintings, modest in scale at 20 x 20 inches, are arranged in three staggered rows spanning the gallery's longest wall. For all the affinities

that these paintings share — from the viscosity of the brushstrokes to the overlay of cutout shapes to the recurring geometric forms — they never come across as variations on a theme.

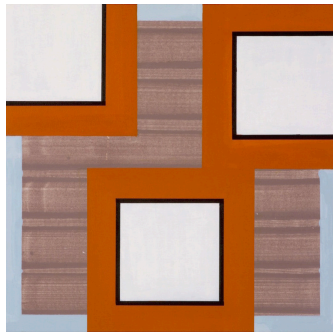
Piet Mondrian was able to achieve this level of singularity with his purist vocabulary, but that was more than 70 years ago. In contrast, Stephan brings together a diverse vocabulary consisting of evenly applied, striated bands; open and enclosed geometric shapes; solid vertical and horizontal bands; cutout and cartoony shapes. The differences are not dramatic or theatrical, but they are evident. Done in acrylic, the mostly muted palette changes from painting to painting. Stephan uses yellow in at least five of the 17 paintings, but it seems just different enough each time.

Although each painting is a square — an abstract shape — Stephan is unwavering in his desire to undo its grip without denying its identity. As I have written in a prior review, he turns a "figure-ground relationship into a Gordian Knot, a layered, two-dimensional Rubik's Cube that never quite fits together nor can ever be taken completely apart." The other thing he does — and this is new to this body of work — is place open-ended shapes along the canvas's physical edge, turning the painting's square into a glimpse of a larger, elusive pattern.



By bringing together the formal issues of the figure-ground relationship while exploiting the spatial tensions between the painting's interior shapes and their aggregate, exterior pattern, Stephan is able to rethink composition in abstraction, which — let's face it — has pretty much been stuck between all-overness on one hand and centrally located forms on the other ever since Clement Greenberg's salad days.

Stephan's rethinking of composition in abstraction is an important development in contemporary painting since — among other things — it undoes the stale, oppressive narrative culminating in the death of composition. In place of this, there is a continuous tug-of-war between the sectioned parts and the whole with neither side winning. Stephan refuses to let the painting settle into one mode of apprehension. Think of all the monochromes you have seen in recent years, from Lucien Smith's "Rain Paintings" to Bill Jensen's "Dark Dragon Pools," and you get an idea of how many artists still try to pass off this commonplace abdication as radical.



In "Sides 2/3/4 Clockwise @ 11/2/6" (2015), three white squares outlined by a black line and framed by an reddish-orange band appear at the 11, 2, and 6 o'clock positions within the confines of the square canvas; starting clockwise from the 11 o'clock position, the squares feature two sides open to the painting's edge, then one side open, and then none. This incremental decrease suggests that the placement of the white squares moves along a spiral trajectory. At the same time, the horizontally striated ground, bordered by a blue band running

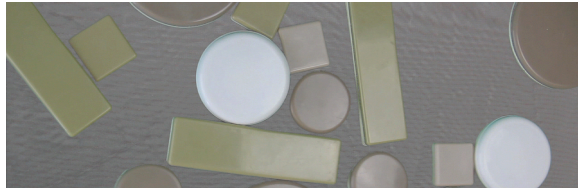
along the painting's physical edge, vies for attention, causing the viewer to continually refocus, undoing the relationship of its various parts as well as making connections between them.

The order of things within Stephan's paintings exists along the boundary between symmetry (implied order followed by strict hierarchy) and asymmetry (implied disorder followed by chaos).

A similar tension rives throughout our everyday life, often making us uncomfortable and even paranoid. The calmness with which Stephan establishes and accepts this tension is a welcome reminder not to seek the simplest, seemingly quickest solution. If resolving the composition of an abstract painting has become a rather easy thing to do — largely because the figure-ground relationship and the painting's physical edges are routinely ignored — Stephan challenges that orthodoxy. More importantly, he is pushing the envelope while doing the best work of his career. Stephan has achieved a fresh complexity that stands apart from commonplace solutions, should be evident to anyone who visits the uptown site of the group show, *Nice Weather*, curated by David Salle at Skarstedt (February 25–April 16, 2016). I suspect that this two-gallery show was Salle's response to the disappointingly shallow, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*, curated by Laura Hoptman, at the Museum of Modern Art (December 14, 2015–April 5, 2015).

This is not to say that there isn't a lot to criticize in Salle's show — because there is — but simply to suggest that Stephan is one of a number of older artists who has worked his way through lots of possibilities until he achieved what I call a real breakthrough. We also see this phenomenon at play in the work of the last decade from painters as diverse as McArthur Binion, Katherine Bradford, Suzan Frecon, and Stanley Whitney.

Each of them has achieved a singularity that doesn't resort to smugness, cynicism, or familiar negating gesture. Someone in a New York museum ought to wake up to this fact, but perhaps the act of working through a painting isn't hip enough for these curatorial fashionistas.



Back at Inglett, Stephan's paintings are thoughtfully paired with Alina Tenser's video and sculpture, establishing a dialogue between an art world veteran and an up-and-coming artist, both of whom explore an

abstract vocabulary of glyph-like shapes that seem to allude to things in our everyday life. In "Glider Shuffle" (2015), which is a single-channel video projection on a freestanding plexiglass screen, Tenser's animated geometric shapes — sliding, colliding and caroming off each other — suggests an affinity with Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye, among others. It is easy to imagine "Glider Shuffle" being made bigger and turned into a public sculpture in a large multi-use space

Certain aspects of abstraction may seem to be exhausted, but as this exhibition makes clear, perhaps those aspects that have long been discounted are actually fertile ground for exploration. The age of parody and citation might not be dead, but it sure does feel a bit moldy these days, doesn't it?

[Gary Stephan | Alina Tenser](#) continues at Susan Inglett Gallery (522 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 23.