

# LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

514 West 25<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10001 Tel. 212 941 0012 Fax. 212 929 3265  
info@lennonweinberg.com www.lennonweinberg.com

*The New York Times*

## Stephen Mueller, Color Field Painter, Dies at 63

By ROBERTA SMITH  
Published: September 22, 2011

Stephen Mueller, a New York painter who expanded and refined the vocabulary of 1960s Color Field painting into deliriously buoyant mystical-comic works, died on Sept. 16 in Manhattan. He was 63.



Bill Maynes  
Stephen Mueller, a painter in New York.



Lennon, Weinberg Gallery, New York  
Roland, 2010, acrylic on canvas, by Stephen Mueller.

The cause was cancer, his sister, Debra Pendleton, said.

Mr. Mueller's mature paintings, which took shape in the early 1990s, were cross-cultural hybrids that presaged many current concerns in abstract painting, most importantly its scant interest in being purely abstract.

Mixing motifs distilled from tantric art, Indian and Persian miniatures, and Mexican ceramics and cartoons, his paintings combined a dizzying array of references and allusions with striking formal contrasts and a brilliant palette. It all might have been overwhelming except for the care with which he constructed his compositions, spatially and chromatically.

Typically, his paintings presented several symmetrical, hard-edged, sometimes aura-ringed forms hovering at different depths in atmospheric washes of glowing or graduated color, their curvaceous silhouettes evoking Buddhist shrines, meditating Bodhisattvas, mosque domes or lotus blossoms. Patterns were used sparingly but could occur at any juncture: shapes might be striped or latticed; vaporous backgrounds might be laid on in perpendicular fuzzy bands, forming bright, blurry plaids.

The effect, guided by a feel for artificial color influenced by Warhol, was of a jazzed-up yet serene mysticism. The critic and painter Joe Fyfe, writing in the catalog for a survey of Mr. Mueller's work at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha in 2003, called Mr. Mueller a Symbolist

whose “work tells us that meaning is ungraspable but that we must enthusiastically search for it.”

Mr. Mueller was born in Norfolk, Va., on Sept. 24, 1947, and grew up in Dallas. His father was a mechanical engineer with the Army Corps of Engineers; his mother, who had been a designer for the milliner Lily Daché in New York, was an interior decorator. Mr. Mueller drew as a child and began painting with oils in middle school.



Lennon, Weinberg Gallery, New York  
Jacinto, 2010, acrylic on canvas, by Stephen Mueller.

He earned a B.F.A. in painting from the University of Texas, Austin, in 1969 and went to graduate school at Bennington College, where the art department was dominated by Color Field painters and the views of the art critic Clement Greenberg, who advocated pure abstraction, stained canvas, the flattening of spatial illusion and a self-evident painting process.

After earning his M.A. in 1971, Mr. Mueller took the Color Field emphasis on color and process to heart, but the notion of pure abstraction or flatness held little interest for him.

While at Bennington, he discovered books of tantric art and was excited by the notion that abstract forms could have symbolic meaning and spiritual power.

He had his first solo show at the Richard Feigen Gallery in New York in 1970, while still at Bennington. After graduating, he moved to New York, where he lived for the rest of his life. He began simultaneously to cultivate and subvert the tenets of Color Field, a path he stuck with as both painting and abstraction moved in and out of fashion and back in.

By the 1980s, he was disrupting the thin, buzzy stains of radiant color characteristic of Helen Frankenthaler’s work with areas of thick brushwork, often in muddy tones, creating a flamboyant, almost comedic air of angst and mess. In the late 1980s he further complicated his compositions by introducing small rectangles of color that were inspired by Japanese prints, and perhaps by the work of slightly younger Neo-Expressionist painters like [David Salle](#). By the early 1990s the precision of these rectangles had won out, aided by the experience of working in watercolor, with its textureless fluidity and crystalline colors.

Mr. Mueller had by then also experienced the light and landscapes of Italy and Greece and was steeped in Eastern philosophy, although he would not visit India until a few years later. Eliminating both heavy impasto and earth tones, he recommitted himself completely to Color Field’s staining technique, achieving intricate, seamless, light-filled compositions unlike anything the style had ever seen.

Mr. Mueller received numerous grants and fellowships. His work is represented in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Brooklyn Museum, the Denver Art Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

In addition to his sister, of Garland, Tex., he is survived by his mother, Frances Mueller, of Richardson, Tex.