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Stephen Mueller

Buhmann, Stephanie. Art Critical, “Cosmic Close-Ups: Stephen Mueller’s infinite spheres”, November 21, 2010. <http://artcritical.com/2010/11/21/stephen-mueller/>

artcritical
the online magazine of art and ideas



Beppe, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 48”

Stephen Mueller’s paintings and works on paper radiate colors that sweep us off our feet. Those fearful that a palette that embraces such saturated and domineering purples, pinks, turquoise and yellow could veer towards kitsch, or cause sensory overdose, will be pleasantly surprised by this exhibition. It takes experience and a finely nuanced sense of balance to avoid such pitfalls. Mueller is equipped with both these virtues and, without shying away from spectral indulgence, applies them with exhilarating finesse.

At Lennon, Weinberg, Mueller’s compositions vary considerably and yet, the group is unquestionably cohesive. Like a family, among whose members essential differences exist, recurring signature characteristics assure an unbreakable bond. One such rather ethereal characteristic is atmosphere, the realization of an illusionistic space generated by contrasting opaque shapes with translucent, thinly layered backgrounds. Like a cosmic close up, these crisply delineated forms emerge from —or retreat into— infinite spheres. They are at once floating and fixed. It seems as if Mueller managed to capture them just in time, during a brief moment of pause in an otherwise never-ending state of flux. It is this

notion of motion turned into stillness that causes these shapes to assume an iconographic presence.



Denton, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 28 x 28”

But what are they exactly? Inspired by art historical references and cultural objects of the past, they function as emblems for hidden truths and tokens of mysterious philosophies. They are symbols for something unknown and possible keys to deeper understanding. One realizes their significance, their inherent urgency and yet, their only immediate importance resides in their physicality, how they are described through color and form. As centers of concentration, these shapes draw much attention, gain personality and hence, rather appear as protagonists than as compositional elements.

In his first New York solo show since 2006 and his first with this gallery, Mueller stresses a sense of theatricality by elaborating on one particular compositional element. In several of his new paintings, side banners of solid color evoke an immense stylized curtain. Pulled to the sides, it is the gateway to all action, allowing a better look at the drama that will unfold on the painter’s stage.

Mueller’s work reflects an array of eclectic interests and influences. There is an evident affinity for the symbolism found in Northern

European Romanticism, for example, or the formal structure of Far Eastern mysticism. Mueller's touch and care in regards to rendition should imply an appreciation of Renaissance masters, while his focus on color alludes to various ethnic decorative patterns. However, the challenge here is not to figure out the ingredients that make up Mueller's vocabulary or to decipher the dense mélange. What matters is what we see, the composition with all its facets and how it unfolds as our eye travels from element to element and from one section to the overall plane.

Mueller's exhibition finds itself in great company in Chelsea this November, with Thomas Nozkowski's newest body of work displayed at Pace Gallery right next door and Brice Marden's two installations at Matthew Marks on 22nd Street. Mueller's show is thus a wonderful intervention in a gallery-to-gallery symposium concerning the nature and experience of abstract painting.



Roland, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 62"