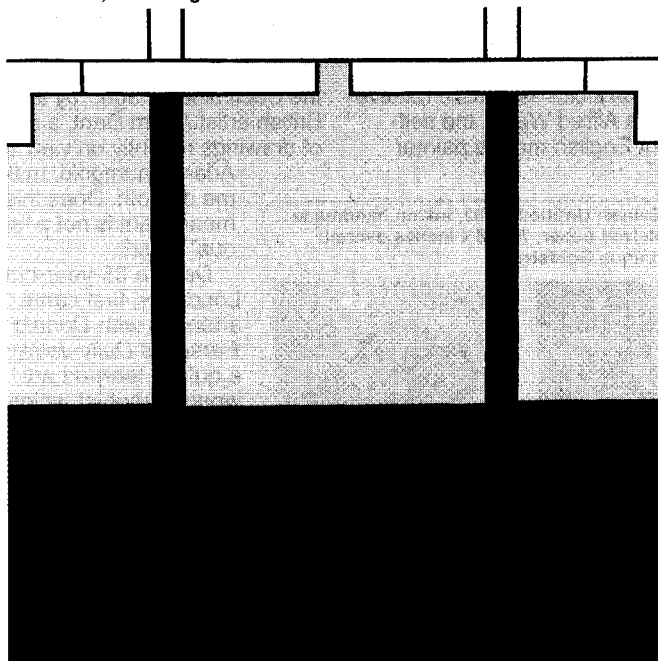


# Art in America

January 2004

Stephen Westfall: *Memory*, 2003, oil on canvas, 60 inches square; at Lennon, Weinberg.



## Stephen Westfall at Lennon, Weinberg

There is formal grace and internal logic to the subtle misalignments of Stephen Westfall's recent abstractions, articulated through a variety of narrow bars, wide bands and other simplified forms in intense colors. Emerging from the abstract grids of his previous work, a new but not implausible development leads the willing eye into planes and grids that frequently resemble urban landscapes. By way of example, a 5-foot-square painting riffing on the grid of windowpanes frames a view of Bauhaus-style architecture. In this work, appropriately titled *Across the Street* (2002), a window with soot-black mullions gives onto a view of geometric shrubbery in the near distance, beyond which the built landscape stacks in blocks and meets the sky. An effect of a dangling cloud bank occupies the painting's upper edge, laid down in square white tiles that, characteristically, never quite align. In passages, the tooth of the canvas support is revealed just beneath the blue flatness of the sky.

Westfall arranges ranks of brightly colored pennant forms in the cool and lively *Miracle Mile* (2003), a title suggesting the eye-catching trappings that deck the parking lots and facades of urban commercial districts. In the new work, four rows of triangles, ranging in hue from ocher to dark green, red, vibrant purple, an almost powder-blue and black, each outlined with different colors from the same palette, are suspended one above the other on narrow bands that stretch across the painting's white field. A lintel and corbel ornament the upper edge of *Memory* (2003) and appear to be supported by two vertical poles of red that cut across the yellow and green horizontal bands of the painting's ground.

References to music appear in four paintings of the same year, two of them abstract, the others suggesting landscapes. Westfall reiterates the bright hues and white ground of *Miracle Mile* in the buoyant, staccato notations of *Canon* (2002), an abstract allusion to a contrapuntal musical

form. Here, he alternates rectangular patches of color, deployed like notes on a staff of narrow black lines. The abstract homage *Mingus* is, at roughly 5 by 7 feet, the largest and arguably the most handsome of these paintings. It resolves as an askew tartan of overlapping grids in ecclesiastical purple over white on black. *Lush Life* refers to the jazz ballad; what seem to be bands of sky at twilight are scored with horizontal black lines and vertical bands resembling telephone wires and poles. *Yardbird* does a turn for Charlie Parker in a barred grid of windows

# LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

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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

## Stephen Westfall

Johnson, Ken. "Stephen Westfall", The New York Times, October 17, 2003.

## The New York Times

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2003

### Stephen Westfall

*Lennon, Weinberg*  
560 Broadway, SoHo  
Through Nov. 1

Every canvas that Stephen Westfall makes is distinctly his own: flat, grid-based, painted with a dry yet sensuous touch in muted comic book colors and defined by cartoon outlines. But within the tightly controlled limits he sets for himself, Mr. Westfall explores a remarkable range of pictorial possibilities. He's practically bubbling over with ideas, and that creates an infectious excitement.

The medium- to medium-large canvases in this exhibition include a vibrant image of colored, triangular pennants hanging in rows on a creamy white field; syncopating colored blocks interrupting horizontal black-on-white lines; a grid of fat, deep purple bands layered over a fine-lined white-on-black grid that is called, somehow appropriately, "Mingus," after the great jazz bassist; and a minimalist landscape of yellow sky and green ground framed by red posts and a lintel of white blocks that gives the effect of gazing out from the front porch of a Buddhist temple.

Mr. Westfall goes too far toward fussy, overly complicated representation in a view through open casement windows to a brick building across the street. But in the larger context of a project that so nicely balances formal control and imaginative unpredictability, it's an entirely forgivable offense.

KEN JOHNSON

## Gallery Going, by DAVID COHEN

This article first appeared in the  
New York Sun, October 2, 2003

# artcritical.com



Richard Serra at Gagosian Gallery until October 25 (555 W. 24th St., at Eleventh Avenue, 212-741-1111). Prices: \$2 million-\$5 million.

"A Survey of the Work of Harvey Quaytman: Paintings and Drawings 1969-1998" at McKee Gallery until November 1 (745 Fifth Avenue, between 57th and 58th Streets, 212-688-5951). Prices: \$6,000-\$60,000.

Stephen Westfall, "New Paintings 2002-03" at Lennon, Weinberg Inc. until November 1 (560 Broadway, between Prince and Spring Streets, 212-941-0012). Prices: \$15,000-\$20,000.

### DAVID COHEN

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Richard Serra **Wake** 2003  
weatherproof steel, 14 x 75 x46 feet  
photo Rob McKeever, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

There isn't much sculpture around today that competes with Richard Serra's in terms of audacity, poise, and presence. His latest works, which continue a line of investigation in spirals and shapes created from mammoth sheets of weatherproof steel, crowd Gagosian's airplane hangar-like galleries on West 24th Street. But without seeming to look the gift horse in the mouth, it's difficult to sustain the exclamation of "simply gorgeous" that these objects first elicit. Thanks in no small measure to the artist's own considerable efforts, nothing about Mr. Serra is ever simple.

His career, indeed, has been consecrated to the act of unsettling. There's invariably an existentialist edge to his activities: From the he-man in his warehouse garret slinging around pots of molten lead ("Casting," 1969) to the übermensch right out of the pages of "Fountainhead" daring the authorities to destroy his public monument ("Tilted Arc," 1981, removed from Federal Plaza, New York, 1989), Mr. Serra's public image has always been of a man who thrives on confrontation.

The risk that precarious-seeming structures might topple over and crush whatever is below and the menace implicit in rustiness are no doubt supposed to engender a frisson of fear. But everyone, including Mr. Serra, seems entirely at ease these days with tilt and rust; they are the device and patina of choice. At the end of the day, Mr. Serra is big and in steel rather the way Wagner is long and in German.

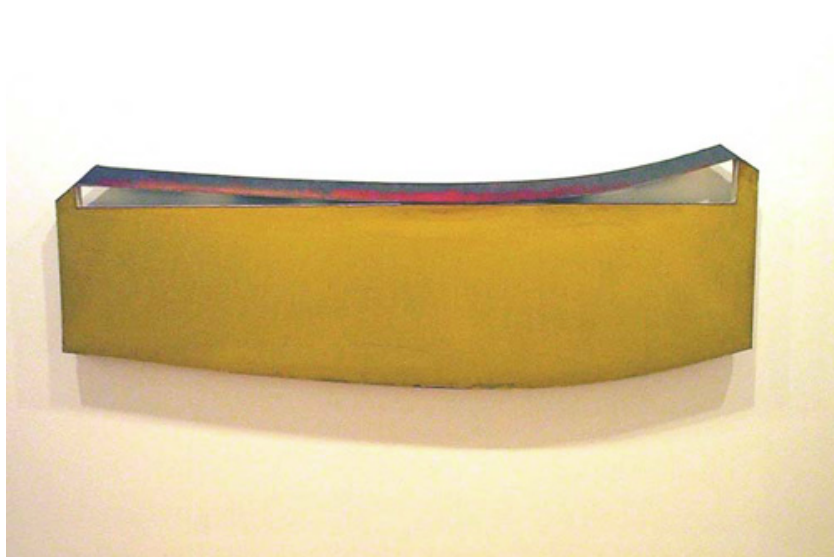
The feelings engendered by the new works have to do with subtler sensations than the sublime, dealing as they do with nuanced inflections of geometry and perception. The strongest, most original work in the show is "Wake" (2003). Five wavy, bulbous asymmetrical forms present themselves in echelon, wobbling like battleships reflected in water.

A new Serra show is like a big budget Hollywood blockbuster ("The Terminator" meets "Titanic"?). At the multiplex, you pay your \$10, so what is it to you that the special effects, sumptuous scenery, exotic locales, and cast of thousands happen to cost millions? Similarly, at Gagosian: Why allow extraneous considerations of facture and installation to interfere with pure aesthetic pleasure? The point, however, is that art is more than entertainment precisely because of the criticality it demands from the viewer. Indeed, Mr. Serra is the type of artist who has always sought to shake his audience from complacency. The active, as opposed to passive, onlooker at Gagosian has to question the discrepancy in bringing brutal, hefty materials to bear for what are ultimately subtle, delicate results.

In Matthew Barney's "Cremaster 3" (2002), Mr. Serra participated in the diminution of his own aura in a brave but consequential gesture that, together with his recent work, forces a new consideration of the earlier: He re-enacted his legendary lead-wielding antics, only this time - in harmony with Mr. Barney's peculiar private lexicon of meanings - replacing the lead in his melting pot with Vaseline. Director and actor alike were having a bit of fun at the expense of the younger Mr. Serra's hubris.

In just such a way, the exploration of elegant, visually soft effects in massive steel configurations at the very least destabilizes the effect of classic Serra. Stand a suitable distance from "Wake," and you could be enjoying the flowing forms of a recent Bridget Riley. Momentarily, the awesome bulks become weightless and immaterial. Which is no bad thing, but who would have expected that inside sculpture's Superman a Barbie had been waiting to escape?

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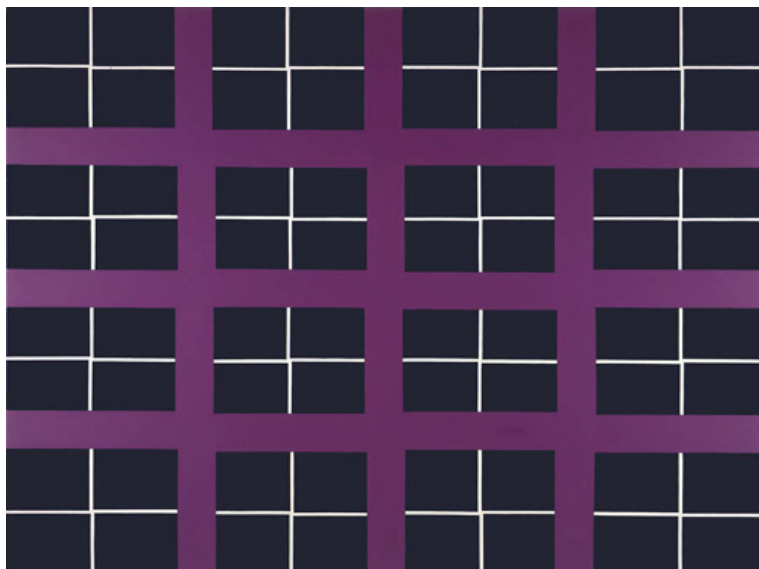
Harvey Quaytman **Moon Fancy** 1969  
acrylic on shaped canvas, 36 x 109 inches  
Courtesy McKee Gallery, New York

A contemporary of Richard Serra's, the late Harvey Quaytman, also had a penchant for rust and a predilection for curving arcs. McKee's moving tribute to the artist, who died last year, is a survey that extends through 1998, the last year in which he was able to work. He emerges as a substantial abstractionist, shaped but not circumscribed by minimalism.

The earliest work in this show, from 1961-63, with the enigmatic, Beckett-like title "Riley Mumbling to Himself at Night," is a de Kooning-esque maze of abstracted limb and torso forms abutting each other. Although this fine painting is untypical of later work, a tension between geometry and vitality resurfaces throughout his career. In the late 1960s, Quaytman produced expressively shaped canvases in somewhat melancholy hues, which often feature a bent or arced element attached in such a way as to create pulsating negative space in the cutout area exposed. Works in rust and acrylic on paper have the tough energy of sculptures by Chillida.

The late works are cruciform, and push geometry to a harder edge. Still, the surfaces are animate, the contrast of colors and textures dynamic. Leo Steinberg, who professed himself startled by the 1998 exhibition of these works at McKee, found it "astounding to see the most familiar of signs de-semanticized, de-centered, de-Christianized, and emancipated to exercise its own territorial power." A cross is a cross, however, and it is impossible not to detect an almost monastic spirit of discipline and denial in Quaytman's austere sensualism.

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Stephen Westfall **Mingus** 2002, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 inches; cover, **Harlem**

**Window**, 2003, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches, Courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc

Restraint with a smile has always been the hallmark of Stephen Westfall. As surely as his method of tight, almost heraldic geometric abstraction remains focused, so are his stylistic references correspondingly diverse. His works acknowledge both minimalism and pop in their serial logic and jazzy, synthetic color. They also have blandness with attitude.

A typical recent composition comprises a dumb, insistent grid subtly subverted by a slight skewing at the joints. "Mingus" (2002), in Mr. Westfall's current show at Lennon, Weinberg, is a masterful example in this idiom, in sumptuous black and ecclesiastical purple. Inevitably, this somewhat designer-ish, language-game take on abstraction places the artist in the dubious company of postmodern contemporaries Peter Halley and Jonathan Lasker, but Mr. Westfall seems incapable of irony: His work is pervaded by ingenuousness. He seems, indeed, to be in genuine and respectful dialogue with the luminaries of the purist tradition in modern painting.

Mr. Westfall's new show represents a significant departure. Because of his work's connection to design and fabric, representation has always been implicit even in his flattest, most severe abstractions. Now, in several pictures, it has become explicit: The view of a Harlem street as seen through a window, for instance, places him in direct relationship to Charles Sheeler, Ralston Crawford, and the American precisionist tradition. And yet "Harlem Window" (2003) seems as involved with De Stijl painting and design as it does with Americana. Mr. Westfall's delightful and promising departure lays the foundation of new bridges without burning old ones.

[Back to First Page](#)

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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

## Stephen Westfall

Smith, Roberta. "Stephen Westfall." *The New York Times*, May 4, 2001.

### Stephen Westfall

Lennon, Weinberg  
560 Broadway, at Prince Street  
SoHo  
Through June 2

Artistic originality can strike early or late, fast or slow. In the case of the painter Stephen Westfall, who is 48, it has arrived gradually over the last decade or so. His 11th New York show may be characteristically quiet, but it is a quiet knockout.

Delicately calibrated destabilization is Mr. Westfall's trademark. Over the years he has used it to revive the tired vocabulary of modernist abstraction, in particular the Mondrianist ideal of grids and color blocks. But he has also infused this vocabulary with just the right amount of worldly reference and postmodern play.

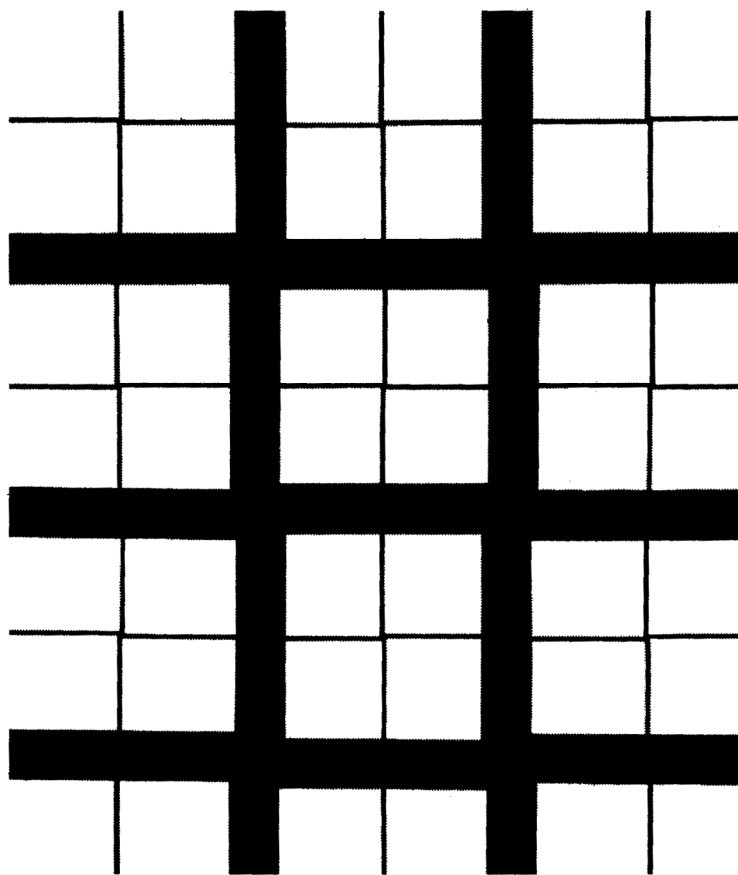
His tattersall grids have jagged intersections; his colors tend toward off-key, either pale or a little rich; his corners never square. With everything slightly ajar, a subtle yet marvelously optical jostling of form and space sets in.

In Mr. Westfall's latest work, this jostling has increased almost to the point of breaking into dance. Colors are stronger; the grids are sometimes doubled, which makes things more than more twice as complicated. Two big works, "Pranaparamita" and "Dogwood," are dominated by grids that expand into wide bands of blue or red, respectively; suddenly they read as fields of solid color, interrupted by infinitesimally irregular window-paned squares. These fields affirm that even the spindliest of Mr. Westfall's grids flip back and forth, reading first as lines, then as background color seeping through the cracks between the nestling squares.

More dramatic, the tiered compositions of "Bye Bye Blackbird" and "Underworld" include actual fields of solid color, freestanding verticals and, most evocative, an enlarged partial grid inserted across the canvas's top edge. This last device adds the odd domestic suggestion of sliding panels, cabinet doors or (even) a geometricized dust ruffle. In "Blackbird" especially, in which the partial grid is orange edged in black, it contributes to the sensation of peeking through someone's living room window to see only carpet and furniture legs.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MAY 4, 2001

### ART IN REVIEW



Lennon, Weinberg Gallery

Never quite straight or square: A large detail of "Dogwood," an oil on canvas by Stephen Westfall in his show at Lennon, Weinberg in SoHo.

Mr. Westfall's paintings have always been spiced with allusions to the real world; in this show the wide-spaced triangles of "Grand Opening" evoke the strung-up pennants of a new store. Nonetheless, the degree of spatial depth and interior décor in "Blackbird" are new for Mr. Westfall. They seem borrowed from the paintings of John Wesley, but they have been put to good use, to multiply further the double lives that his paintings have always led.

ROBERTA SMITH

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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

## Stephen Westfall

Cotter, Holland. "Art In Review." *The New York Times*, March 12, 1999.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MARCH 12, 1999

### ART IN REVIEW

#### Stephen Westfall

Lennon, Weinberg  
560 Broadway, at Prince Street  
SoHo  
Through March 27

Stephen Westfall's abstract paintings appear to be based on grids set against a monochrome field. Yet structural solidity is seldom in evidence. Instead, the artist shuffles and tweaks his components to produce a jumpy, just-suppressed energy.

When one grid lies behind another, certain lines overlap and stick together. Verticals and horizontals are seldom straight or smooth. Often they are made up of small lines inexactly joined so that the grids turn into networks of misaligned squares and rectangles with nodelike corners. Precariously stacked, these boxy forms appear to be gently quaking, as if they might collapse.

Sometimes an impression of instability is made through color: the combination of gray-blue lines on a poppy-orange ground in "Namaste" produces a classic, Op-ish retinal jangle. In other cases, a single color becomes the focus of attention, first because it is pleasing, but also because it has odd, just-at-the-tip-of-the-tongue associations.

Such is the case with a purple that is penitential and grapey, or a blue that might refer to nature but also has the light-absorbent chalkiness of dining room Wedgewood.

In the end, Mr. Westfall's work feels far closer to figurative painting than to "pure" abstraction (whatever that might be). The modernist formal ingredients he calls upon are time-honored. But what he distills from them — a blend of anxiety, self-effacing humor and buttoned-up transport — is personable and distinctive.

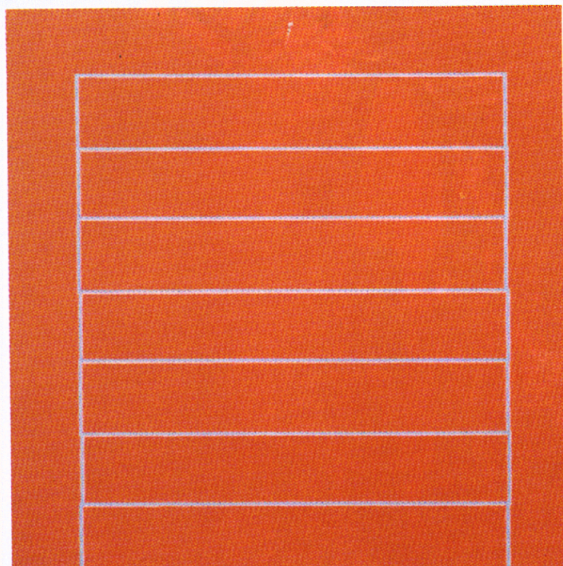
HOLLAND COTTER



# LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

560 Broadway, Suite 308 New York, New York 10012-3945

Tel. 212 941 0012 Fax. 212 941 0098



Stephen Westfall: *Namaste*, 1998, oil on canvas, 60 inches square; at Lennon, Weinberg.

## Stephen Westfall at Lennon, Weinberg

By now it is a critical truism that Stephen Westfall is an artist concerned with the grid. Yet the attentive viewer of his nine new paintings (all 1998 and 1999) comes to realize that, in fact, there are no true grids in these works. Instead of a lattice or checkerboard, Westfall populates his paintings with rectangles arranged as unconnected shapes which never cohere into a regular pattern. From a distance, the five-foot-square *Magic Power*, hung in the gallery's central room, seems to present two grids overlaid upon a reddish-orange background: one a pattern of blue lines that are "stretched" to be more widely spaced at the center of the canvas, the second a more regular white design. Both patterns appear "disrupted," and lines seem to jump as the painted bands awkwardly abut one another. Closer inspection reveals that these jumps are the result of a series of out-of-synch blue and white rectangles that never meet cleanly enough to form an orderly plait across the painting's surface.

# Art in America

June 1999

If the grid has always been a self-referential device, a taut web of lines reiterating the canvas's bounding edges, then Westfall's subtle geometries reintroduce a spatial complexity, an airiness, that the grid excludes. *In the Trees*, which takes a form resembling that of *Magic Power*, allows the eye to travel from shape to shape, from plane to plane between two layers of rectangles—as we might scan the forest, our eyes leaping from tree trunk to tree trunk. We never find a definitive ground in its deep green surface, only provisional resting points in the black and off-white outlines of its non-grid.

Confronting the visitor at the entrance to the gallery, *Namaste* played comparable tricks on the eye. The canvas is painted an intense orange which seems to cause retinal vibrations, and the actual surface would disappear within those optical pulses but for a "ladder" of irregular gray lines which rise almost to the top of the canvas. This minimum of cool paint is enough to pull us back to the surface, to give us some ground to stand on before diving off again into that orange ocean. Similar optical effects are generated by the smaller *Bijou*, where a black ground and lighter rectangles cause hazy spots to float before one's eyes. Westfall, as it turns out, can let go of the architectonic surface to become an explorer of painting's indeterminate depths.

—Tom McDonough