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GARY STEPHAN'S PARADOXES

Essay by John Yau from the Tspace Catalog, May 2013

A fundamental conundrum hovers at the heart of Gary Stephan's recent paintings and works on paper: What do you uncover – or cover over – when you apply a layer of paint to a bare surface? Rene Magritte wittily dealt with this paradox in such paintings as *The Human Condition* (1934) and *The Telescope* (1963), but American artists have largely eschewed it for a variety of reasons, including a distrust of Surrealism, a tendency toward literalness, and the lingering influence of Formalism. One exception is Gary Stephan, whose work extends outward from the visual dilemmas that Magritte drolly examined in order to expose something of the relationship between the seen and unseen, image and language, fact and fiction.



The Human Condition (1934) and The Telescope (1963)

The difference between Magritte and Stephan is that the former took a dry, academic approach to representational painting, while the latter works with a pared-down, abstract vocabulary consisting largely of matter-of-fact band-like paint strokes that can be both reoriented and repeated – vertically, horizontally or diagonally – like a picket fence across the surface of the canvas. Stephan deploys the bands to echo the perimeter of the stretcher bars, the horizontal/vertical divisions of the crossbars that keep the stretchers straight and firm, or the weave of the canvas – what William Carlos Williams, in another context, called "the thing itself."

Through his arrangements of a circumscribed vocabulary and varying viscosities of paint, from semi-transparent to solid, Stephan achieves an engaging visual tension between the "covered" and "uncovered," structure and surface, construction and façade, complete and incomplete. In contrast to Magritte, who asked, what is the relationship between painting (or pictorial illusion) and reality? Stephan seems to be asking, what is a painting? Is it a surface or a structure or – the more likely possibility – a combination of both? And, as a combination of both, what is the relationship between the two?

At the same time, by revealing that a painting is both a surface and a thing, a façade and a construction, Stephan proposes a connection that could apply to a painting, a building, and the body – all three are layered things. This leads back to a question he shares with Magritte: What is the relationship between fiction and fact?

By raising this question, Stephan distinguishes himself from his antecedents, the Minimalists, who squeezed space out of painting, and the Pop artists, who derived their images from popular and commercial culture. By claiming that the painting's surface was all there was to consider, both the Minimalists and Pop artists elevated the literal above all other approaches, which is said to have helped bring about the death of painting. According to many observers, Frank Stella's black paintings and Andy Warhol's use of silkscreen (mechanical reproduction), both of which were produced between 1958 and 1962, were the central contributions to painting's demise.

But for Stephan, who was born in 1942, any agreement with critics and theorists about the achievement of Stella and Warhol would be tantamount to jumping out of a plane without a parachute. Of course, there are artists who did exactly that, and – no surprise – some of them are celebrated for the wisdom of their decision. However, to raise a question that remains open and challenging, as Stephan does, is different from providing an answer, a tidy solution.

Slightly above the center of the vertically oriented painting, *Hidden in the Word* (2013), a cruciform cluster of overlapping yellow bands is visible through a cutout. Shaped like the silhouette of a barrel with outwardly curving sides, the cutout focuses the viewer's attention on the yellow cruciform in the middle. Meanwhile, spanning the width of the painting, a plane of gray paint frames the cutout. The gray plane extends three quarters of the way down the surface from the painting's top edge, like a window shade. Vertical yellow bands continue to extend downward from beneath the gray plane, where a staggered row of horizontal yellow bands push in from both sides to meet them.



Hidden in the Word (2013)

Stephan complicates the relatively stable relationship between the gray plane and yellow bands by introducing a third element, which comes in two forms, both black. The first form, which looks like something between a cartoon peanut and a dog bone, peeks out from each of the cutout's four corners. In its second manifestation, the black shape emerges in different configurations in the field below the gray plane. Four of the black figures protrude from behind the gray plane's lip, while two others peek out from beneath yellow bands, like ominous notes slipped under the door.

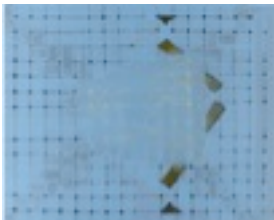
All three elements – the yellow bands, the gray plane with its large, central aperture and the irregular black shapes – seem to be simultaneously complete and fragmentary, a piece of something larger and concealed. This relationship echoes the entire painting, which is a dialogue between the conclusive and the partial.

While a straightforward connection can be traced from the yellow bands to the painting's stretcher bars and the weave of its canvas – a line of thought that could be extended to

the gray plane, which is both a skin of paint and a façade – the various black forms introduce an irrational element into the composition. By interrupting the initial logic of Hidden in the Word, Stephan advances the possibility that the irrational – wherever it appears - must be embraced in order for a painting to be complete, that making an entirely rational work of art leaves too much out in the name of logic and purity.

Whereas the Surrealists pursued the irrational and the dream life at the expense of logic, Stephan brings the two together, suggesting that they are inseparable and continuously influence each other. Moreover, by linking painting to both the body and architecture, he expands our understanding of its role in contemporary society. It is more than a decorative object hung on a wall because there is an essential connection linking you, the painting, and the enclosing building.

In the large, horizontal painting *Untitled* (2013) Stephan loosely weaves together a grid of semi-solid blue bands over a black ground that is visible in the narrow spaces between the bands. A partially effaced, semi-transparent bell-like shape, lying on its side, nearly merges with the bands as it occupies a large area in the center of the painting. Within the area defined by the bell-like shape, the ground is yellow instead of black. A diagonal brown band traverses beneath the both the right top and bottom edge, extending out like strips of tape from the bell-like shape. Directly beneath and above the corners of both brown bands are similarly colored triangles. Here again, Stephan deftly subverts the logic of the painting. If the brown bands are beneath the bell-like shape, why can't we see them through its effaced, semi-transparent surface – particularly since we can see the weave of gray bands? And why did the ground become yellow beneath the bell-like shape?



Untitled (2013)

The longer we look at Stephan's paintings, the more we become aware of the deliberate inconsistencies and the interruptions in the logical that call into question the relationship between seeing and knowing (or naming). Using a basic vocabulary that echoes a painting's structure – its canvas weave and wooden stretcher bars – Stephan suggests that a painting's layered existence is in and of itself a mysterious object.

When Stephan hints at *trompe l'oeil* while staying true to his abstract vocabulary, as he does in *Export Porcelain* (2013), he adds yet another layer of complexity into the painting. Is the blue edging along the brown bands a reflection of light, an indication of volume, or simply paint on paint? Could celadon plane be the wall "behind" the painting, or is it a layer of paint covering part of the brown diagonal bands (or linen)? In all of the paintings I have described, the unraveling of our seeing becomes one of the central experiences of the work. Stephan asks us to take nothing for granted, to re-examine everything we look at, even as he makes paintings that are a pleasure to see and consider. Close looking, the artist suggests in these works, is key to both our experience

and understanding, as well as to the recognition that seeing and knowing might only take us so far.



Export Porcelain (2013)

At the same time, there is a visceral component to our experience of Stephan's work. The solid and semi-transparent bands are simultaneously visual and physical. The artist is not interested in either pictorial illusionism or a purely optical experience. In art, the mind should not be separate from the body, and the body's experience consists of seeing and touching, the ocular and the tactile. By introducing illogical elements into the painting, Stephan asks us to examine our assumptions, a stance that, in painting, is central to the avant-garde tradition. Perhaps nothing new can be made under the sun, but that does not mean the eternal questions can't be examined from a fresh perspective. This is what Stephan accomplishes with a visual economy that rivals that of the Abstract Expressionists as well as the Minimalists.