

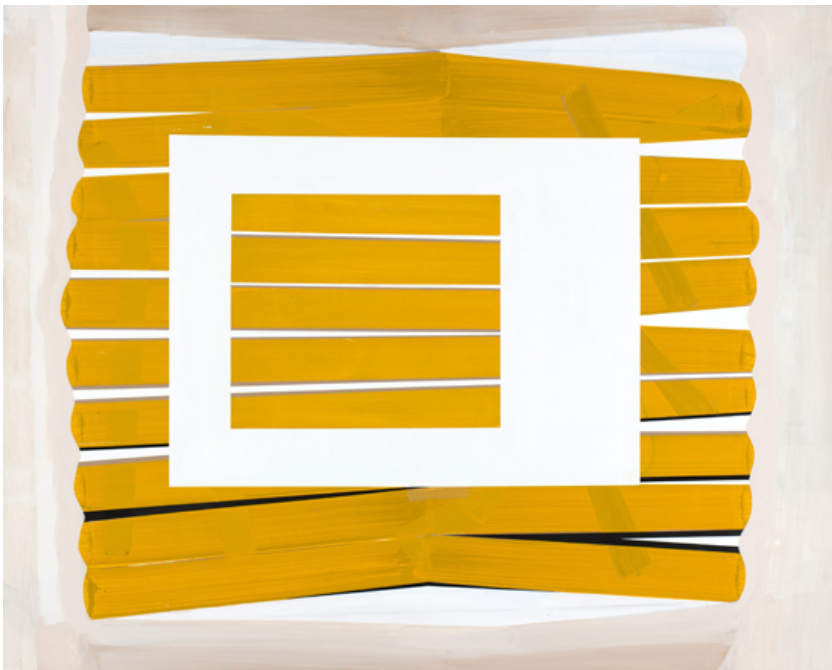
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The Slide Area of Abstraction: Gary Stephan at Susan Inglett

by Drew Lowenstein

Gary Stephan at Susan Inglett Gallery
March 20 to April 26, 2014
522 West 24 Street, between 10th and 11th avenues
New York City, 212-647-9111



Gary Stephan's new paintings exude matter-of-factness about their own making that perfectly embodies the often overused term "practice". Stephan toys with expectations of how foreground and background are supposed to function, slyly inserting illusionistic references that undermine the order and certainty of hard edge formalist abstraction.

Untitled (2013) offers a straightforwardly bold execution of a clearly conceived idea. In the center of the composition,

the watery paint application of Stephan's swirling strokes leaves a mercurial and ghostly impression upon the canvas. After this opening salvo, Stephan counters by introducing a row of weighty, opaque, pale blue vertical bars. This oppositional contrast provides the tension that is Stephan's wheelhouse. He looks to exploit the ambiguities between negative and positive space. In this case he reanimates the ghostly ground, sprouting an illusionistic snake-like form that slithers through the vertical blue bars on the surface. This slide area of contingency is where Stephan teases out unexpected possibility.

Although operating within an extremely shallow pictorial space, Stephan transforms spatial relationships from a set of circumstances into a metaphysical event. In the *Small Mental Furniture* paintings, we see how the purity of classical essentialism stands on the shoulders of an untidy world. Using a minimal, non-objective abstraction as his ground, Stephan overlays this with a compelling architectural motif of interwoven bands whose resolute order begins to waver in the lower strata of the design. The foundational bracing anchors the larger structure to a proto-terrestrial foreground. But this base seems prone to destabilization: the whole enterprise may just sink into the sand or collapse like a house of cards. In the meantime, the iconic design,

the shifting spatial relationships, the translucent paint handling, and the lush greens and deep blues satisfy.



Gary Stephan, *Untitled*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches. Courtesy: Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

Stephan considers how we visually perceive and conceptually locate our occupation of and relationship with architectural space. Stephan's regard for cubist facture recalls Markus Lupertz's *Tent* paintings of 1965 and the recent paintings of Thomas Scheibitz. *Untitled* (2014) looks vaguely like a window blind, or more specifically, like a window blind with a retinal after-image of a window or old format TV screen floating in front of it. A square frame hovers in front of the larger, slatted structure behind. Gradations of a creamy hue border the central slatted shape, and indications suggest that shadow and light seem strictly observed and abstracted. But are they? Is

this a window motif, or are we just projecting the expectation of a specific form into a realm of shadows?

Although we may not know what exactly is being depicted in this exhibition, in most of the paintings the viewer can unpack the steps involved in how each painting is constructed. We can follow the process almost as easily as we can follow the step-by-step execution of a portrait or a figure in a landscape by Alex Katz. Though Stephan may paint an area and then paint over it, he does not obfuscate his moves or cover his tracks much. One small painting seems to retain paint impressions of kitchen cabinet hardware, removed and repainted. These still visible traces of underpainting are an essential part of what Stephan communicates – reconsideration and adjustment during the process.

At a moment in which market abstraction is being defined by such monikers as “raggedy AbEx” and “zombie formalism,” Stephan is uninterested in a summary affirmation or a “look” that neatly ties-up his choices. He points out smaller questions that are as resonant as they are elusive. Where so many others are going through the motions he keeps moving on.