

*THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981*  
*BOMBSITE*

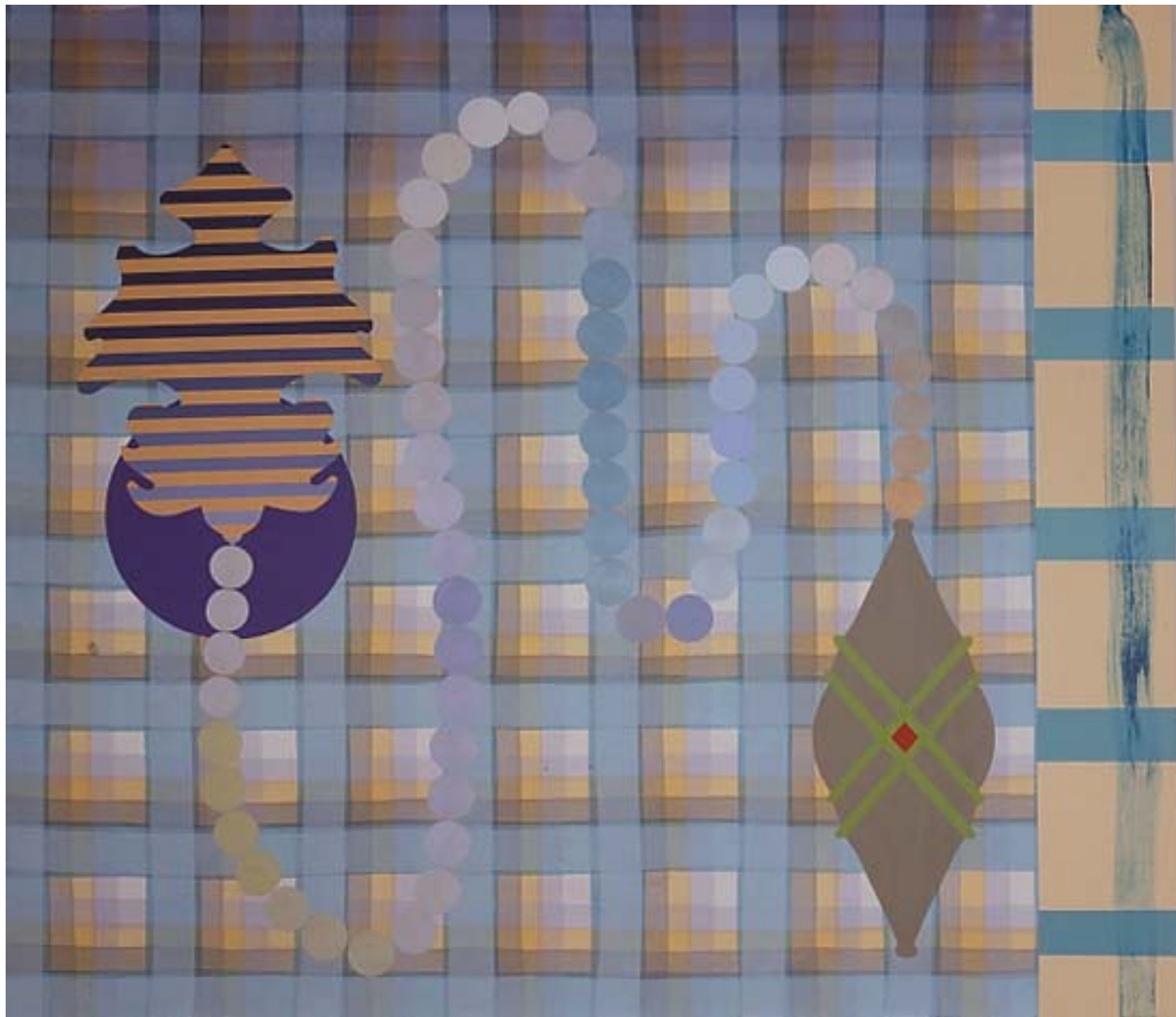


Stephen Mueller  
by Joe Fyfe  
BOMB 79/Spring 2002, ART

**STEPHEN MUELLER**

REPRESENTED BY

LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.



Stephen Mueller, *Madrugada 2*, 2001, Acrylic on canvas, 70×80". All images courtesy of Bill Maynes Gallery.

I have been following Stephen Mueller's work for 20 years. I didn't understand it right away but some work plants itself in your mind and its logic begins to grow there. These earthly sensual paintings display a rare pictorial intelligence and an emerging cosmic ferocity. The work is Baudelairean in that high value is placed on imagination; the act of painting as if the world is some grand bazaar—a brave and oddly private form of investigation.

At one point in the late '80s I began to notice Tantric imagery emerging amid Mueller's eclectic iconography. The palette knifed scrawls of acrylic were giving way to pancaked rounds of bright pigment, and the individual tropes revealed themselves more slowly overtime, like the flickering retinal structure of the Tibetan Tanka. I was intrigued. A few years later I became an abstract painter, mostly owing to a revelatory afternoon with the work of Blinky Palermo (a legendary New York painter from Germany, Joseph Beuys' student who took the name of a gangster), in which I detected an influence of Tantric art. Within a Minimalist idiom, Palermo had integrated the physical with the spiritual by way of his rich paint handling and a universal inclusiveness, implied by bright primary color. I curated a show titled *Om*, selecting contemporary artists whose work was engaged in what I considered "Spiritual Postminimalism." I called Stephen and asked him to be in it. I went to his studio to choose a painting for *Om* one day and met him.

The process of selecting the right painting took a few more visits, and I ended up becoming a regular visitor, talking with Mueller and looking at new work. Natural light floods his large, cubic studio. Smoke from incense billows off of the painting table in the middle of the room. Another fragrance seems to come from whatever music is playing. For the interview, sitting at a table next to a vase of fresh flowers and a stack of books, I asked Mueller things I'd always been curious about but had never got around to addressing.

---

**JOE FYFE** I wanted to ask you about Clement Greenberg; wasn't he involved in forming you as a painter?

**STEPHEN MUELLER** How?

**JF** I think the background plaids in your paintings exaggerate the ground. It's this variation on emblematic abstraction where the figure is soaked in the ground of the canvas. You illustrate that by suspending images on the plaid, which imitates the weave in this far-out Greenbergian attenuation or cartoon rarefaction.

**SM** Well, I guess that's true in a way. I've spent my whole career rebelling against the Greenberg thing because everyone always said that my paintings were like Helen Frankenthaler's just because I use thin and thick and thin paints and all that. Greenberg seems of the moment again, serious reviews in the *New Yorker* and what not. In fact, it's a style. I see what you're talking about. Greenbergian thought says that painting should be the story of the painting's own making, and that part I agree with—it's that kind of flat-footed . . . but I would say that somebody like Mary Heilmann, who started out in craft, is more of an influence on me than Greenberg's criteria—just her play it as it lays, put it down here, one-two-three, without any trickery.

JF Well, Greenberg wasn't about trickery.

SM No. But doctrinaire Greenberg painting lives on in the Tribeca squeegee school and there's plenty of trickery there.

JF Who'd you study with when you were in graduate school up at Bennington?

SM I worked with Philip Wofford, known as a lyrical abstractionist.

JF Was he the only one up there then?

SM No, Ken Noland had a studio close by. And Greenberg seemed to visit often enough. Olitski and Poons were also around.

JF So his influence was still kind of floating around.

SM Floating around? It was shoved down your throat.

JF It was dominating the art magazines.

SM No, it was on the wane, Minimalism was dominant in New York City and Postpainterly Abstraction had already worked its way into the homes of the wealthy in Cambridge and what not. I don't think my paintings came under his influence because Clem's observations, as he put it, were simply about the qualities of the best paintings; that's all it was, a bunch of observations. The best paintings as he saw it, cleared out the center, held the surface of the canvas, there was no depiction of space. In other words, color didn't generally describe space. A lot of guys turned his observations into a formula for making a successful painting by treating them as rules. But the great painters, like Noland, remain so.

JF One of the most interesting lines of his I have come across states—and I'm paraphrasing—that an artist has to develop to the point where his eccentricity blossoms. It seems uncharacteristic, but that's the word he used, eccentricity.

SM That's good. Well, his personal advice for me was, "Don't let anybody tell you what to do." But the principles of Postpainterly Abstraction are the opposite of how I work because there's more centrality in my work, there's no wedge at the edge.

JF What's that?

SM That was a compositional game they used. A lot of Olitski's early, really atmospheric, disembodied color paintings had a wedge at the edge that would define the shape and size of the stretcher bar and its supports so there's no lying about space or anything. Helen Frankenthaler's compositions often have a wedge that pads the edge.



Stephen Mueller, Shape Shifter, 2001, Acrylic on canvas, 68x64".

JF The edge is the end of the world for you, right?

SM I think you could safely say that Greenberg abhorred anything that smacked of a glimpse into another world, spatially or otherwise. He was a modern kind of guy, but that was misconstrued, too; he just had modern good taste, lots of brown and olive. Remember that painter Jack Bush, the Canadian?

JF Sort of.

SM That was like pushing good taste.

JF Then there was Paul Feeley, who still has a strong reputation among painters, like he's the Alfred Jensen of Color Field.

SM I never got Feeley's paintings. They always reminded me of some kind of institutionalized modern taste, like Marimekko or Design Research.

JF David Carrier has interpreted Morris Louis as a Symbolist, which I find interesting because Color Field is returning even emptier than when it left.

SM Symbolism is completely antithetical to Greenberg, it was like a bad case of the "phony far-outs."

JF So was he good on color?

SM Well, to answer that, unfortunately, back to Jack Bush—I always liked him because his color is truly odd. But Clem's take on it was the pedestrian interpretation of good taste at the time. That article on his collection, art that was given to him—what he chose, was often, too often, something very tasteful in that dated way, something in the beige to burnt beige family, maybe a little blue; it wasn't eccentric art. You also notice that what Clem loved to do himself, and enjoyed others doing, is life drawing.

JF And you all sat around over at Noland's farm and got completely ripped and insulted each other?

SM It was a ritual. I don't know if Ken or Clem started it, but all of those artists were at the ground level of Sullivanian analysis, and one of the principles of that school was confrontation. Irony was not to be tolerated. If someone was putting you on, your duty as a modern person was to confront them on that.

JF The most interesting thing about Warhol, to make a little shift, is to think of him as a colorist. In the Edie Sedgwick book an assistant is quoted as saying that once he and Andy kept mixing a white for a background all day until they finally

got the white he wanted. His color is even richer, more complex than the claims David Batchelor makes for it in Chromophobia, because Batchelor's pushing his industrial color agenda, he has a personal bias. But I think that if Warhol ever isn't chilly, it's in the color; it's certainly never in the imagery.

**SM** Yes, and the color is always synthetic, even when it's a naturalistic color like brown. But, come to think of it, Greenberg mentioned that he thought Warhol was a good colorist; he would agree with you. I said to Clem, "But he doesn't even mix his own colors!" and he said it didn't matter.

**JF** Did you mix colors when you worked for Warhol?

**SM** No, Ronnie Cutrone mixed the colors, and sometimes Andy fooled around with them.

**JF** How long did you work for him?

**SM** Not really that long, mostly on the Shadows series. Andy and Rupert painted them, screened them, and we put them together. Ronnie and I arranged them for the Dia show.

**JF** I remember, they were at Heiner Friedrich's. It's always such a surprise, but I have accepted Warhol without realizing it. It's like when I was in high school, I always bought the Doors without thinking about it. Other stuff was a considered purchase, but I unconsciously just accepted them. Recently, I was working on a painting and thought, "If I were to resolve it like this, it would be a Warholian solution," and that immediately legitimized my decision—a standard that I wasn't even aware of.

**SM** I know what you mean; Andy's style in painting and drawing and everything has been completely absorbed and internalized. It was part of everybody's consciousness, at this point it's so far removed that you don't even think, Warhol.

**JF** When did you show in Dave Hickey's gallery?

**SM** A Clean Well-Lighted Place was a little gallery in Austin when I was an undergraduate at the University of Texas. Dave showed Texas and California art. I used to see him at student art sales, eyeing everybody's work. I thought, "What's this guy up to?"

**JF** Did you talk to him much?

**SM** Not really until years later.

**JF** That was when Austin was really a cow town, wasn't it?

**SM** More of a hippie Arcadia.

**JF** About 15 years ago I reviewed a show of yours—although the review never made it to print—and I remember these mascara-like gestural strokes and flesh-colored rainbows. The Tantric imagery in your work was just beginning to arrive. I wrote this rather sarcastic conclusion that went, “Why fast and meditate when you’ve already achieved enlightenment using Ecstasy?”

**SM** The Ajit Mookerjee books on Tantra art came out in '65 or '66. They’ve had an especially lasting impression on me. I got really interested in Tantra because of the notion that these abstract paintings had a specifically spiritual use—and that a symbol or shape could have power. You know, one thing led to another; years later I’ve come up with a shape of some sort and I like to think it has a function.

**JF** These new paintings have a lot less drop-dead drama than what you were doing say, ten years ago. At that time, there would be this big wash of color and other little things going on, but it was more ominously beautiful and very, Wow.

**SM** I know what you’re saying, more like event or phenomena.

**JF** When I came to New York in the late '70s the big art word was reticent. Then the '80s came along and painting got incredibly theatricalized; it became hard to do a painting that wasn’t grabbing you by the throat, just the way every other form of visual communication in daily life did.

**SM** That’s true. Maybe now I’m trying to induce a new point of view, rather than a depiction of an event, apocalyptic happenings and big change. Generally, I’m more interested in constant things rather than little episodic things. If you’ve only seen one tornado, it’s a big deal, but in Texas it just becomes another element of the weather.

**JF** That’s what I was saying. So much art, no matter how much irony it inserts along the way, derives from the language of mass media whose whole intention is to tell us that some event is unprecedented, et cetera, so that we’ll pay attention. Art has the opportunity to work in areas outside of the zeitgeist world.

**SM** I like to look at my paintings metaphorically with the quality of paint and the interaction of color, which is something Klaus Kertess has been talking about for years.

**JF** I’m seeing a lot of painting now that is much more virtual. Whereas before there was a relatively conventional space, now there’s all this incredibly close, virtual space, or cartoon Simpsons space.

**SM** I like to look at cartoons. But much of the new painting you’re talking about is so many generations removed from the original depictions that I don’t know what they might be.

**JF** Well that's attenuation, all right. One of painting's properties that's so interesting and so unavailable elsewhere is its immediacy and autonomy, it's like singing on the street.

**SM** I used to like Islamic art because geometric form is supposed to allow the soul to escape. If you look at Islamic architecture and its tile work, you can read it and reread it. First, perhaps you read only rectangles, but the shapes move in a certain direction and you realize it's connected to a larger pattern, and you can rearrange it visually. It works in the way colors in a plaid flip from what seems to be the ground color and what seems to be the figure.

**JF** When I wander around the Islamic section of the Met, what I love most are the bowls with one dot at the bottom and maybe a very simple three-dot pattern and a stripe around the rim. It's not as directly representational as the dots in Tantric art, which are figures, really.

**SM** I used to like the Mughal style of Arabian painting, with animals and all of those jewel-like colors and mountains and all the elements of narrative all in one field. Now I'm more interested in geometrics and calligraphy. The way the geometric patterns rearrange themselves is infinite.

**JF** When I was in the Istanbul market looking at erotic miniatures, I noticed that in the Indian ones the women are smiling but in the Islamic miniatures the women look put-upon, dutiful. There are 500-year-old steam baths all over Turkey, all with a dome with a glass dot pattern circling the top. You lay on this giant slab of marble and stare up at the dots. Love them dots. Like that necklace motif you use in some of the more recent work. So where do you think your color comes from?

**SM** I so very love the color in those Iranian miniatures you mentioned and I love the color in Indian painting. Even the really primitive, ritualistic, rural stuff that's usually a shrine. The pigments are modern but intensely colored, a kind of tempera paint.

**JF** Did India hold many surprises when you finally got there?

**SM** I don't think you can ever grasp the otherness. We are only just understanding how different Islamic culture is from ours. In India there is just this plain strangeness, fundamental differences that are so big; everything is different. And so much of India is modern that you are hardly shocked. You see those photographs of deepest Africa and the photographer has just avoided the rubber flip-flops or the boom box, but Hinduism is totally inclusive, it's the great sponge. Everything gets absorbed into more Hinduism, more Indianism, regardless of how modern or technological it is.

**JF** Painters, at least the ones I like, are as much ruled by the paintings they've experienced in their lives as the life they've experienced. I get impatient very quickly if the balance tips too far either way. I can't stand painters that are too far into painting culture and I can't stand painters, or artists for that matter, who have too much skeptical distance on art or see it too philosophically.



**SM** I'm interested in demonstrating the folly of duality; I'm deliberately toying with that thing about figure/ground, which is which. The ground being the way we set up what we think reality is, the warp and woof of how we see our situation. The paintings are not constricted or rigidly mathematical; it's like the fiction of our perception is ready to fall apart, the whole grid is ready to collapse, or change.

**JF** Your recent paintings fall into this weird still-life category.

**SM** Oh, you're talking about that painting right in front of us.

**JF** Yeah. Still-lives tend to stare back at you in a way that landscapes or even portraits don't. But the real reason I'm comparing your work to still-life is because it shares the subject of the transience of life within it, with the still-life genre.

**SM** Oh, absolutely. Thank you. Also the color defies the apparent stasis of the structure.

**JF** Defies it?

**SM** Right. If you really looked at the colors, then it's like you're not, because the paintings don't make any sense as a figure on a ground. Color-wise, the ground is the figure and vice versa, the figure and ground flip back and forth.

**JF** Yeah, because you're being seduced by the ground and looking past the foreground things, right?

**SM** Yes. It's a fiction, the subject-object and the subjective-objective way of looking at things—who's the subject and where is it? It sounds like I'm talking about physics but it's more of a Buddhist thing.

**JF** The way that I interpreted your work for the *Om* show was that it represents a model of the universe as a huge mouth spewing one's life out, toward one. The foreground shapes are events and—

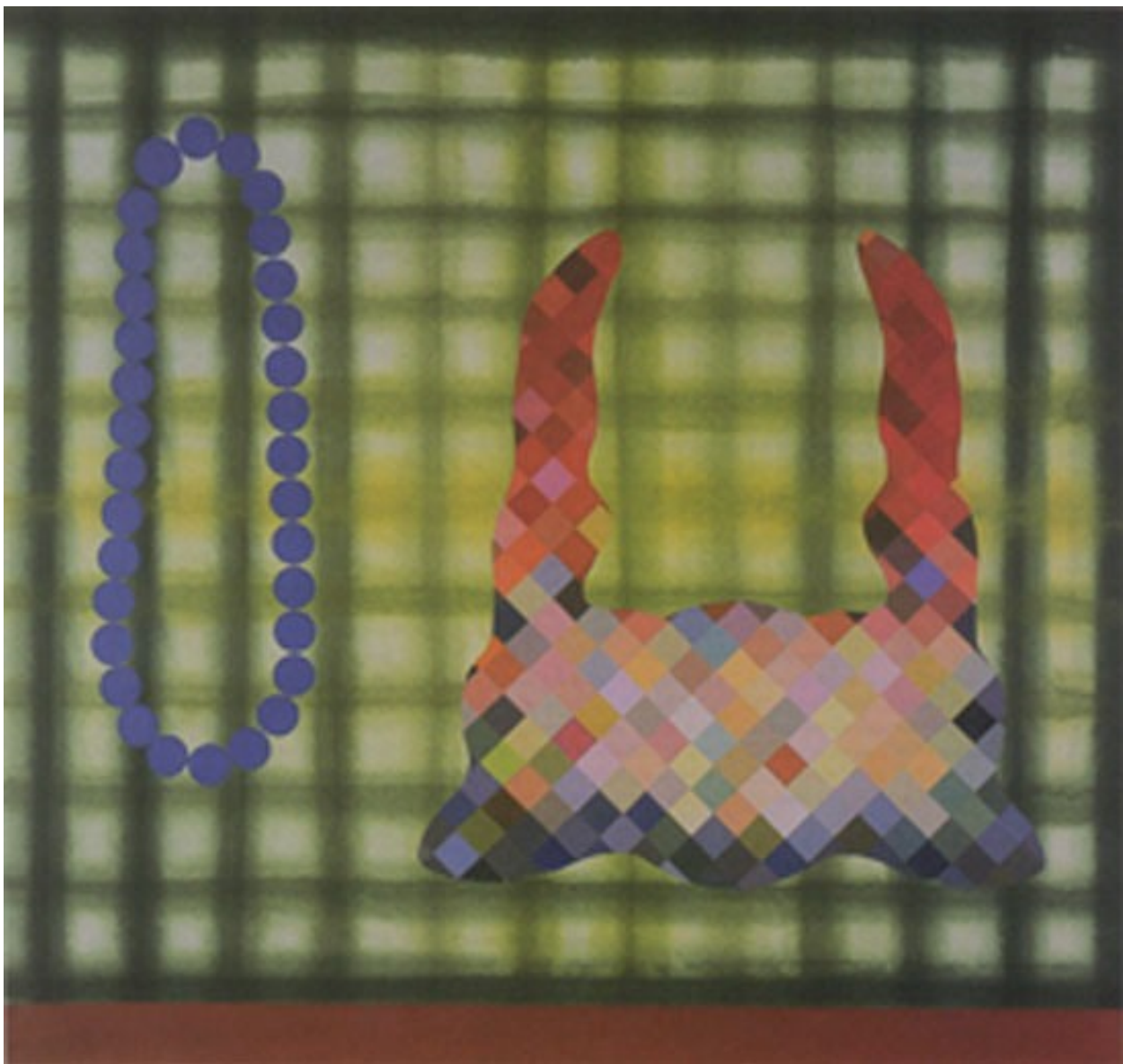
**SM** Our ideas—which are all transient, of course, like taste, judgment and our ideas of morality.

**JF** In the new Warhol biography, Wayne Koestenbaum thought that the films were about the eroticism of passing time. I thought that was so cool.

**SM** It's a beautiful idea and he's a smart guy, but that's an interpretation. I mean, please don't think for a minute that it crossed Andy's mind or anyone else's who was in or around any of those movies that they were about the eroticism of time passing. That's what you see, that's maybe the thrill that you get, but to go back to Dave Hickey, Dave always says that a work of art exists in the world independent of what the artist's intentions are. And that's the case with Andy's movies, with Andy's art, with anybody's art.

JF I was taught that whatever you see in a work of art, you have to assume that the artist intended it. I don't think Delacroix would have been so resistant to Baudelaire's rather morbid analysis of him if there wasn't some truth in it. You have to call them like you see them, go by that, even though it sometimes forces you to admire artists that you would rather feel differently about. It's humbling stuff. Anyway, I was thinking about how Warhol off-loaded a whole bunch of people and attitudes that hadn't shown up in the art world before.

SM That's true, and I think that was Andy's attraction for everyone. Even the Minimalists were seriously hypnotized. There was a closed mindset, certain things weren't acceptable, and then all of a sudden there were all these misfits and high-society types mixing into our world, as it should be, I guess.



Stephen Mueller, Mala and Mara, Acrylic on canvas, 66×71”.

JF When you were talking about the Tantra art books, I was thinking about how they seemed to me to have influenced the Minimalist painter, Blinky Palermo.

SM I'm mystified by a lot of German art. Sigmar Polke is one of my favorite painters; I don't know where some of that imagery comes from, but it's something really ancient like tree worship.

JF There's a Palermo that's kind of mythic, a long, very thin rectangle and a flat tondo both wrapped in blue tape; it looks like a spear and shield. Do you know it?

SM Yeah, bright blue tape.

JF He had just died when I moved to New York, everyone was still talking about him. So Polke is one of your favorite painters?

SM Yeah.

JF Who else?

SM Well, Mary [Heilmann] and Brice Marden, Pat Steir. Certain periods of Chinese painting, a lot of Indian painting.

JF Yeah, Mary's really good. A lot of her ideas are also in the French movement, surface-support.

SM From what?

JF Claude Viallat, a bunch of others, from the early '70s. The idea was that the content of the painting was how it was made. They would set up this rational-looking situation and then execute it as playfully and obliquely as possible, and that's what Mary does. I've always loved her work; I just thought it was really good French painting, which nobody is interested in anymore, even though there was that show out in Ohio this summer.

SM Well, it's a very French idea that we are philosophically obligated as painters. I've always enjoyed the decadent, extreme cultural periods like the Pre-Raphaelites, the Symbolists, Rococo, the extremes of Romantic music that occur just before a major sea change.

JF Melancholy Buddhism?

SM (laughter)

**JF** In Eastern religion you get this dark side of things that you don't get in Christianity.

**SM** Well, art is knowledge and you have to acknowledge the other side of it. A lot of artists can be very literal minded about the darker side of art; they use viscera, excrement, all that transgressive stuff. There's a more subtle and simple way to show the contingency of everything in paintings without being literal minded.

**JF** I always thought that there was a shadow that sometimes fell across your paintings, not a shadow where I could point and say, There it is, but this kind of shadow-evil. It's the most fleeting presence, but it's there. But not as much as it used to be. Sometimes I think, "Stephen must be feeling better, there isn't so much of that shadowy presence anymore."

**SM** I don't think it's about feeling good or feeling bad. It's what it is.

**JF** Well, maybe you're right: the viewer does what he or she wants with it. I've always been adamant about not explaining the work to myself because I want to keep it alive. There's an idea that when you can put something into language it's already dead for you—you know that one?

**SM** No, but I've heard museums called mausoleums. (laughter) Two of my favorite concepts are from other cultures. One is what the Greeks called kefi, where you are overcome by tragedy as well as the wonderfulness of it all. Like do you ever get all worked up about music and, Oh! my grandmother's dead and, Let's dance! and the ocean and everything all at once? It's cathartic, and painting is akin to that. The other concept is Japanese, mono no aware, which first showed up in Lady Murasaki's 11th-century novel The Tale of Genji. It's a cultural principle where a work of art—be it poetry or a pot or a painting, clothing or calligraphy—reveals somewhere in its making a knowledge of the transience of everything. Later it came to mean just melancholy, but it's slippery. They're both slippery concepts— especially in America where we don't have, you're happy and sad, you're rich and poor, the whole ball of wax all at once and then it's over.

**JF** This guy Ian Buruma is very good on other cultures. He explained mono no aware in a review of Banana Yoshimoto's book, Kitchen. This character dies and the narrator opens a letter and smells the dead character's perfume. The most difficult thing about the moment is the narrator's thought that eventually, after opening the letter enough times, the perfume will fade, that the grief will weaken. That they would place an aesthetic value on strong feelings of sadness is very different from this culture. Americans don't exactly place value on powerful, fleeting emotions.

**SM** (laughter) Somewhere in the middle of that is what life is, a powerful, fleeting emotion. That's how I end up with the faux stasis in the work.

**JF** Faux stasis?

**SM** The fact that all you have to do is sit still and it will all happen to you anyway.

JF Well, not that you're saying this, but I don't think of your work as melancholic. I ended up making abstract paintings because figuration seems unavoidably melancholic. The new crop of figurative painters are melancholic and it's a second-rate, adolescent emotion. While abstraction seems to be naturally philosophical and affirmative; even Rothko isn't melancholic.

SM He's tragic.

JF Which is very different.

SM What about pathos?

JF It's been really nice to stare at this painting for two hours while we're doing this. What were you saying?

SM Just having an awareness of the folly of style, the folly of attitude, the folly of opinion about art or anything. I'm talking about emptiness. When I said the paintings are about the folly of duality, that is emptiness. I know that sounds like a '50s thing, "Oh yeah, I get it, Zen, emptiness," but it's much bigger than that, and it's not happy and it's not sad, it's just the Big Empty.

JF Well, your paintings sustain themselves outside of an art context, it's a thing with colors and internal relationships.

SM One of the assignments I always have on my students' syllabus is to make something that is their idea of what an abstract painting is. Because people have notions about abstraction that are still like the very first New Yorker cartoon about modern art: What is it? It's much scarier to have to deal with almost any abstract painting than it is to deal with depiction or a historical painting like *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. There aren't many people who like to look at abstract painting or who want to bother with its implications.

JF If you want to talk about it generally, the reason abstraction ended up making sense to me was simply if you paint long enough, you finally get to the point where you realize you're involved with something that doesn't serve language. You know what my big aesthetic concept is?

SM Anything goes?

JF (laughter) No. A French woman gets completely dressed and then removes one thing. Which is about restraint, about how much is enough. Well, we're getting down to the wire now.

SM That part about language was good.

**JF** That's the jazz thing, another discipline with its own language. We never talked about music, which is so important to your work. Or literature.

**SM** I do think that painters are predominantly influenced by either literature or music. I'm definitely a music man.

Joe Fyfe is a painter and curator. In addition, he writes for Art in America, Art On Paper, Artnet, and Artcritical.com. His most recent solo show was at Nicholas Davies Gallery, and he has recently had work at Lindsay Brown, Edward Thorp and Jay Grimm Galleries in New York City, Pierogi 2000 in Brooklyn, and Marcel Sitcoske Gallery in San Francisco

All rights reserved. © Bomb Magazine, New Art Publications, and its Contributors.