

Stephen Mueller

BAUMGARTNER GALLERY

The *Tao te Ching* indicates the essential role of emptiness as an element in the creation of things, habitable space, and sentient beings: “We shape clay into a pot, / but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want. . . . We work with being / but non-being is what we use.” Painter Stephen Mueller refers to this emptiness by suspending enigmatic objects in boundless colored space, making canvases that hover between lyrical abstraction and geometric decoration.

The only recognizable and repeated formal element in Mueller’s work is a vase, which evokes the votive containers in Tibetan Buddhist altars and which the artist defines as “a cauldron, a mythical vessel from which everything is formed.” As in Tibetan *tankas*, in which the contrasting colors and repeated symmetry of the figures of the Buddha represent the illusory nature of the concept of duality, Mueller creates a dialogue between subject and object, background and foreground, to express what he calls “the folly of duality, the falsity of the idea of self.” In the new paintings shown recently at Baumgartner Gallery, vividly colored opaque forms float against soft, fluid backgrounds, every element interrelated and integrated into the whole.

Stephen Mueller,
Mneme, 2006, acrylic
on canvas, 60 x 50”.



Every part seems perpetually about to become something else, nothing can be taken for granted, and the notion of certainty falls apart. Mueller’s forms are as ephemeral as patterns in a kaleidoscope.

In *Show Up Showdown*, 2006, a puff of yellow powder escapes from a blue and red striped container, above which a pendulum is suspended. Shapes on the right-hand side seem captured mid-drift, while shadings, outlines, and internal geometries echo one another in an endless play of references. Formal elements are in balance, and the composition seems suspended in an ecstasy of absolute quiet. Mueller here reminds us that reality is in a state of continuous passage from one physical state to another by wedding the Buddhist concept of impermanence with Marx and Engels’s “All that is solid melts into air.”

While inspired by tantric Buddhism, some of Mueller’s paintings have Greek titles—*Mneme*, *Zephuros*, *Orpheo* (all 2006)—a move influenced by the artist’s reading of Italian scholar Roberto Calasso, whose works illuminate the cultural and spiritual path that leads from ancient Greece to the Vedas to Buddhism. Mueller draws on different spiritual and mythological references precisely because his interest lies both in the concept of myth in general and in an expanded spirituality. In his smaller paintings, the contrast between background and the colored painted silhouettes in the foreground introduces a regular dimensional matrix periodically broken up by the introduction of “off” elements. Vibrantly colored geometric forms appear suspended in the foreground for an instant before collapsing back into the undifferentiated void. Every form becomes the condensation of an exhaled breath, holy for the briefest of brief moments.

—Ida Panicelli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.