

Stephen Mueller, *Euterpe*, 2008,
acrylic on canvas, 70 x 80"

Stephen Mueller, *Euterpe*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 70 by 80 inches.
Courtesy the Estate of Stephen Mueller.

Many are the darts thrown at abstract painting just now.
Dismissive epithets pile up in front of canvases. Good

paintings, bad paintings and indifferent paintings are equally held to blame for the sins of the market.
Abstraction is seen by many as a corrupt practice.

All of this happens, and perhaps can only happen, within a historical void; it happens, in part, because we still lack an adequate history of recent painting. Over the last decade there have been a very few exhibitions that have attempted to explore this history from a New York perspective ("[High Times Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975](#)" in 2007, "[Conceptual Abstraction](#)" in 2012, my own "[Reinventing Abstraction](#)" in 2013), and if there have been any books on the subject, I haven't yet seen them.

Here, then, are notes towards another chapter of my once and future history of painting in New York. Here, then, some observations about one of the period's best painters, whose work, at least for the moment, is hovering silently in barely visible empyrean zones like one of the floating mandalas in his final paintings. Here, then, in brief, is Stephen Mueller (1947-2011).

Mueller began showing his work in New York in the mid-1970s, following studies at the University of Texas in Austin and at Bennington College. At the time Bennington was a bastion of Color Field painting and Greenbergian formalism, and although Mueller rejected many of its tenets, he was also deeply marked by the work of artists like Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland whose influence, he remarked to an interviewer much later, was "shoved down your throat" at the Vermont college. In New York, Mueller found his way, for a time, into Color Field's polar opposite: Warhol's Factory, where he worked as an assistant, most notably helping to stretch and install Warhol's most abstract works, the *Shadows*. (After Warhol's death in 1987, Mueller paid



Stephen Mueller, *A.W. Takes a Bow*, 1987, acrylic and pigment on canvas, 48 by 48 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Stephen Mueller.

tribute to him with a painting titled *A. W. Takes a Bow*.)

It wasn't until the mid-1980s that Mueller emerged with a distinctive style in which thinned-out acrylic paint is used to create soft, glowing, loosely geometric stained grounds (reminiscent of Rothko's "multiform" paintings) that Mueller then defaces with pigment-thick gestural forms that have a Baroque grotesquerie about them. Additionally, there are often sprays of ink that seem to have been misted onto the canvas. (I don't use the word "misted" by chance—Mueller was an aficionado of perfumes.) In some cases flurries of glitter are sprinkled onto the canvas. More ubiquitous are small rectangular blocks of solid color, often containing modestly sized but altogether exquisite gestural

marks, that seem both to sit on the picture plane and cut an aperture into it. These insets or shapes, depending on how you choose to read them, no doubt owe something to Hans Hoffmann, but I suspect that a more direct source are the similar shapes that began showing up in David Salle's paintings just two or three years earlier. If Hoffmann is about push/pull spatial dynamics, Salle is about discursive interruption and stylistic contamination. For all his lifelong commitment to abstraction, Mueller took a great deal from Neo-Expressionism. Many of the pictorial devices as well as a sense of glamorous drama in his 1980s paintings recall elements from Polke, Schnabel, Salle, while some of the brushwork looks borrowed from lugubrious paintings by the likes of Rainer Fetting and Enzo Cucchi. And yet, Mueller, even in the 1980s, never looks like a "school-of" artist, in part because isn't tempted by figuration (a requirement of Neo-Expressionism), in part because of his sheer painterly ability and daring. This isn't to say that his work was unconnected from representational art. According to Holland Cotter, who wrote a marvelous catalogue essay for Mueller's 1987 show at Fabian Carlsson in London, his paintings were sometimes inspired by 19th century marine-scapes, and by the landscape of Hydra, the Greek island he often visited. Mueller's painting *Meltami* (sic) alludes to the powerful meltemi or etesian winds that tear through the Aegean Sea in summertime.

In the early 1990s the work changed dramatically. The gritty gestures disappeared, and with them the sense of an artist hell bent on destroying the decorum of Color Field painting. Mueller's surfaces grew calm, the space grew deeper, and the newly uncluttered paintings became suffused with color and light. Held aloft by some



Stephen Mueller, Meltami, 1987, acrylic and pigment on canvas, 70 by 76 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Stephen Mueller.

invisible force were luminous orbs and hypnotic rings of color, as well as concentrated areas of decorative patterning (plaids, stripes, trellis-like grids), all of which are painted with devotional delicacy.

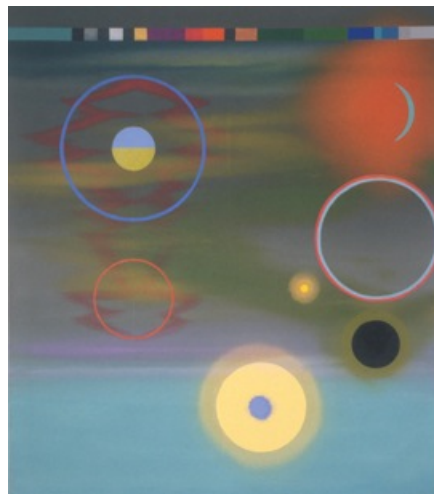
Mueller began looking more and more at non-Western art, most notably the tantric painting that would engage him, and increasingly so, for the rest of his life. In the mid-2000s his compositions often featured simple centered forms, usually filled with patterns and silhouetted against gradated grounds. In other paintings Nolandesque circles are

ringed with far more fanciful concentric forms, inviting with equal ease viewers in search of a meditative experience and those hungry for intense visual pleasure. His last works, made as he was fighting the lung cancer that would soon fell him, were as complex and as transcendent as anything he had ever made.



Stephen Mueller, Devotees, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 68 by 64 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Stephen Mueller.

The estate of Stephen Mueller is represented by **Lennon, Weinberg**, New York and **Texas Gallery**, Houston. On February 19, 2015, an exhibition of Mueller's work will open at Lennon, Weinberg.



Stephen Mueller, Bageshwari, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 78 by 68 inches. Courtesy the Estate of



View of 2010 Stephen Mueller Exhibition, at Lennon Weinberg, New York.



Stephen Mueller, Kabir, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 57 by 36 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Stephen Mueller.



Conversations with artists
