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HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

What Happens When You Are Not a Track Star for Mineola Prep

by **John Yau** on April 28, 2012

The French novelist Alphonse Karr famously declared (in French, of course): "The more things change, the more they stay the same." Another Karr homily, which is not as well known, is his take on capital punishment: "Let the gentlemen who do the murders take the first step."

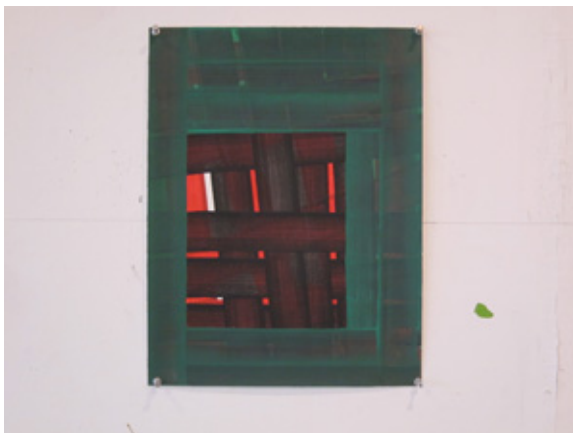
People usually quote Karr because they believe that things never really change, that it's just more of the same in a different package. I disagree. I think you have to resist reaching this conclusion; that it offers too easy a way out.



Karr's homily unexpectedly popped up the day after I went to Gary Stephan's studio to see an installation of drawings that he will exhibit in the fall of this year at Devening Projects + Editions in Chicago. The artist [Dan Devening](#) runs the space.

When I walked into Gary's studio, I discovered that he had a very specific idea in mind. He had arranged three rows of drawings on a long wall, going from largest to smallest — a forced perspective in which the works appeared to recede in space. That illusion got me to want to look closer, but it also made me a little more conscious of looking, which we all too often take for granted.

(On the way to Gary's studio, I watched a man in an expensive suit walk down the street checking his cell phone as if the sidewalk would magically clear any and all obstacles in his path — on the way to something important, no doubt. Just another act of everyday hubris, which Jacques Tati would have turned into something magical).



I think Karr's homily popped up because I had been thinking about my relationship to Gary's work. In the 1980s I reviewed it twice, both times critically. The second time was uncalled for, and I have neither excuses nor reasons for why I did it. Whatever the reason, it wasn't spiritual or high-minded. Stanley Whitney would say it is because I have a prickly, volatile side.

Fast forward twenty-five years. One day a mutual friend, who didn't know of my two reviews, told me that Gary Stephan was doing the best work of his life. It took a while, but one evening I went up to Gary and invited myself to his studio. I had already

had made a stealth visit to his [website](#) and decided I should see the real thing.

It is while I was sitting in Gary's studio that I got the idea for an exhibition, *Broken/Window/Plane*, which was held in February and March of this year at [Tracy Williams](#), New York. I was looking at "Light Trap" (2011), and for a moment I remembered "Cathy" (2011), a painting by Catherine Murphy, as well as "Barn Window with White Square" (1991), a painting by Lois Dodd. It was certainly not what I expected to happen.



Formally, the drawings are made up of a series of parallel brushstrokes, which Stephan reorients as he moves around the paper. They can be vertical, horizontal or diagonal. He might layer them. They evoke picket fences and the weave of the canvas, among other things. Stephan could stop there — and many artists do — but he doesn't, and that's one reason to look at these drawings. The initial layer of parallel marks has a logic to them, which Stephan continues as far as it will go, but always seems to know to stop just before he would be belaboring a point or becoming redundant. It's what he does next that elevates the drawing into another place. This is what Frank O'Hara said:

"You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, 'Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep.'"

Gary Stephan has moved into a place where he is operating without a safety net, where there is no justification or theory that supports what he does, or even the move he makes in a particular work, but there it is, looking back at you.

I think that moment where the work reaches a state of otherness is one to be sought after — where you are no longer speaking to it, but it is speaking to you, and you may not even understand what it is saying.

I have been thinking about artists who come into their own after they turn fifty or even sixty. I have already mentioned Kathy Bradford, Suzan Frecon, Judith Linhares and Joyce Pensato. Stanley Whitney is another artist who began making terrific paintings after he turned fifty.



I think it is very different for a white male artist, one who already has a profile, but who quietly sets out to reinvent his work, take what he has done and push it to another place. That is the case with Gary Stephan. An abstract artist, he showed with a number of prestigious galleries in the 1980s, but, to his credit, never jumped on the Neo-Expressionist or Neo-Geo bandwagon. He hadn't branded himself, and his career suffered for it.

I think our mutual friend is right. Gary Stephan *is* doing the best work of his life. These works on paper are going to Chicago and will not be seen in New York because he doesn't, as they say, have a hometown gallery.