

Yau, John, "Gary Stephan Talks to Rene Magritte and Kazimir Malevich", HYPERALLERGIC, 30 March 2014.

**HYPERALLERGIC**  
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Gary Stephan Talks to Rene Magritte and Kazimir Malevich



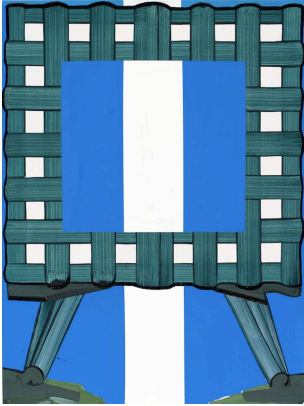
On the face of it, Gary Stephan's paintings seem straightforward and austere. Done in acrylic, their viscosities of paint, range from striated, semi-transparent brushstrokes laid down with the same consistency as they span the canvas, to watery, semi-transparent irregular shapes, to solid geometric planes of color — virtuosity in plain sight. The palette includes slightly off-kilter primaries, thalo green, white, black and various grays. Some of the striated brushstrokes, all of which are laid down with the same consistency as they span the canvas, carry traces of a previously used color, such as the mauve band over a not-quite-dry thalo green one in "Small Mental Furniture (Black and White)" (2013), one of nearly a dozen paintings on view in his current exhibition at Susan Inglett Gallery (March 20–April 26, 2014).

Stephan's sense of precision and timing — when to pull a loaded brush over a still-wet area — never announces itself, but is always there. Working with this circumscribed vocabulary, he composes paintings that twist the figure-ground relationship into a Gordian Knot, a layered, two-dimensional Rubik's Cube that never quite fits together nor can ever be taken completely apart.

This is the beauty of Stephan's paintings. Everything in them seems to be defined by what is adjacent to it, whether side-by-side or underneath. Take the three paintings called "Small Mental Furniture" (all from 2013), which are distinguished by the parenthetical color pairing — white and blue, red and blue, black and white — following the title. We seem to be looking at a geometric abstract painting, a trisected, horizontal rectangle sitting on an easel, which has three leg-like structures extending from it. As

paintings within paintings, they evoke Rene Magritte's paradoxical views, such as "The Human Condition" (1934) and "The Telescope" (1963).

In "Small Mental Furniture" (White and Blue), the trisected abstract painting is composed of a white vertical rectangle in the middle, flanked on either side by equally sized rectangles of solid luminous blue. A square lattice made of seven striated, evenly spaced thalo green brushstrokes form the ground (or easel) on which the "abstract painting" has been overlaid.



Meanwhile, the square spaces nesting between the thalo green brushstrokes are solid white. And, to destabilize the matter further, the white band in the middle of the "abstract painting" compresses the layered space (ignoring the lattice) to join a vertical white band bisecting the painting from the top to the bottom edge. What is in front and what is behind, we ask, but no satisfying answer is forthcoming. This is what painting can do, flatten a space while acknowledging it. You see this in Max

Beckmann's "The Night" (1918–19), with the woman on the right who is stretched across a table, but is pressing flat against the picture plane. In Stephan's "Small Mental Furniture" paintings, there is a tension between the airlessness of minimalist abstraction and the openness suggested by landscape. Stephan seems to be asking, how do we get some fresh air into painting again without jettisoning the past? It is not a trivial question.



By dissolving the categories of apprehension that separate the literal from the illusionistic, Stephan subverts the guidelines we use to sort and differentiate types [or genres] of painting. In doing so, he challenges what those categories imply, namely the long held myth that Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella or Andy Warhol (take your pick) forever settled something about painting, which is in effect saying that one of them found the god we should all believe in. Despite what critics and others who are invested in denigrating creativity say, painting (like poetry) not only persists, but is also healthy and flourishing in the face of inattention.

By building a painting out of striated brushstrokes and solid planes (you could call them modular building materials), which complicates the figure-ground relationship, Stephan opens up a space both for himself and for painting. Stephan's "abstract paintings"

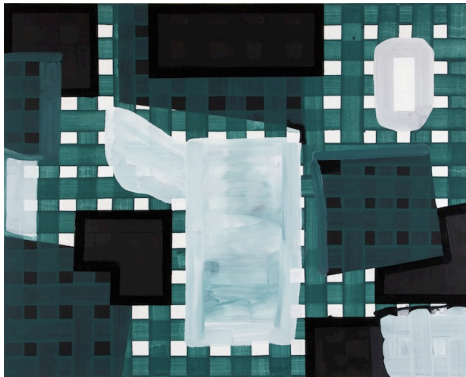


framed by a lattice are a rebuff to the latest round of attempts to characterize aesthetic experience, as if it were leprosy, as something to be quarantined or eradicated.

Stephan's paintings typically consist of three layers, each of which simultaneously build upon and contradict what's beneath it. The painting never logically resolves into an overall picture nor ever breaks down into separate, freestanding parts; everything needs what's around it to achieve a temporary stability. One could extend this view of things beyond aesthetic experience, but Stephan isn't about

to wave his finger and tell us that.

The gray, black and white square painting, “Untitled” (2008/13), belongs in a museum. It’s modest, smart, severe, generous, witty and serious all at once. The first layer of the painting is a white square framed by a thick black band — the exact opposite of Kazimir Malevich’s “Black Square,” which he first painted in 1915. Stephan overlays the white square, which is framed in black, with an irregularly-edged field composed of gray striated brushstrokes and four cutout shapes: a square, a triangle, and two hexagons. The cutout shapes interact with parts of the white square and black band beneath them, while becoming geometric offshoots of the initial layer. The cutout shape in the painting’s upper right hand corner is a square that opens onto the painting’s top and right physical edges. A wide black band spans the top edge and right side of cutout square, framing a white square in the lower left hand corner — so that there is a square within a square within a square within a square. This black-and-white square evokes the purist paintings of Ellsworth Kelly. By adding the gray field with the four cutouts, Stephan connects himself to a history that both includes and challenges Malevich, Kelly and reductivist painting.



Stephan poses the challenge both formally and pictorially. He inverts the colors of “Black Square,” suggesting that perhaps Malevich didn’t make the last painting, as some critics have claimed, but the first. In an acknowledgment of his source, he superimposes the white square framed by a black band with a gray field (a mixture of black and white). And each of the cutout shapes features a black-and-white “abstract painting.” History goes forward as much by bringing parts of the past with it as by rewriting and covering over what preceded it. Changes can be both abrupt and incremental. There is no single narrative account that covers it all. Evoking Magritte and Malevich — two artists you might not think should be mentioned in the same sentence, much less seen equally — without resorting to parody or citation, Stephan challenges conventional patterns of thinking. At any moment in history, there are artists who dare their contemporaries to see with fresh eyes, to look and look again. Stephan is one of them.

Gary Stephan continues at Susan Inglett Gallery (522 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 26.