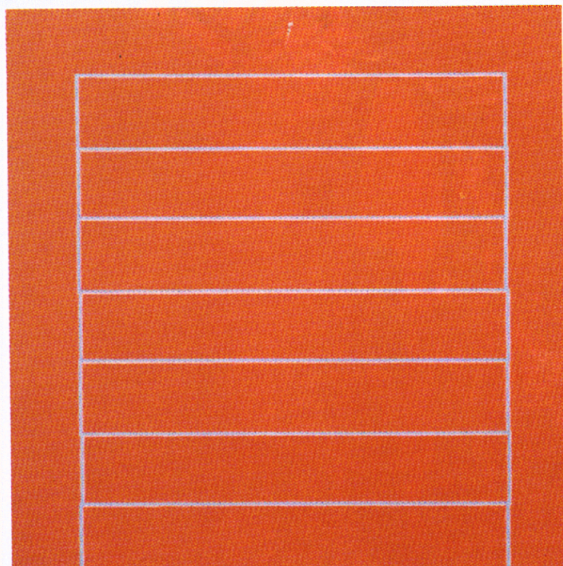


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Stephen Westfall: *Namaste*, 1998, oil on canvas, 60 inches square; at Lennon, Weinberg.

Stephen Westfall at Lennon, Weinberg

By now it is a critical truism that Stephen Westfall is an artist concerned with the grid. Yet the attentive viewer of his nine new paintings (all 1998 and 1999) comes to realize that, in fact, there are no true grids in these works. Instead of a lattice or checkerboard, Westfall populates his paintings with rectangles arranged as unconnected shapes which never cohere into a regular pattern. From a distance, the five-foot-square *Magic Power*, hung in the gallery's central room, seems to present two grids overlaid upon a reddish-orange background: one a pattern of blue lines that are "stretched" to be more widely spaced at the center of the canvas, the second a more regular white design. Both patterns appear "disrupted," and lines seem to jump as the painted bands awkwardly abut one another. Closer inspection reveals that these jumps are the result of a series of out-of-synch blue and white rectangles that never meet cleanly enough to form an orderly plait across the painting's surface.

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If the grid has always been a self-referential device, a taut web of lines reiterating the canvas's bounding edges, then Westfall's subtle geometries reintroduce a spatial complexity, an airiness, that the grid excludes. *In the Trees*, which takes a form resembling that of *Magic Power*, allows the eye to travel from shape to shape, from plane to plane between two layers of rectangles—as we might scan the forest, our eyes leaping from tree trunk to tree trunk. We never find a definitive ground in its deep green surface, only provisional resting points in the black and off-white outlines of its non-grid.

Confronting the visitor at the entrance to the gallery, *Namaste* played comparable tricks on the eye. The canvas is painted an intense orange which seems to cause retinal vibrations, and the actual surface would disappear within those optical pulses but for a "ladder" of irregular gray lines which rise almost to the top of the canvas. This minimum of cool paint is enough to pull us back to the surface, to give us some ground to stand on before diving off again into that orange ocean. Similar optical effects are generated by the smaller *Bijou*, where a black ground and lighter rectangles cause hazy spots to float before one's eyes. Westfall, as it turns out, can let go of the architectonic surface to become an explorer of painting's indeterminate depths.

—Tom McDonough