

Gary Stephan

By Dennis Kardon June 2, 2014 4:54pm



Gary Stephan: *Hidden in the Word*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 40 by 30 inches; at Susan Inglett.

colors, which he then uses to undermine a coherent view. He introduces a long translucent brushstroke that is direct, unwavering and striated by the brush hairs. Since the strokes are done in acrylic, their short alteration time demands confident mastery and a spontaneity anchored in the body. They have the appearance of wooden slats, gauzy bandages or—when crossed by a perpendicular of a complementary color—plastic webbing on lawn chairs. Stephan leaves varying amounts of space in between the strokes, or he weaves them, leaving a clear awareness of their exact order of placement.

Stephan surrounds the brushstrokes with shaped areas of negative space that destabilize figure/ground relationships. A color that is used as ground might come to the surface as a positive form. He also uses discontinuous areas of similar color that visually unite to create the impression of a singular shape.

Part of the power of Stephan's paintings comes from their engagement with the architecture of their exhibition spaces in ways that mirror their formal structure. We viewed *Hidden in the Word* (2013) twice, first from the street and again on our way in. Seeing it on a wall that blocked our view of the gallery before we even entered the space echoed how the various layers in the painting both conceal and disclose. Long, translucently other brushstrokes—structured as parallels and perpendiculars, and executed with steady determination—look like wooden slats, with a surrounding light bluish-gray negative shape that makes them into a barrel form. There are four little black shapes at the top and bottom corners of the barrel; wholly abstract in character, they are strangely and specifically delineated. They might be scorpion-tailed creepy buglike encrustations, or four black chairs surrounding a conference table seen from far above. Or they become eyebrows and mustaches, a sort of Groucho face, transforming the barrel into a nose and the bottom of the painting into a mouth. In this scenario, seven echoing black shapes at the bottom, interwoven with more other slats, become teeth. Or they become the footsteps in a dance instruction diagram.

Because of their color and facture, the remaining paintings may seem austere, but merely apprehending their complex formal structure does not settle their meanings. Stephan creates ambiguities of form that summon feelings that are not easily resolved. The brushstrokes of an untitled canvas from 2014 have us peeking through the bent slats of Venetian blinds, while the three “Small Mental Furniture” paintings (2013) can invoke memories of sitting in front of a test-patterned TV console in a '50s suburban rec room.

As an abstract painter, Stephan might evade the seductive charms that picture-making proffers, but her scent still lingers on his collar. Though he presents himself as a rigorous formalist, Stephan's strength is in the way he can engage our imagination through metaphor-eliciting ambiguities. All the feelings connected with these various interpretations coexist in the emotional resonance of his paintings.

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