I find she uses the stage space the way the realistic theater does, as an accidental segment of a place, not the way the poetic theater uses the stage, as a space complete in itself

– Edwin Denby on Martha Graham

Stephen Mueller's Poetic Theater

When we enter Stephen Mueller's work, when we pass inside the boundaries of the painting's edges, we arrive in a space that is at deliberate remove from daily reality. Mueller's pictures favor a completely absorbed poetic theater over a fragment of somewhere known. Each of his works is, in a sense, a chamber ensemble, a Joseph Cornell box (Fig. 1). This visual realm is most often found in the genre of still life painting or in fragments of larger figural compositions, where a discreet group of objects functions as mute observers of the main action. In still life proper, a collection of objects comments on the transience of life, but there is also a conversation between the depicted presences within the picture. The viewer is implicated in the event by looking, but the gaze is not quite returned. The viewer is only acknowledged in passing.

The difference between realistic and poetic space in painting, to borrow Edwin Denby's terms, is that in the latter, one gets the feeling the viewer is unnecessary; we are voyeurs who peer at an activity that could be taking place even if we weren't around. It is a space as old as myth, in narratives where fairies and gods are secretly observed by mortals, or mortals are spied upon in turn.

This is not to say that we are dealing with the preciousness of a closed system. In fact, wide polarities flicker within these paintings: mordant reserve becomes innocent other-worldliness, sagaciousness indulges in the immediate delight of video cartoons. Over the course of his career, Mueller has had many different things to say in his paintings. Throughout, he has been a synesthete: Mueller plunders painting's treasure chest, intent upon maximalizing the sensate properties he finds therein. He seems to incubate color; it suddenly blooms to the point where it virtually takes on a fragrance. What initially appear to be symmetrical emblematic shapes soon become unreliable, almost miragelike; what is there then seems not to be. Touch is addressed optically: he likes to make colors that overload the retina, like fingers poking closed eyelids.

Fig. 1

Joseph Cornell (American, 1903–1972)
Untitled [Star Box], n.d.
wood, glass, pigment, adhesive tape, rag paper with type, cord, cork, steel, and screws, 2½ x 11 x 12¼ inches
Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 2002.27

The viewer can sometimes feel overcome by a precocious, dandyish excess in the work while also aware of the presence of an old soul. The intense concentrations of tactility and opticality that are already in place at the inception of Mueller's project are most often associated with the later stages of a painter's progress. Late Bonnard, late Braque, and the mature Rothko all came to imagine painting as a resonant field of complex coloristic and tactile relationships—an outward sign of metaphorical and psychological depth.

Mueller's choices of how to proceed as a painter, in his contrariness and as well as his erudition, betray an instinct for the preservation of his creative drives and for the replenishing of his spirit, both of which are markers of a true artist. Bennington College,

where Mueller attended graduate school in 1970, was still under the influence of Clement Greenberg, who simply told him, "Don't let anyone tell you what to do." But Greenberg's personality and opinions still dominated the art department. Painting was very much concerned with an art of the real, of acrylic soaked into canvas, of non-referentiality. Mueller took in this instruction skeptically, while beginning his own involvement in Asian art with the recent appearance of books by Ajit Mookerjee on Tantra art. "I got really interested in Tantra," he has said, "because of the notion that these abstract paintings had a specifically spiritual use—and that a symbol or a shape could have power."

Of the color-field painters he was exposed to at Bennington College, it makes sense that Mueller credits as an influence the work of the most eccentric painter of this group, Jack Bush. "His color is truly odd," he has said. Mueller's earliest work in this exhibition, *Southern Film*, from 1977, signifies his stepping-off point, where his own identity begins to reveal itself and his influences begin to take root. The pigment-inflected background and fully saturated, frontally located hues recall Jack Bush's later paintings (he died in 1977) of rolled-on background and color-swatched foreground. The air of meditative stasis, which comes to dominate Mueller's later works, is already present, as is the characteristic interiority and the forward projection of oblique geometric shapes. This last element is reminiscent of the stylized forms of 18th-century Rājasthān miniatures, with which Mueller was already familiar (FIG. 2).

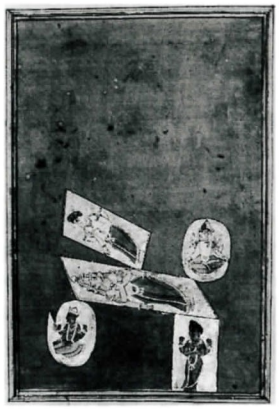

FIG. 2
Rājasthān, India, 18th century
Painting representing a stylized form of the syllable *Om*, with its resident deities
From *Tantra: The Indian Cult of Ecstasy*
by Philip Rawson,
published by Thames & Hudson, Inc., New York

In addition, *Southern Film* evokes a primordial, damply reptilian environment, realized from scraping on the moss-colored acrylic with a palette knife. The painting is a personal genesis; it symbolically illustrates a point of departure, an embarkation upon a life in art that is similar to the early works of such artists as Al Held in his 1950 *Fragment of a Dream of God's* (collection of the artist), or Barnett Newman's *Genesis—The Break* from 1946 (Dia: Chelsea). These abstract paintings locate the artist mythically as creator. We enter Mueller's painting by crossing an implied proscenium. Like Picasso, Mueller never fully abandons a frontally oriented, stagelike space. A red and blue band, a bicolor pennant, flutters near the bottom edge. An oblong TV-screen-shaped plane hovers impassively in the upper center. Almost inexplicably, the painting seems to empty itself into the half-lit, atmospheric room emerging from the monochrome surface.

In Mueller's early 1980s work, the presence of myth and the influence of Tibetan painting are temporarily discarded in favor of free-associative and material investigations. Idiosyncratic disc and ribbon shapes begin to unravel, like a sweater's yarn being pulled out; scraped paint marks become independent entities. In *Jaipetto* (1980), *Vain Servant* (1981), *The Director's Conundrum* (1982), and *That's What You Think* (1983), feathery brush strokes and knife marks coagulate or drift. These molting forms might be organisms from a distant planet. The painting seems to document shape-shifting flora and fauna in an acrid atmosphere of red skies and smoky vistas.

The works of this period also engage in a dialogue with the recent history of painting as fully as did the output of another artist who came under the heading of neo-expressionist, David Salle. Mueller and Salle were not colleagues, they occupied different art circles, but they shared, for various reasons, what at the time was a somewhat anachronistic engagement in the legacy of color-field painting. The level of nuance in the genre allowed both painters to acknowledge the continuing viability of taste, available as a touchstone, while they challenged it. Mueller has stated that he has spent his career rebelling against Greenberg's legacy while retaining aspects of color-field's legacy: for example, its unfussiness and its exhilaration. But his project extends far past color-field's proscribed capability of carrying the content of its own making.

It should be remembered that in the early 1980s, painting—particularly the emotive and visceral properties of oil paint—had returned as historically ironic content to the center of art discourse. There was no interest in acrylic paint. Nonetheless, Mueller and Salle's temperaments led them to favor the detached response that the medium afforded—it lacked oil paint's emotive bearing. In this way, they underlined the impossibility of direct expression in painting, an issue that has become central to the medium, while avoiding the excessive pastiche of much 1980s painting. The primary element in both their work is an attempt to extend the subversive properties of color. Salle also added figurative elements, affecting a kind of channel-switching negation of disparate cultural imagery. Mueller eschewed overt representation while inculcating a provocative mix of artifice, invention, and fantasy.

Mueller began to compound his approach to the act of painting. He saw it as a form of adornment and as an investigation of solipsistic markings. He played with the identity of the artist as mythical creator to include sources such as mystic, drag queen, punk, and *Yakuza*, a denizen of the Tokyo underworld. In *Champ* and *Howdy Duty* (1985), Mueller left behind the more vegetal hues of his earlier palette and painted with a synthetic battery of iridescent and artificial-looking colors and unconventional

applications of paint. He utilized all of the extenders and additives that were becoming increasingly available to painters. Many of the works from this period include areas of painting pushed through the canvas weave onto the foreground or washed on with big brushes. Gelatinous scumbles congeal on the surface while wet rivulets dart or fall in all directions. There are colored chalk marks and scrawlings of shiny semitransparent paint. A number of passages of applied paint appear hermetically transgressive: the bulked-up metallic acrylic is smeared on with a stick, as if the artist was using the painting as a rag and his attention was on some half-completed alchemical experiment of turning waste into gold.

FIG. 3
An illustrated sheet of famous Japanese woodblock prints, from the collection of Stephen Mueller

By the time Mueller painted *Help Me Somebody* (1985), he had, for all intents and purposes, degendered color-field painting and immobilized Greenberg's influence. One also detects a calculated distance, as if Mueller, as the malevolent cosmetician-as-clinician, is disavowing any cathartic motives and is carefully weighing the effects of each painting decision, though he clearly takes Greenberg's strictures as a personal affront. He responds coolly. There is both languor and violence lurking beneath the ice-blue acrylic pours, pearlescent washes, and Fanta orange fields. These works were both personal explorations and deliberate travesties of gestural painting, a *riposte* to the authority of canonical abstraction. Still, Mueller has not abandoned taste; the paintings reveal character and complexity, airiness and breadth, and he counters Greenberg on his own terms, acknowledging the continuing importance of the retinal, the optical and the haptic.

In the second half of the 1980s, Mueller made a number of trips to Italy and Greece. *Rushing Up Portofino* (1986) was inspired by his first trip to Italy, where he was bedazzled by the landscape and vistas of the Italian Riviera. Greece drew him repeatedly to what he called the "placid, bathtub-like" composure of the Aegean Sea. *After Helen's Picnic* (1987) commemorates an all-day sailing excursion around the Greek island of Hydra, organized by his friend Helen Marden, but may also refer to the most famous mobilizer of Aegean boat trips, Helen of Troy. Formally, Mueller's painting vocabulary continued to expand, his abstract imagery became progressively various and layered, as he became more interested in the structuring of the viewer's experience. A Japanese print from the artist's collection helps to illustrate how some of the changes in the paintings arrived (FIG. 3). Both *Rushing Up Portofino* and *After Helen's Picnic* use strips of color along some of the borders to trip the eye as it moves toward the picture's edge, a final halt at the boundary between the picture and reality.

Mueller also introduced interior rectangles floating on the inflected washes and softened grounds of the canvas surface. These interior pictures operate in the breach of the main action of the picture and are derived from the broken-up, episodic character of Japanese prints. They echo the rectangular support while also containing a small series of expressionistic strokes that seem to encapsulate the activity of paintings from some other zone, like a window of activity imposed upon a full-screen television image.

Many paintings of this period have a remarkable similarity to the layered, softened graphics that overlay imagery on Japanese news programs, also derived from traditional Japanese prints. The rectangular laminations are painted on while still wet, so that the gestural strokes, executed with a knife or brush, pull up the ground color and reveal portions of the background, enmeshing themselves with the floating foreground element. Mueller marries the influence of Hans Hofmann to the effect of electronically transmitted kabuki, combining elements of circumscribed ritualistic theater with painterly improvisation and tropes from global communication mediums. At the same time, he continues to ease the viewer's associations of unalloyed color away from the mineral and toward a wider range of connotations.

The final painting from the '80s on view in the exhibition, *Revolving Specter* (1988), is an inflected horizon of electrified pea green and curry, tipped on its side. Moon-white painterly discs of scraped paint congeal as they appear to fall through the foreground plane above snaky or whiplike greasepaint strokes. The laminated rectangles on the upper right both anchor and disrupt the illusionistic interior space, while the entire picture invokes a queasy view—a satellite circling some distant moon or some nightmarish interior landscape.

A sea change occurs as Mueller enters the 1990s; he has by now become accustomed to the technical skills developed through his improvisational method. For a number of years he has had a parallel engagement in watercolor, and this method of working, where the artist is constantly playing off the light of the paper, begins to manifest itself in the paintings. Mueller's intense scrutiny of the visual devices found in South Asian and Japanese pictorial material begins to become evident in his ability to embed abstract shapes in such a way that they are slowly apprehended by the viewer. Mueller's paintings become more clearly constructed of soft backgrounds and opaque foreground shapes. Certain moments of abstract imagery reveal their presence only after minutes of looking, though they hover in plain sight. In his

earlier gestural work, Mueller was able to accomplish this with bulky swatches of gray, but in the later work it is mostly done with stylized semi-round forms.

Omphalos as Guadalupe, from 1992, is a seminal painting. Mueller hybridizes the most important Catholic icon of the Americas by including it in a pictorial composition with the navel-shaped stone used in the rites of Delphic cults. This fusion of two distinct devotional images—a kind of narrative doubling where a pagan object is introduced into an animist/Christian setting—grows out of his formal transversals in the earlier work. There is also the poetic rhyme of the Virgin of Guadalupe's oval face with the oval shape that often represents the Omphalos, the rounded stone in the center of the ancient Greek temple of Apollo at Delphi thought to mark the center of the earth. Also present is an overlapping of religious function in their shared ability to communicate with the Creator, or life-giver. What is most significant is that Mueller has found a way to invest abstract shapes with fleeting, mutable identities that contain spiritual power. What he first encountered in Tantric painting when still an art student had directly woven itself into his practice.

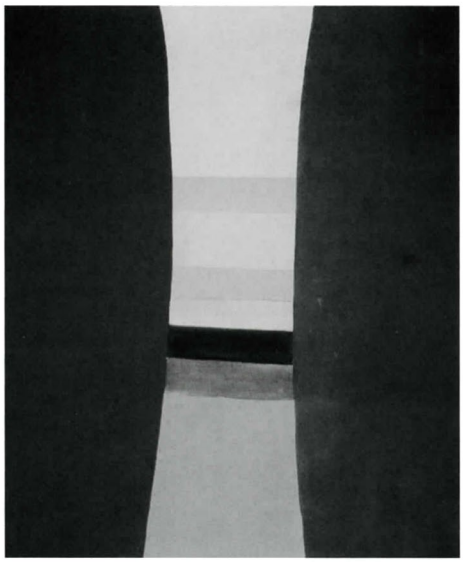

FIG. 4
Jack Bush (Canadian, 1909-1977)
Striped Column, 1964
oil (blue areas) and protein and
oil (stripes) on canvas, 88 x 70 inches
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: Anonymous gift 1973.417
Photograph ©2003 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
©2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SODRAC, Montreal

Mueller's ability to transpose sensate data—such as his penchant for imagining the colors and textures of composed sounds—underlie the implicit transitoriness of *Even All Night,* from 1993–94. A charcoal-colored background embeds a dark silhouetted personage on the lower right set within a hazy double halo. Left of center is a dull white atmospheric fog surrounded by pebblelike shapes that sit on the washy surface, accented by sky-blue pompons. The aura-surrounded ovals, climbing lozenge shapes, and hazy pinpoints of light imply planets, sculptures, or vast space without confirming any of their suggestion of forms.

As the structure of music became more incorporated in his use of geometric symbolism, the work became more calmly composed, and the need to interject dramatic counterpoints of paint diminished. In the harmonious *Bageshwari* (1998), the painting's hypnotic flavor and dusky ambience is a reminder of electronic drone music chiefly influenced by traditional Indian music. Mueller often listens to these types of recordings while working, and the title, *Bageshwari*, refers to a midnight raga. Mueller imposed a family of circles, discs, vaporous auras, and a blue crescent over a field of washes that gradually shifts from a day to night sky as the eye travels from the bottom to the top of the painting. A long, color-sectioned rectangle stretches from end to end near the top of the painting, once again reminiscent of Jack Bush, this time his striped column and color-bar paintings (FIG. 4). Like drone music, the painting becomes a meditative exercise in experiencing a state of becoming.

This continues in *Forbidden Colors* (2002), where the playful reversals of figure and ground inherent in plaid patterns contrast with the tubular arabesque of a thick line. This emerges from either end of an echoing foreground shape that seems to divide the picture into upper and lower reflecting areas, but is contradicted by the other free-floating shapes. As in much of the recent work, there is a combination of the knowing presence of still life with a rich complexity of color. The patterned double crescent and frontal blue rectangle recall how Islamic art utilizes similar repetitive devices. Mueller has commented on his attraction to the spiritual power of Islamic ornamentation that allows the soul to escape the confines of its earthbound existence.

In *Television*, from 2003, a luminous plaid background is rendered with a wide Chinese brush. This creates a washy effect that deepens the background space and resembles light melting through colored glass. This is another in Mueller's continuing series of cross-cultural hybrids, where complex shapes that hover on the foreground—such as the multi-eyed figure on the right—seem to combine the pattern-distorted birds from Islamic decorative tiles with the NBC peacock. Next to it another shape divides itself between traditional striping and a frenzied, multicolored grid.

Finally, in the very recent *Plains Indians*, Mueller constructs a coolly cosmic Nature Theater, an expansive pictorial embrace of the profound spaces of the Great Plains. The large moistened background field, with its traces of plaid patterning, reminds one of Nebraska's vast grasslands after rain. A spiritual cleansing is taking place as deities, disguised as geometric and patterned forms, seem to confront the viewer then appear distant, evermore hovering further away on the edge of the horizon. The atmospheric halos around the principal shapes are barely distinguishable from

the washed sky/ground. The painting's title, *Plains Indians,* refers broadly to the native peoples of this region, while its imagery maintains ties to Mueller's central preoccupation with the South Asian country of India. With his combined interests in indigenous, European, and Asian cultures, he again sees the artist's role as a kind of creator, hybridizer, and healer of opposites.

If anything, this mid-career survey of Stephen Mueller's work can only hint at the direction that his painting will take in the future. It is clear that he is involved in a progression that is vividly wide-ranging and curious, and he continues to be engaged with his instincts of investigation and his oceanic imagination. Joseph Cornell, mentioned toward the beginning of this essay, is important to bring up again as a reminder of the similarity between these American artists. Like Cornell, Mueller is a symbolist. Their work tells us that meaning is ungraspable, but one still must enthusiastically search for it.

There is much to be gained by investigating the varied points of reference in both Mueller's and Cornell's work. Cornell thought that his work would lead viewers to his interests in 19th-century French culture, to Gerard de Nerval and the Romantic Ballet. In this same way, sharing in Mueller's expressed admiration for Roberto Calasso's books on themes in Greek and Asian mythology, as well as listening to global and experimental music, will further illuminate the work of this most poetic and allusive of painters.

Joe Fyfe
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