

Stephen Mueller

by Maya Damjanovic U.S.A.

Gesture

Mueller's earlier uniformly-full composition has been replaced by a more sparse and tightly contemplative picture plane that follows the minimalist edict "less is more". The current paintings achieve focused clarity through a collection of vivid pictorial gestures whose simplicity sometimes borders on the calligraphic: isolated brushstrokes, varied paint applications, ranging from translucent luminosity to matte opaqueness, and a speckling of assorted shapes, dots and lines. Additionally, these "gestures" often appear separate and peripheral to each other in seemingly incidental, unexpected and often whimsical arrangements that successfully undermine formal pictorial language.

Since Greenburg, American art increasingly acknowledges the contemporary, ontologic conflict between presence and absence in determining legitimacy of a particular art form. Presently, the proclamation, or evocation, of the truth of any presence is at best held in wary critical trust. It is this question of trust that highlights Stephen Mueller's current painting. The artist uses "gesture" both as a sign of presence and to address a broader theory of meaning. In fact, Mueller's vibrant images indict our perception and experience of presence. Looking at these paintings it is as if we are lulled into a nod or sleepwalking in the midst of unruly visual gestures. A space of contemplation opens as a fracture in the picture plane through the nomadic movement of the *anomalous gesture*.

Anomaly

Like an aphorism, the *anomalous gesture* contains and suggests meaning, but does not carry it to a formal or transcendent conclusion, as it denies systematically or formally rooted semantic determinations. Rather, this anomaly weaves a "ghost-like" trace of presence. In Mueller's recent paintings, "gestures" maneuver the canvas with little formal regard, appearing not only in graphic, but also in peculiar semantic isolation and juxtaposition. As if to underscore this precarious nature of presence, the recent painting matches vivid contrasts of passionate clarity with sombre shadows and impenetrable areas of color; similarly, great beauty in surface texture and color often borders on a strange and puzzling vulgarity. Mueller's random orchestration of these pictorial devices expresses the significant role of chance in the construct of presence. As such, Mueller's use of "gesture" rejects any transcendent value of presence, or meaning, and only poses the appearance, or the effect, of presence.

Invisibility

Like islands of uncharted poetics, these "gestures" beckon the viewer into a brilliant and always – new visual "immediacy" – as *anomalous gesture* is structured as a perpetual self – inventing practice, always inventing and reinventing itself without regard for formal histories. However, even the visual brilliance of images presents a certain

muteness. As anomaly surrounds itself with referential incongruity, an "invisibility of meaning" defers a final or pure reading. Consequently, Mueller's images effect a momentary suspension of meaning between visibility and invisibility. It is as if this anomaly amounts to a small epiphany on the mortality of presence. In this semantic gap, or fracture, between the visible and the invisible of meaning, Mueller's imagery approaches its most radical life.

Rhetoric

In general terms, formalism expresses a dogmatic haste with the structure of presence, by proposing a precomprehension of the essence, or essential structure, of identity. In sharp contrast, Mueller's anomalous use of visual imagery, at its most profound, effects a disappearance of presence through semantic suspension. This moment of suspension or deferral, this *becoming invisible of meaning*, is the poetic index to Mueller's current painting. Such use of gesture requires of the viewer a mobility, an active, reading of the many spaces and layers of visual presence. Here, presence is no longer restricted to formal procedure, but exists in relation to the changing and mobile effect of language on the world of life. Then, identity becomes a rhetorical force – a course of action – directly related to the unrestricted action of life. "It remains then, for us to speak, to make our voices resonate throughout the corridors in order to make up for the breakdown of presence".