

Silk, Diamonds and a Chicago Girl

Julia von Eichel, Stephen Westfall and June Leaf in this week's Fine Art



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'Tumble Fumble' (2015) by Julia von Eichel Photo: Julia von Eichel, Winston Wächter Fine Art, NY

By

Peter Plagens

July 1, 2016 4:54 p.m. ET

Julia von Eichel: Scream in My Throat

[Winston Wächter](#)

530 W. 25th St., (212) 255-2718

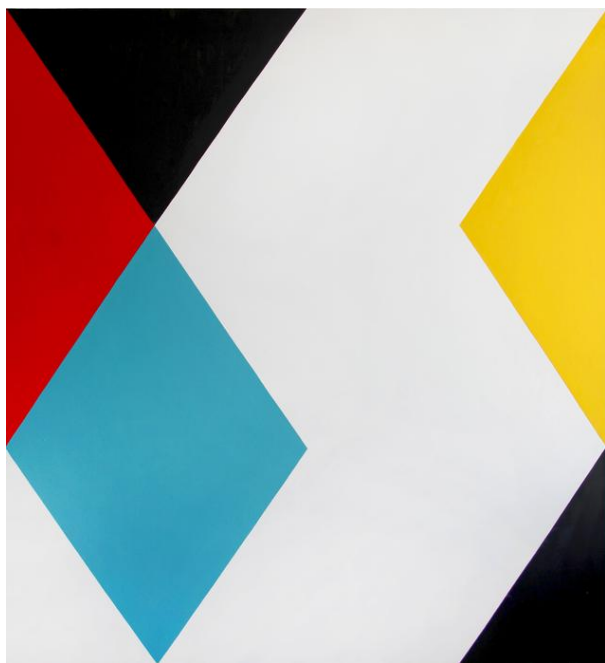
Through July 29

Half a century ago, in the forward precincts of the art world, painting was thought to be the sick man of the visual arts: constrained within the rectangle, stuck in its flatness, and condemned no matter how abstract it became to be merely an illusion—a pale imitation (or at best, implication) of real spatial depth. Sculpture, on the other hand, once liberated from the convention of always being on a pedestal, could successfully venture out into the whole

gallery (installation art), the landscape (earthworks), and even live performance (Gilbert & George's "living sculpture").

But an art form without boundaries runs the risk of losing its center. For sculpture, a big question these days is, "What does it take for conventional sculpture—defined as objects shippable in crates—to be compelling enough to gain traction in the contemporary art world?" Julia von Eichel (b. 1974) gives us an excellent answer: emotional resonance conveyed through an inventive and economical three-dimensional idea executed with just enough craft to give it a genuine presence.

Ms. Von Eichel's father died in 2012 and, in coping with the event, she began making moderate-size wall-mounted sculpture by stretching silk, coated with gesso, over irregular armatures composed of Wiffle balls pierced by wooden dowels. The result is a precariously graceful white tent with a subtly threatening underbelly of exposed spheres and shafts. It's a visually arresting metaphor for—perhaps—life itself.



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Stephen Westfall's 'Aeolian' (2014) Photo: Stephen Westfall/Lennon, Weinberg, New York

Stephen Westfall: Crispy Fugue State

[Lennon, Weinberg](#)

514 W. 25th St., (212) 941-0012

Through July 29

Geometric abstract painting generally has to have a theory behind it, or at least some sort of system at work, to be more than mere decoration. The prime example is Piet Mondrian's "neoplasticism." Even so, there is such a thing as serious geometric abstraction based on taste. And the newest work of Stephen Westfall (b. 1953) is a good instance of this sort of art that's worth thinking about and looking at.

Although the art-history-savvy Mr. Westfall, who teaches at Bard College, acknowledges a debt to Mondrian (and to Matisse, Stuart Davis and some art from ancient Rome), in these 11 paintings, done during the past three years, he's very much his own man. As he told an interviewer for the blog "Two Coats of Paint" last year, "paintings come to me whole," and via a pencil, ruler and some Photoshop for "a general idea of color distribution" they make their

way onto canvas.

Most of the pictures in the exhibition, which range from 2 to 7 feet on a side, are emphatically oriented on the diagonal (brightly colored diamonds and triangles are Mr. Westfall's favorite shapes), with the inclusion of generous areas of white. In the artist's felicitous phrase, they make the pictorial space "mentholated." The show's overall flavor is that of brainy sensuousness—relatively rare in today's gallery fare.



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June Leaf's 'Mother/Ballroom' (1978) Photo: Alice Attie/June Leaf

June Leaf: Thought Is Infinite

[Whitney Museum of American Art](#)

99 Gansevoort St., (212) 570-3600

Through July 17

June Leaf, who was born in 1929, studied for a while at the Institute of Design in Chicago, earned a master's degree in art education from the Art Institute of Chicago, and was connected to the Windy City's "Monster Roster"—a group of funk-surreal figurative painters. (Ms. Leaf was included in an exhibition of that title at the University of Chicago earlier this year.)

She's said she found her individual style—whose eclectic and personal nature is the reason the Whitney has mounted this retrospective—in the immediate aftermath of a visit to the Louvre in her youth. She was trying to copy a Goya when an inner voice told her she was just a Chicago girl and should give up trying to emulate such an artist. After a sleepless night, she grabbed a sketchbook and drew a horse with an exploding head. Add to this impulsiveness her fascination with watching the way an eggbeater works (no, really), and the result is a petri dish,

as it were, for this mélange of improvisational drawings (some of them obsessively worked and reworked), paintings (on paper, so as to strike one more like relentless drawings), and sculpture (small and assemblage-ish enough to seem as if they're mere tinkering).

If the foregoing sounds negative, it's not. "Thought Is Infinite" touts a certain temporized self-consciousness. Ms. Leaf inhabits her own universe, but at the same time she knows she's a professional artist, and the Whitney's staging conveys a visceral conviction behind the work. I only wish the artist and the museum hadn't agreed, in the somewhat sentimental interest of maintaining a studio-like ambience, to forgo picture frames.