

ARTFORUM



Stephen Mueller, *Meerabai*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 73".

DALLAS

Stephen Mueller

BARRY WHISTLER GALLERY

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“My paintings don’t depict anything. I’m trying to reach that kind of experience where you are on the edge. There and not there.” This declaration by Stephen Mueller, who died in 2011, offers a guide to this handsome gathering of works on canvas and paper. Most of the paintings utilize a vibrant amorphous background, upon which Mueller rendered circular mandalas suggestive of the Buddhist dharma wheel. Mueller gravitated toward “Eastern” painting formats, including Tibetan *thang-ka* painting, but these served largely as templates: By cleverly altering shapes and adjusting his palette, Mueller created a variety of unusual forms within each composition—some seemingly reference board game pieces, Easter eggs, or limbs.

In the standout *Meerabai*, 2008, a yellow-and-baby-blue diamond shape is surrounded by eight curved forms that resemble abstract portrait busts. Each rounded head's central color is determined by its position, according to the logic of the color wheel. Linking the bust shapes are gangly conduits. In some of the works, wiry framing drawn in pencil remains visible. Slippery washes of paint were combined with carefully rendered opaque shapes that float on the surface. Mueller was unnecessarily consistent in his craft, but the tight and repetitious nature of his work is thankfully counterbalanced by the variety and inventiveness of the internal shapes.

Mueller evidently had a strong kinship with artists such as Agnes Pelton and Emil Bisttram, who used saturated radiance to build visionary renderings of nature. Yet Mueller's ombré religious iconography, hybridized with a hint of stylized, cartoonish sexual innuendo, might have led to even stranger and more idiosyncratic territory—images we can now, regretfully, only imagine.

— Matthew Bourbon