

PEYTON WRIGHT

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John Stephan

American (1906-1995)

John Stephan (1906-1995) devoted himself exclusively to disc paintings for the last three decades of his artistic career. These nearly square compositions, always just inches taller than they are wide, each comprise a central monochrome circle delineated from its ground by multiple bands of contrasting colors. Depending how the particular colors come alive in relation to one another, the central orb floats or recedes, emanating pulsing energy or enveloping the gaze. Painting after painting, Stephan found within the fixed parameters of this geometric distribution an infinite potential for visual poetry in the juxtaposition of his subtly mixed colors.

The monumental achievement of Stephan's disc paintings stands on the solid foundation of a lifetime of artistic accomplishment. Having painted urban landscapes and worked as a WPA artist through the 1930s, John Stephan truly came of age as an artist after World War II. An important figure in the development of Abstract Expressionism, Stephan showed at the Betty Parsons Gallery and counted among his close associates Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. With poet (and then wife) Ruth Stephan, he published *The Tiger's Eye*, an influential "little magazine" that chronicled the creative ferment of the period. Inspired by William Blake's "Tyger," the title symbolized the editors' faith in the power of creative vision, as did John Stephan's design for the cover which prominently features an abstracted eye. Stephan's 1947 *oculus* presages in form as well as spirit the metaphysical striving embodied in his later disc paintings.

"*The Tiger's Eye*," a widely read magazine of art and literature, which was published in nine quarterly issues from 1947 to 1949. "*The Tiger's Eye*" featured European and American Surrealists, members of the Latin American avant garde, and young American painters soon to become known as Abstract Expressionists. The artists, among them Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, Adolph Gottlieb, Stanley William Hayter, André Masson, Pablo Picasso, Mark Rothko, Anne Ryan, Kay Sage, Kurt Seligmann, Rufino Tamayo, and Mark Tobey, as well as art editor and co-publisher John Stephan himself, range across the cultural forefront of the post-war period.

One of the artist's favorite books, *Metamorphoses of the Circle* by George Poulet, traces a cultural history of meanings associated with this most elemental form. As Poulet explains, "changes of meaning coincide with corresponding changes in the manner by which human beings represent to themselves that which is deepest in themselves, that is to say, the awareness of their relationship with inner and outer worlds; their consciousness of space and duration." John Stephan's disc paintings are contemplative works, portals to insight, offering us moments with our deeper selves. They mark the culmination of an unwavering, lifelong commitment to art and make an indisputably significant contribution to American painting of the twentieth century.

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John Walter Stephan was an early member of the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. He was born in Chicago and studied art at the University of Illinois and the Art Institute of Chicago. He created mosaics for a number of buildings in the Chicago area under the auspices of the Work Projects Administration. After World War II, he and his first wife, Ruth Walgreen, moved to New York City, where he had solo exhibitions at the Dayton Art Institute in Ohio; the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City and the Newport Art Museum in Rhode Island. His work is in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Cincinnati Art Museum, Loyola University in Chicago and other places.

IN HIS OWN WORDS:

"DURING THESE LAST FIVE OR SIX YEARS, I have been involved in the painting of colored discs that singly occupy the major central area of almost squared, vertical, and other wise colored canvases and which, more often than not, have one or more colored rings separating the one from the other. I draw these discs and their rings with a compass as I am particularly interested in the phenomenon of apparent perfect circularity, whether as seen in nature or through metaphysical contemplation, and in this sense, I see the circle-disc as being the simplest yet most subtle, inherently perfect form (as compared to other forms that an artist or nature might create), and accept its inviolate constancy with the same faith with which artists have accepted the figure, subjects in nature, or any other imaginable image for its formal validity. For my purposes, I have avoided the use of further devices, either geometric, asymmetric, or expressionistic, as being irrelevant to the basic contentions implied between these two spatial forms, rectangular and circular. I am, moreover, intrigued by the primacy that this austere image demonstrates within the space of the canvas; it appears to float and hover naturally with sublime disregard for the necessary rationale supporting the straight sides and right angles of the rectangular form with its presumed base. However, within this adopted duality of space forms, I seek to create, through the use of color, a kind of pictorial metastasis, more contemplative than symbolic and more related to nature than to the formalities of mysticism. I choose subtle colors above those that are purely chromatic so as to convey the impression of fused color substances, somewhat like the translucency of jade, the colored rings to act as an apposition between these two shapes."

John Stephan, 1970

BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN STEPHAN:

Born: 1906, Maywood, Illinois
Died: 1995, Newport, Rhode Island

Education

1925-26 University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois
1926-28 Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois

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John Stephan and his wife Ruth were editors of *The Tiger's Eye*, a journal of art and literature published in nine quarterly issues from 1947 to 1949. Its diverse contents captured the creative ferment of these postwar years from the point of view of the artist-editors and their circle. *

Solo Exhibitions

- Waldon-Palmolive Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, 1931
- Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, Ohio 1932
- Argent Gallery, New York, 1944
- Mortimer Brandt Gallery, New York, 1945
- Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1947, 1950
- Galleria della Zodiaco, Rome, Italy, 1953
- Rosenquist Gallery, Tucson, Arizona, 1955
- 10/4 Group, New York, 1963
- Benson Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York, 1969
- DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts, 1970
- Woods-Gerry Gallery, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, 1971
- Newport Art Museum, Newport, Rhode Island, 1972, 1975
- 141 Prince Street Gallery, New York, 1973
- Marcus Krakow Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1977, 1980
- Mckillop Gallery, Salve Regina University, Newport, Rhode Island, 1988
- Spring Bull Gallery, Memorial Exhibition, Newport, Rhode Island, 1995
- Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, 2002
- Washburn Gallery, New York, 2007

Public Collections

- Babson College, Wellesley, Massachusetts
- Brandeis University, Rose Art Museum, Waltham, Massachusetts
- DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts
- Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign, Illinois
- List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois
- Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island
- Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts
- Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut

CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

Art Acquisitions, St. Paul, MN
Management Analysis Center, Cambridge, MA
Art Enterprises, Chicago, IL
AT&T, Southfield, NJ
Gemini Consulting, Cambridge, MA
Gerson Bakar Associates, San Francisco, CA
Rosenquist Gallery, Tucson, AZ

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R. U. Development, Boston, MA
Stop and Shop, Inc., Boston, MA
Wang Laboratories, Boston, MA
Wellington Management, Boston, MA
Trinity Church, Trinity University, Tucson, AZ

* Franks, Pamela, *The Tiger's Eye: The Art of a Magazine*, 2002, Yale University Art Gallery