



Image: Ted Stamm, DGR-42 (Dodger), 1977-78, oil on canvas, 431 x 113 inches

Painting Advanced Stamm 1990

By Robert C. Morgan

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“I am interested in making a work which is read as a totality in its situation and remains confrontational by perceiving its nature and installational effects upon the actual exhibition space. This is achieved as described. The installation insures the implied extension of the work’s elements and implies a relational weight to the floor. These works have maintained their frontality and the inherent materials of painting (support, canvas, paint), because it is here where I feel my research can extend the language and possibilities of painting.”
— Ted Stamm (1944-1984), “Statement of Plans” (undated)

I became acquainted with Ted Stamm in the summer of 1981 while attending a dinner party in a mutual friend’s loft in lower Manhattan. His paintings were vaguely familiar at the time. I had seen a work of his the year before in Princeton, and recalled its utter completeness, its fundamental refinement, and stark elegance. Meeting Stamm came at a time when the reductivist position in New York painting had nearly vanished. The outset of the 80s represented another tendency; the epithet of the day was “Maximalism.” The issue in painting was no longer how little, but instead how much. Very few artists, and fewer dealers, were interested in its former opposite. With the heavy influx of European Expressionist styles, augmented by such exhibitions as “Bad Painting” at the New Museum and “New Image Painting” at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the late seventies, Minimalist aesthetics were fading.

The reduced statement in painting, with very few exceptions, was struggling to maintain a position. Those artists who had established a reputation in this genre during the sixties and early seventies were continuing to show work on a regular basis. Younger painters who had not secured a reputation earlier were having a difficult time.

It was within this recent historical context that I came to know Ted Stamm and to appreciate his work. It was also within this context that I came to understand the kind of commitment and personal strength required to maintain an “outsider” position when the art market takes an abrupt shift. I perceived in Stamm’s paintings, and later in his discourse, an extraordinary energy, a dynamicism that is rare among artists in postmodern times. He insisted that his work was not about Minimalism. He preferred the term “reductivist.” Again, from a historical vantage point, the latter term is unquestionably more appropriate; and from a practical viewpoint, it was clearly shrewd and necessary to avoid ambiguous references which might imply imitation.

In spite of his obvious allegiance to Ad Reinhardt, and to a nearly equal extent, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, and early Frank Stella, Stamm allowed his paintings to progress in a more personal direction. The term “formal” is not misleading, but the label “formalist” clearly is.

Formalism suggests that the content is the form, whereas with Stamm the linkage between content and form was more intertwined with references to industrial imagery and media culture. One can perceive these linkages most evidently in his later series of works, the “Dodgers,” the “Sliders,” and the “Honeycombs.” The individual paintings have abbreviated titles, such as CDD-002 or SLDR-001. This kind of abbreviation, which in some cases has rather arcane references, suggests a systemic underpinning in Stamm’s work. I recall on one occasion his delight in receiving a sequence of “I got Up.” postcards from the systemic Conceptualist On Kawara. The fact that Stamm de-emphasized any quality of brushwork or any reference to gesture or personal touch is not happenstantial. It begins with Duchamp, of course, and carries through most of the early conceptualists, some of whom were also directly inspired by Reinhardt’s endgame aesthetics. The titles and their corresponding works also manifest certain industrial design processes and packaging methods. There is an outright efficiency about the way Stamm “finished” his paintings. Any extraneous mark was anathema. He was interested in the mute presence of the thing how it looked and felt upon first glance. The methodology was clearly industrial in concept, and eventually it was going to become industrial in its realization. One of the last projects on which Stamm worked was a series of “Honeycombs” which involved sending out specifications in order to have the corrugated aluminum shapes cut and assembled.

Stamm claimed an interest in “frontality”—that is, how one dealt with a painting in its most economically visual state within the context of architectural space. He was concerned with the initial instant of confrontation as the viewer approached the work for the first time.

Given the more successful formal strategies used in paintings such as ZCT-002 (1982) and ZYR-4 (1980), the interior black shapes subvert their structural support. This is a crucial aspect of Stamm’s evolving maturity as a painter, beginning with the “Dodger” and “Zephyr” series of 1977-78.

In ZCT-002, for example, there is a tension made visible, a hint of acceleration held in check by a long and a short horizontal black bar. This tension gives a visual effect which has little to do with painterly mystification; yet it is also considerably more than a retreat to predetermined perspectival gimmicks. Stamm worked out his ideas on graph paper sheets initially, but then in the process of upscaling his image, often changes and adjustments had to occur. Any pretense toward perspectival manipulation became coincidental and occurred within the process of the work. The visual and formal tension in SCT- 002 functions in relation to three basic factors: 1) the interior hard- edge image painted on raw canvas, 2) the structural support of the canvas which functions as a contrasting element in relation to the image, and 3) the perspective achieved through the placement of the painting close to the floor in an attempt to associate its visual references with the surrounding architecture.

Stamm's evolution and development of these basic concerns occurred with a series of eight drawings he completed in his Wooster Street studio in 1978. These drawings would eventually become known as the "Wooster" series. They were each permutations in which a diagonal line was abutted to a square. The connection of the diagonal line to the side of the square created a new polygon which the artist emphasized and delineated by painting three of the four sides with a thick black line. (In later modifications of this motif, Stamm used aluminum paint as well.) In the "Wooster" series he defined the painting in linear terms almost to the point of giving it a sculptural connotation. As the drawings were transformed into paintings, most of the interior space was translated as raw canvas. There was a slight suggestion of dynamic presence in the "Wooster" series, but the power of the square module held any further implication of motion in check.

At an exhibition at the Clocktower in 1981, Stamm showed a very large rectangular canvas titled R-1, which was situated horizontally and hung no more than two or three inches from the floor. Flat black pigment covered nearly the entire surface with the exception of two areas cropped in the upper left and upper right corners. The dominance of the image offered a mute presence which the two diagonally cropped corners helped to accentuate. There is a stasis about R-1 that predominates, a stasis that was also given to the earlier "Dodgers" and "Zephyrs." Yet in spite of the muteness of R-1, one can see the artist's involvement with contrasting image and frame, and how both are inextricably tied to the architectural context.

The painting is "grounded" in such away as to cue the position of the viewer's gaze as it moves across the rising floor plane and meets the baseline before ascending upward and upon the mute presence of the painting. In this kind of situation, the painting confronts the viewer in a special way by extending the gestalt principle of the spatial field from object to planar surface.

Yet this maneuver in itself is not the major achievement that I understand in relation to Ted Stamm's short career as a painter. The following year, after the Clocktower exhibition, Stamm began to concentrate intensively upon a new group of paintings for his 1982 exhibition at the Harm Bouckaert Gallery. During this highly energetic, productive interval, Stamm produced some of his most noteworthy work. The aerodynamic, high-speed metaphor reached a new level of visual fruition in paintings such as ZCT-002, ZCT-004, and the profoundly elusive CDD-002. These paintings are noteworthy because they transform the explicit muteness and the metaphysical stasis (not to be confused with "mystification") of the earlier "Dodgers" and "Zephyrs" (1977-80) into a new kind of kinetic voyeurism. CDD-002 is a fully streamlined painting, elongated, close-to-the-

ground, hovering in space before our gaze. The metaphor is speed, light, and industry. There is also a reference to popular culture, hot rods, and sleaziness. Perhaps, most significant of all is how far Stamm was able to refine his intentions. In so doing, we are left with a painting that nearly works as a machine. It is so perfectly contained, yet so capable of projecting itself beyond itself. In this way, CDD-002 acts as a metaphor of space-time on the brink of science fiction. The form is complexly integrated, an invented form, in which the interior components deflect our recognition of the physical support system. And never do we lose sight of the painting's material substance or its paradoxical hygienic awkwardness. The ultimate effect is not so much a "floating" sensation as it is a taut pictoriality suggestive of acceleration. It represents a view of the fourth dimension.

Shortly after the Bouckaert exhibition, I received a postcard from the artist painted black with a silver stamp which read "Painting Advance/Stamm 1990." Just as the paintings from the last two years, including one year of a Guggenheim Fellowship (1983-84), came to represent a personal position about painting despite the powerful resurgence of Expressionism, so did this phrase come to suggest a possible leap, a metaphysical acceleration toward the next decade, an impossible idealism made possible by thinking far enough ahead. Ted Stamm's last paintings suggest an adaptation of human perception while moving at high speed. Their momentum breaks free from conventional religious attitudes toward gravity, once held sacrosanct in Western painting.