



Installation shot of the exhibition under review. Right wall shows Ted Stamm, 78-W-4 (Wooster), 1978. Oil on canvas, 60 x 96 inches. Ted Stamm © 2018 Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

From Stasis to Kinesis: The Woosters of Ted Stamm

by Robert Morgan

April 13, 2018

By the time of Ted Stamm's premature passing in 1984, his Wooster paintings were becoming known in the New York art world, especially among younger aficionados in the SoHo art district (then the center of the avant-garde in New York). While Stamm rarely traveled outside the metropolitan New York area, the Wooster paintings were often seen in group and occasionally solo exhibitions, including Documenta 6 (1977), and were presented at the Guggenheim Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, MoMA PS1, and the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, among others. Thanks to the tireless advocacy of Danish New York-based curator Per Haubro Jensen, a stalwart against years of art world neglect, we have a show at Lisson Gallery that affords these works some interpretative clarity. Stamm was born and raised in New York. He was an avid conversationalist and a faithful correspondent. His manner of letter writing was always in longhand and seemed to follow a comparable direction to the Woosters.

At the outset the paintings appeared more static, but as they developed after 1979, as in the Lo Woosters, they began to take on the appearance of speed. By comparison, his hand-written letters also began to extend

laterally to three or four words stretched across one line on the page. In the process, the speed and intensity of the words took on a new meaning. A further example of his speed might be attributed to Stamm's consistently dressing in black except for his glistening white tennis shoes. I have few recollections of Stamm sitting still, but many of his appearance standing in a conversation continually in a state of motion as if transporting words through the sudden movements of his body.

The Woosters employ an unusual rectangular theme that extends into a triangular hinge on the left side. These works were both drawn in graphite and painted in black and white (and, later in silver). At the outset (1978), it seemed that few observers were aware of Stamm's discovery of this rather obtuse form. Given the analytical orientation of the times, many assumed it was based on some complex mathematical derivation; but, in fact, it was quite the opposite. Stamm, being a man of the streets, with bicycle in tow, discovered this abbreviated form one day on the sidewalk near his loft. The fact that he could not decipher its use or origin piqued his curiosity enough to accept it as what might be called an unknown readymade.

The exhibition catches both the artist's consistency as well as his complex reprieve from an all-over spatial reduction, replacing it with a series of modular variations. Examples of this would include 78 W-4 (Wooster) and 78 SW-22 (Small Wooster) (both oil on canvas from 1978). The difference between the two is not only the shift in scale in relation to identical forms, but also the enclosure of the black band that moves around the edge of otherwise white paintings. In the first, larger version, the band descends from the upper side and follows along the upper diagonal slide of the triangle before it extends back along the bottom edge. The second, smaller form carries the exact same proportions except that the black band completely encloses the white surface, which makes the interior shape a smaller version of the larger one that extends outside the black frame.

Beyond these modular variations, Stamm began to move from stasis to kinesis. LW-2H (Lo Wooster) and LW-2A (Lo Wooster), both graphite on paper from 1979, are flattened versions of the rectangle and its adjacent triangle that optically incite leftward movement. In either case, this suggests they are studies that precede the large low-hanging oils mounted at the entrance that dominates the wall as one enters the Lisson Gallery.

The space within the Woosters was gradually evolving into space/time. By 1980, he had returned to the origin of the Woosters as he became conceptually involved in placing red stickers of his familiar sign, which he called "Wooster Designators," on bumpers and license plates of parked cars with the intention of transmitting the message throughout New York in the directions in which they would drive.

Some two years later (1982), Stamm began sending out cards on which the message "Painting Advance 1990" was printed. In my reading of this, Stamm was saying that painting would move towards another level, a higher level of sensory cognition, in less than a decade. Sadly, Ted never reached 1990. But he showed the potential of painting to move beyond stasis and connect with urban time — not simply as a representation, but as bright new awareness of how we think and see and how we come together through painting.

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