

EMILY SESSIONS ON STEPHEN DEAN

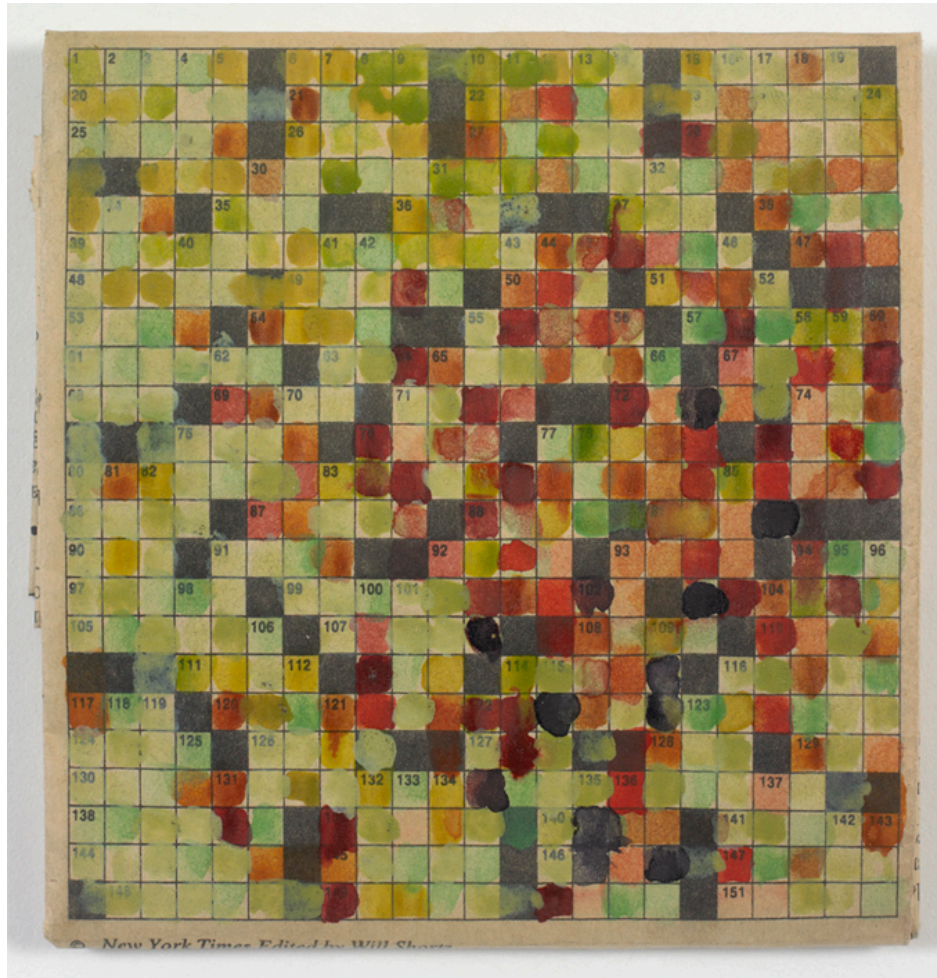


Stephen Dean, *Untitled (Crossword)*, 1996, watercolor on newsprint, 3 1/2 x 4 inches (8.9 x 10.2 cm). © Stephen Dean / Photo: Ellen McDermott

Stephen Dean seems to argue that underneath the world we think we know—the objects around us, and the people with whom we associate—lies a different universe, a universe of color. Throughout history, artists have been seduced by color, but Dean seems to have a unique relationship with this different universe. He speaks its language. His works read like anthropological field reports from a distant culture, like decoder rings for the cipher of color that surrounds us but that we never fully understand.

Dean's drawings seem simple at first. He takes crossword puzzles and help wanted sections from national newspapers and works into them with watercolor. The results are familiar objects defamiliarized, grids of hues and soft black newspaper ink often surrounded by quotidian text. They are lovely objects. The medium is sensitively modulated, with a range of densities and transparencies, each square a slightly different tone. This interplay of color and shade seems to shimmer on the page. The crossword puzzle works speak to the long history of the grid in minimal and post-minimal art, with Dean working into almost every pixel of the

already intricate geometric puzzles. Each of the two crossword works in this exhibition has a particular emotional resonance due to Dean's specific modulation of color.



Stephen Dean, *Untitled (Crossword)*, 1994, watercolor on newsprint, 4 x 4 1/2 inches (10.2 x 11.4 cm). © Stephen Dean / Photo: Ellen McDermott

More than simply lovely objects though, these puzzles are also charged with meaning. One aspect of crossword puzzles that attracts Dean is their social element, that on any given morning thousands of people are working on the same puzzle published in that day's newspaper, together-alone. The puzzles are a kind of fold in the continuum of space, linking people together without their necessarily being aware of it. His interventions into this quiet system—his reinvention of these puzzles and inscription onto them of the language of color—allows Dean to call attention to these links. By maintaining their siting within the folded newspaper sections in which he finds them, Dean explicitly points to the puzzles' social power.



Stephen Dean, *Untitled (Help Wanted Half Page)*, 1994, watercolor on newsprint, 11 1/2 x 14 inches (29.2 x 35.6 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Gift of Werner H. and Sarah-Ann Kramarsky. © Stephen Dean / Photo: Ellen McDermott

The third watercolor by Dean in this exhibition further demonstrates his interest in human connection, in shared experience within unique experience. *Untitled (Help Wanted Half Page)* takes the employment classifieds section of the newspaper as its departure. While the blank squares of the crossword puzzle drawings retain some of their anonymous potential, the text that remains visible in the help wanted work speaks more directly of the human stories that draw Dean to newspapers. These stories are both obscured and highlighted by Dean's fields of colors, which differentiate each ad, each square, hinting at encoded connections between seemingly distant parts—at the possible overlap between the carpenter, the pharmacist, and the picture framer.

In his contemporary video pieces, Dean examines everyday activities until they dissolve into separate universes of color, which remain connected to the original activity but which also have their own rules. Through their indecipherable codes of color, the earlier watercolors in this exhibition similarly point to social connections across time and space. Dean's watercolor washes over everyday objects and somehow, through his mindful modulation, he seems to penetrate to this underlying universe. The windows these works open, from the routine parts of our life into the world of color, reveal the indefinite, the loopholes, and the hidden affinities between our separate quiet mornings.