LISSON GALLERY

Artforum
September 2020

ARTFORUM
SEPTEMBER 2020 INTERNATIONAL

WHERE WE'RE AT:
VIEWS FROM ALL OVER

STEVEN PARRINO

CARCERAL AESTHETICS:
NICOLE R. FLEETWOOD
TALKS TO RACHEL KUSHNER

STANLEY WHITNEY

PROJECT
STANLEY WHITNEY

Opposite page: **Stanley Whitney**, ***Untitled (Can You Hear Us . . .)***, **2020**, watercolor, graphite, and crayon on paper, 10½ × 10½".

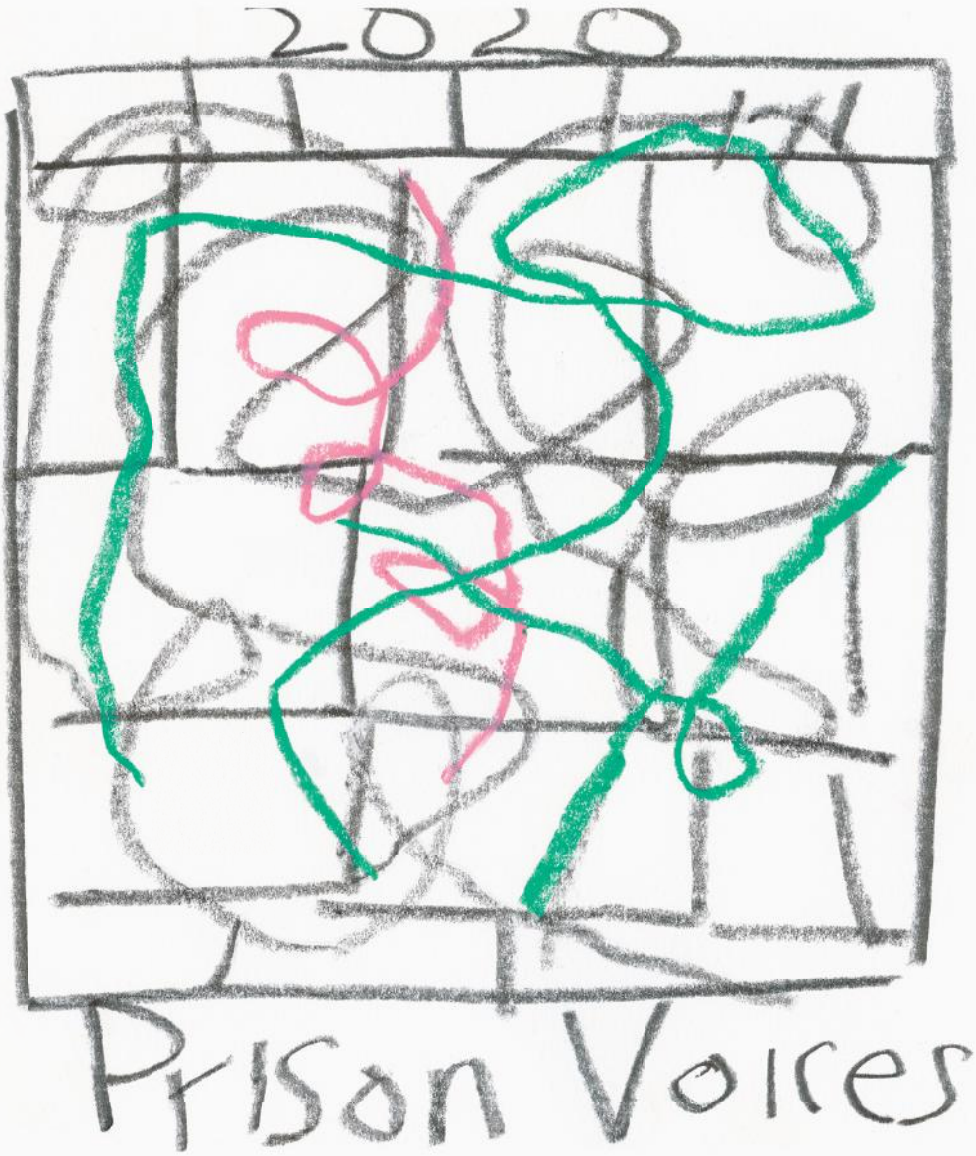
Following spread, from left: **Stanley Whitney**, ***Untitled (2020—Prison Voices)***, **2020**, graphite and crayon on paper, 10½ × 10½". **Stanley Whitney**, ***Untitled (Can You Hear Us—No to Prison Life)***, **2020**, watercolor and graphite on paper, 10½ × 10½".

IN THE DRAWING on the cover of this issue and in the three images that follow, the pioneering artist Stanley Whitney incorporates words into his enduring compositional touchstone, the four-by-four grid, within which he carries out his virtuosic adventures with color. The result is a group of potent pictures with a potent message: No to prison life. "Creating space within color involves experiments with density, vibrancy, saturation, and even with matteness," Whitney told the art historian Andrianna Campbell-LaFleur in 2015. "It is not just formal for me—color has great depth; it can bring up great emotion and immense feeling." Within the framework of Whitney's artistry, the straightforward refusal has the power of the absolute. No to prison life, these images say. But more than that, they suggest that until our jails and prisons and detention centers are shut down, until we stop enlisting the punitive to preserve our romance with safety, there is no such thing as non-prison life. The ethical imperative infuses our collective existence. We must all say no, irrevocably and unequivocally, right now.

Along with Whitney's portfolio, *Artforum* this month features a conversation between writer and curator Nicole R. Fleetwood and novelist Rachel Kushner that ranges widely over the violence of mass incarceration, the reinvigorated prospects of the abolitionist project, and the art of the imprisoned—art that, Fleetwood persuasively argues, must be seen as the core of cultural production in the carceral state.

—David Velasco

Can You Hear Us
No to Prison Life


2020
Prison Voices

Can you
No To Prison Life
Hear Us 2020

LISSON GALLERY

Financial Times
30 July 2020

FINANCIAL TIMES

Bidding battles and gallery moves in step with uncertain times

Plus: 1-54 fair bucks trend to go ahead in London; Lisson opens in the Hamptons; art fairs launch online stores

Lisson Gallery is to open in East Hampton this week as the Long Island holiday spot replaces New York as a gallery hub during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since lockdown struck, the wealthy Manhattan set have lived more permanently in their second homes — including many gallerists, who spotted an opportunity while their city spaces are closed.

Lisson has taken the 1,000 sq ft Main Street space until "at least" March 2021, says executive director Alex Logsdail. He plans to focus on just one work at a time, starting with a large 1996 painting by the American artist Stanley Whitney, offered for $850,000. "A single work forces simplicity and focus. It's a way of slowing down without slowing down," Logsdail says.

'Untitled' by Stanley Whitney (1996) © Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Lisson's latest space is only a short hop from where Skarstedt, Van de Weghe and Sotheby's also now have outlets. "We're seeing pretty much the same people as you would in New York," says gallery owner Per Skarstedt.

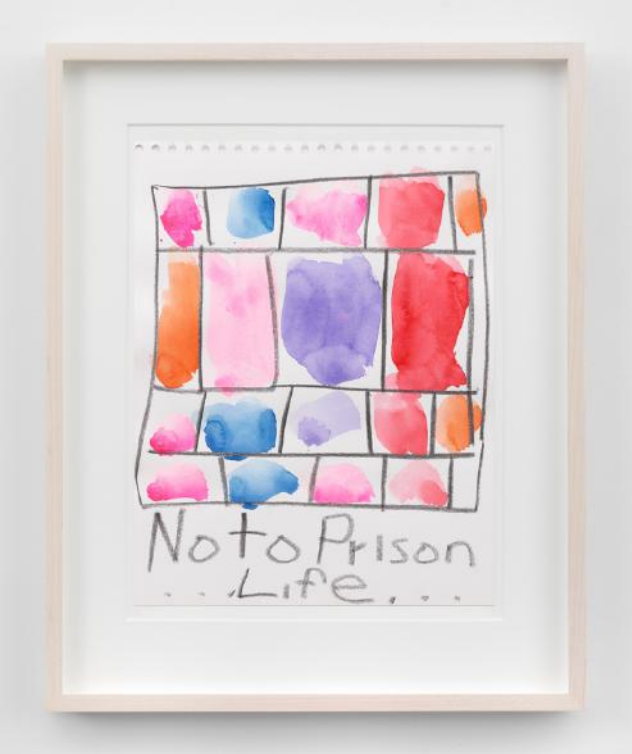
He has already made sales, including of a new David Salle painting for $375,000. Other new entrants to the Hamptons include Michael Werner Gallery, Pace, Hauser & Wirth and the founders of Di Donna gallery, who last week opened an art and design outlet in Southampton.

LISSON GALLERY

ARTnews

Artist Stanley Whitney, Collector Agnes Gund Protest Mass Incarceration with Lisson Gallery Show

BY TESSA SOLOMON
July 13, 2020 10:13am



In commemoration of International Justice Day on July 17, **Lisson Gallery** presents a special online exhibition of new works on paper by artist **Stanley Whitney** in collaboration with collector and patron Agnes Gund. The show, titled "Stanley Whitney: No to Prison Life," opens on Monday and runs through July 26. Each featured work was created in protest of mass incarceration in the United States, which disproportionately affects African-Americans.

Ten percent of the profits from works sold through "No to Prison Life" will go toward Art for Justice Fund, an organization founded in 2017 by Gund with $100 million of proceeds from the sale of her Roy Lichtenstein. The fund awards grants to artists and activists in support of projects related to criminal justice reform.

In a statement to *ARTnews*, Whitney said, "I remember in '71 during the prison revolt at Attica, I was at Yale and we didn't hear too much about it. I can make this work now because I have enough power to do it and no one can tell me anything. When these drawings go out in the world I can have that conversation, I can bring that conversation in."

Since the mid-1990s, Whitney has gained acclaim for his colorful, grid-like paintings which riff on historical and pop culture references ranging from jazz music, Egyptian iconography, and Abstract Expressionism. Many of the works in the exhibition have never been exhibited before, most having been created while Whitney was quarantined in New York. Included are crayon on paper and graphite on paper works such as *Untitled (Always Running from the Police – NYC 2020),* which was drawn amidst the nationwide protests against police brutality. The phrase "No to Prison Life" was first incorporated into Whitney's practice in "Project Wall: Stanley Whitney" (2019), the artists's first public commission. Installed on the H&R Block Artspace Project Wall at Whitney's alma mater, the Kansas City Art Institute, the artwork paired his signature color blocks with a message handwritten in white.

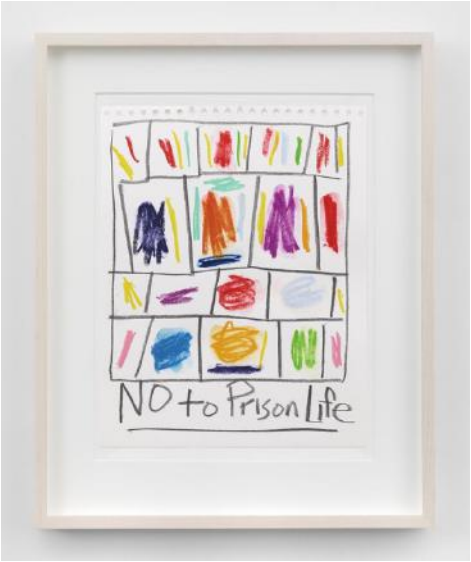
"When I first saw a painting from his 'No to Prison Life' series some five years ago, I was deeply moved," Gund said in a statement, adding, "Suddenly, the primordial grids and abstract shapes were transformed into a claustrophobic and locked cell. His demand for justice and accountability forbid viewers from looking away."

THE ART NEWSPAPER

'Get rid of prisons': artist Stanley Whitney speaks out against US judicial system in online show

Initiative highlights disproportionate number of African Americans incarcerated in the US

GARETH HARRIS
15th July 2020 17:51 BST



A portion of the proceeds from an online sale of works by the artist Stanley Whitney will go towards the Art for Justice Fund, the organisation founded by the high-profile patron Agnes Gund aimed at reforming the criminal justice system in the United States.

Whitney's new and recent works on paper can be viewed on the Lisson Gallery website in the *No to Prison Life* show (until 26 July); so far, eight works have sold while other works are available including *Untitled (Prison Voices)* (2018) for $15,000; ten percent will be donated to the Art for Justice Fund.

"The statement, 'No to Prison Life' is the artist's protest against the US judicial system's promotion of arrest, incarceration, and other forms of imprisonment, in particular highlighting the disproportionate number of African Americans in US prisons, [around 33%

in 2017]" says the gallery in a statement. The initiative coincides with World Day for International Justice 2020 on 17 July.

In an interview with his son William Whitney published online, the artist explains why the US prison system is failing. "We're human beings, we're social animals. As much as I'm a hermit, I still have to have some kind of social engagement. So to lock someone up for 20 years… No to Prison Life," Whitney says.

"Most people don't need to be in prison, people are there because they're poor, and you can't expect poor people to be shown all this material stuff and then be told 'No, you can't have it,' while you show it to them. You're going to try to steal, you're going to take. You want to have those Michael Jordan sneakers as a kid, you're going to get them somehow. Why shouldn't you have that stuff, everyone else has it. So No to Prison Life, it's really very important that we get rid of prisons and think of a better way of healing and educating people."

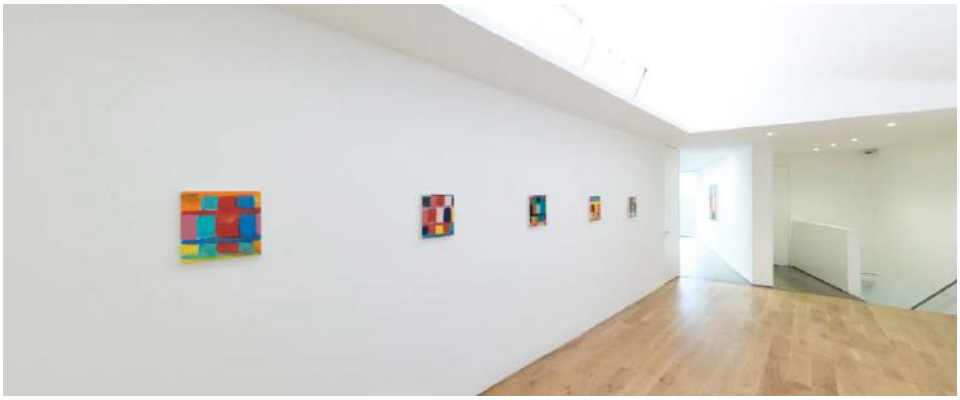
Some of the works were created while Whitney was on lockdown in New York in the wake of the coronavirus crisis. *Untitled (Always Running from the Police - NYC 2020)* (2020) focuses on police brutality. But the piece, which has sold, and other *No to Prison Life* sketches "weren't always meant to be public", Whitney says.

"There's a lot of things I have in sketchbooks that I don't want people to see. But all these things, they're all things that feed me. I am a very political person, as an African-American you're forced to be political. Really, I don't know how you could not be, living in America," he adds.

Last year, Whitney presented a *No to Prison Life* billboard at the Kansas City Art Institute in Missouri, the artist's alma mater; at the Documenta 14 show in Kassel in 2017, he showed a work on the same theme.

Galleries Now
17 October 2019

GalleriesNow



Stanley Whitney: Afternoon Paintings

Lisson Gallery

London

Wed 2 Oct 2019 to Sat 2 Nov 2019

Mon-Fri 10am-6pm, Sat 11am-5pm

artworks | share | visit | contact gallery | get notifications

67 Lisson St

In his studio, surrounded by a carnival of colours, reds, oranges, blues, purples, grays, Whitney says, "I don't take colour for granted." The world is in colour, and people do — I do — forget it. A majority see in colour, so when presented with black and white, Franz Kline's paintings, say, or a black and white photograph by Rosalind Fox Solomon, colour's absence is obvious, palpable and no longer taken for granted. In these *Afternoon Paintings*, there's usually one black square or rectangle settled into the composition, on a row at the top or at the bottom or to the side, usually not in the middle. Whitney tells me he sees the darker colours as creating more weight, a kind of gravity: "I don't worry about what the colour does. If it feels right, if it sits right....To me, it's all about how things feel. I never know what the colours are going to be....I'm trying to open up space, for people to wander."
– Lynne Tillman, *Afternoon Paintings*

For his second exhibition in London, Lisson Gallery presents Stanley Whitney's 'Afternoon Paintings', works executed by the New York-based artist at a smaller scale. A new publication will accompany the exhibition, featuring an essay by the novelist, short story writer and cultural critic Lynne Tillman.

Hyperallergic
13 July 2019

HYPERALLERGIC

Stanley Whitney's Machine for Painting

Whitney's paintings at this point seem to embody the transitory.

"Stanley Whitney / Yves Klein: This Array of Colors" (2019), installation view, Galería Cayón, Menorca, Spain, photo: Joaquín Cortés (all images courtesy of the artist and Galería Cayón)

MAHÓN, Menorca — I usually don't go around ranking artists but I was enormously impressed by the Albert Oehlen retrospective in Venice this past January. I thought, who do we have as good as this guy? Seeing Stanley Whitney's most recent work this summer gave me my answer. While not departing from his known program, his newest seems to demonstrate more abundantly than ever what painting can and must do, and how simply and forthrightly it can be manifested.

Oelhlen and Whitney have an eight-year age difference. While each Oehlen painting is a product of negations of what he has previously done on the canvas, Whitney negated all his early work until he arrived at what he wanted: he once said in an interview that for his first 20 years or so he hated what he came up with. His candor, incidentally, is a very generous gesture, especially toward younger artists.

Whitney worked steadily and self-critically until he owned what he had, storing his knowledge of painting in his body. Each successive work now nails down his approach while moving it along. The individual canvases can be comprehended alone or in groups. They do not necessarily add or subtract from one another.

Like Oehlen, Whitney converses with painting's past, but it's not directly indicated. Their respective styles are completely contemporary, though, categorically, Oehlen is a postmodern painter, relying on ironic precedents such as found in the work of Sigmar Polke and his peer, Martin Kippenberger, while Whitney is nominally a modernist, coming from the abstract canon of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, as well as from standard-bearers outside of painting — jazz musicians such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, et al. — who were also major influences on American abstraction. That Oehlen and Whitney would draw on different idioms while remaining especially relevant to our time demonstrates that progress in painting is no longer measurable historically, but is instead contingent. Witness the newly important Martha Jungwirth or Etel Adnan.

Whitney's new works are on display at Galería Cayón in the city of Mahón on the Mediterranean Spanish island of Menorca, in a gallery space that has taken over a 19th-century former theater with a ceiling 40 feet high and a balcony. The theater has been largely gutted, but its distressed, pockmarked, discolored walls have been retained. Whitney's five paintings surround a long, wide, shallow trough filled to the rim with the crumbled pigment of Yves Klein International Blue. It is an attractive juxtaposition, and the anything-but-neutral repurposed exhibition space fully becomes a third participant.

This bewitching company makes apparent that Whitney's color choices are yes, quite vibrant, but also, I think, deliberately familiar. He sticks close to fully saturated greens, reds, and blues to support lighter, slightly off variations of pink, apricot, and lime, to take one example.

These are balanced with a brushiness or an arrested liquidity that is equally structural. Whitney's choices, revealed in his many works on paper, are about working out the weights of various tonalities as realized in gestural marks. So, coloristically, he seems to prefer the immediately available to the far reaches of the possible, and this is another strength.

Whitney said in another interview that at one time he wanted to paint all the colors in the world. Each of his paintings has a metaphoric message of color inclusivity, but in this exhibition it becomes apparent that, formally, he has always been more about achieving precision within a full but limited range. His constant fine-tuning results in color we can look at uninterruptedly; it has presence. It is not gratuitous. It has achieved a place where it can be itself.

"Stanley Whitney / Yves Klein: This Array of Colors" (2019), installation view, Galería Cayón, Menorca, Spain; (left) "Dream Keeper" (2019); (right) "Morning Blue" (2019); photo: Joaquín Cortés

Lee Friedlander said that he had to learn how the camera sees. This observation is particularly appropriate when it is applied to painting, thanks to its long history. Questions of form are of the utmost importance in painting as they are in life. A painter still needs to learn how a painting communicates. Every inch of it has to have a function and every flick of the wrist, mannered or involuntary, counts. But there is also the matter of degree: a painting can be nuanced to death.

Whitney's work relies on the generalness that can be derived from using a few medium-sized brushes including some rounds — there are always stubby corners in his painted matrix. Crisp, straight edges, when they appear, are a byproduct of one band of paint intersecting another.

One painting here, "Dream Keeper" has almost no underpainting except on the upper left, where Whitney painted a black over a red and got a brown. He sometimes smears a thick dash of line over a wet field that seems to function visually like that of a pause in a musical score. Rivulets of thinner often secrete through the painted squares. Bottom areas are often left unresolved, with thinner paint contrasting with overall completion–a trope from Matisse, whose influence looms large.

In *But Beautiful*, his 1991 book about jazz, Geoff Dyer describes the music of Thelonious Monk as if he had built a bridge, but then, after removing the supporting spars, left only the ornamentation — it's as if the structure is built around what isn't there.

"Stanley Whitney / Yves Klein: This Array of Colors" (2019), installation view, Galería Cayón, Menorca, Spain, photo: Joaquín Cortés (courtesy of the artist and Galería Cayón)

Similarly, in Whitney's paintings the structure is congruent with his color. There are stacks of rectangles seemingly supported by horizontal, shelf-like stripes, but there is no feeling of compression. The downward pull of gravity, which was sometimes present in earlier work, has disappeared; a conceit discarded. This renders the internal architecture weightless.

As the paintings move toward the present, they increasingly press against their surface like a wall, holding on to the front plane. The entire ensemble of stripes and boxes often sways towards the upper left corner. The idiosyncrasies here are those of his body.

It is a very difficult accomplishment to problematize frontality in this way. Whitney says in an interview published in the exhibition catalog that he looked at a lot of ancient pottery while living in Rome. Perhaps Whitney, like Mary Heilmann, saw a way to approach the painting as if it were pottery, which, through its decorative indifference, avoids corresponding directly with the viewer's gaze. Whatever his reason, he has been able to remove painting's default mode of confronting the viewer with a singular, autonomous, totalizing experience.

In other words, Whitney has found a way to avoid European-style easel painting's obnoxious sovereignty without resorting to either the excessive irony of the recent past or the excessive sincerity that seems widespread at present. To borrow Peter Schjeldahl's definition of art, he is a painter who uses his energy intelligently.

"Stanley Whitney / Yves Klein: This Array of Colors" (2019), installation view, Galería Cayón, Menorca, Spain; (left) "Sun Song" (2019); (right) "Poetry Afternoon" (2019); photo: Joaquín Cortés (courtesy of the artist and Galería Cayón)

For the past 15 years I considered Mary Heilmann to be more successful at this problem than anybody else. She placed handmade, brightly colored lawn chairs or pieces of pottery near her paintings to relieve the pressure on the individual artwork, but the whole thing still functioned as painting; it didn't turn into installation or window dressing, while being only mildly ironic. The recent Josh Smith show was also pretty good at unpacking the historical baggage of the painting as an all-encompassing philosophical unit, but if you start out thinking of 100 paintings as a single work, I am not sure whether there is the same tension in each piece. Then again, Claude Viallat sees his entire output as one painting. A thought to be pursued elsewhere, but relevant here, too.

Whitney's new paintings are much freer and only coincidentally comprise seriality. His color compositions are like a liquid Rubik's cube or a wet abacus, or to use a better comparison, they function the way George and Ira Gershwin's tune "I Got Rhythm" (1930) did for jazz musicians. Its chord progression functioned as the basis for many other jazz compositions and continues to do so.

Whitney's "I Got Rhythm" is the façade of the Palazzo Farnese in Rome, whose "one tier, another tier, another tier" architectural style he credits with influencing his format, which became his machine for painting — a machine the he is constantly reworking.

I am borrowing the term "machine" from the painter Christian Bonnefoi, who calls it:

> [...] a type of object that is halfway between rough sketch and the work itself [...] it reveals the hidden surfaces, the facets are exposed under different lights: didactic, experimental, theoretical, practical or — and this last is significant — playful.

I think Whitney's work at this point outperforms all else while continuing to achieve more, as it never strays from the condition of one person standing in front of one canvas with brush in hand.

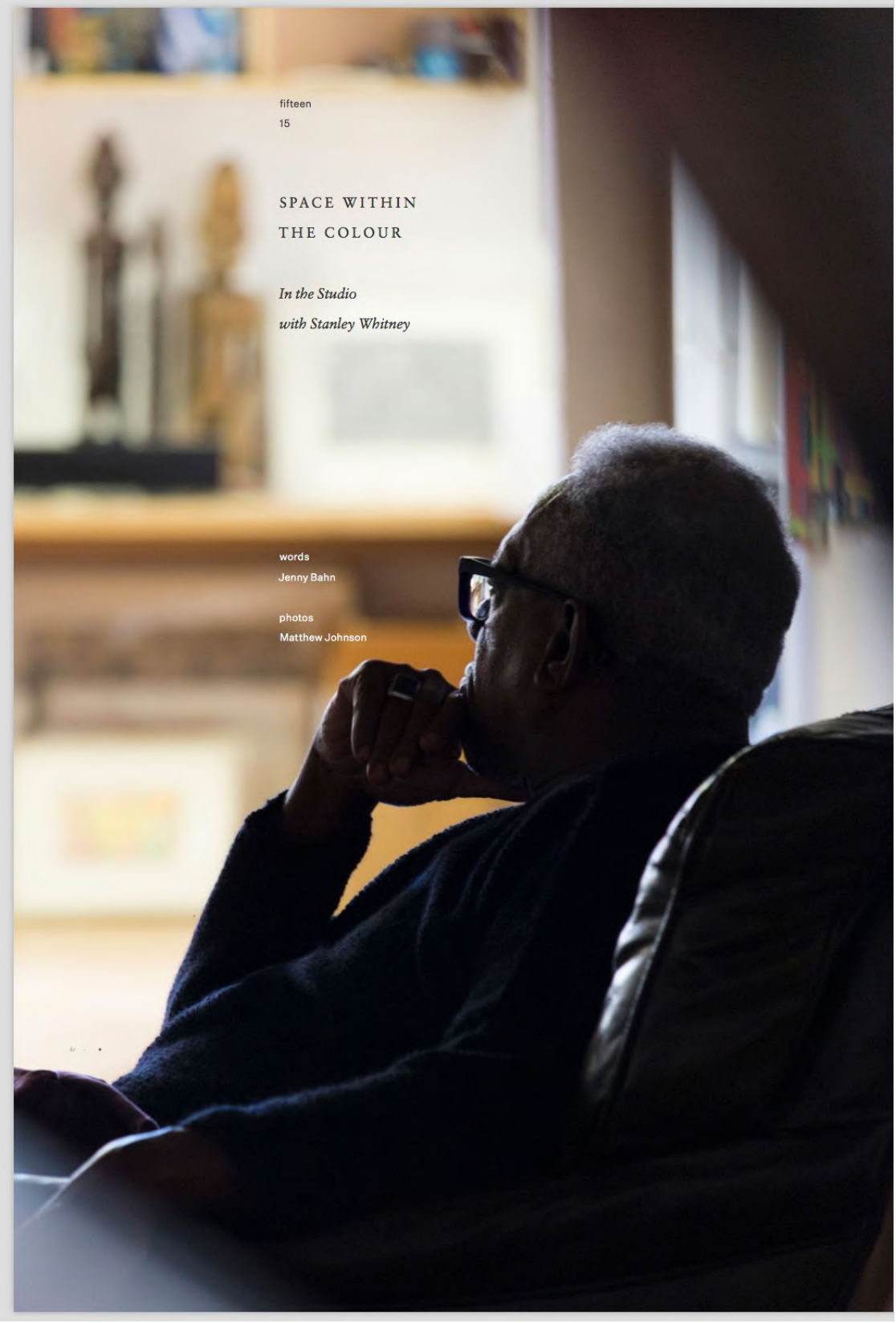
But in each work, he manages to disperse the historical singularity that is so often accompanied by a direct address to the viewer. The paintings at this point seem to embody the transitory. They also draw on a wide range of known events within the history of painting, but still return maximum playful pleasure to the viewer.

Stanley Whitney / Yves Klein: This Array of Colors *continues at Galería Cayón (Carrer de Sant Roc 24 07701 Mahón, Menorca, Islas Baleares, Spain) through September 5.*

LISSON GALLERY

Cereal Magazine
March, 2019

CEREAL



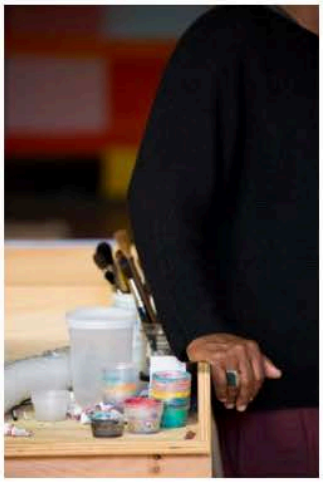
Stanley Whitney, the 73 year old abstract artist, reaches for the handle of the bathroom door. "What you would do," he begins, "is practise with the door, because it can swing." He is showing us how to dance — the jitterbug, to be precise. With one hand on the knob, he briefly transforms, his feet, hips, and knees moving to accommodate an invisible and opposing form. "You see what I mean?" he asks. The door creaks loudly, an agreeable enough partner.

This impromptu performance — a practised navigation of space, with its unique rules and rhythms — is not dissimilar to the work for which Whitney has become so well known. In his pieces, richly hued blocks of colour operate within the parameters of an irregular grid. Rectangular chunks of pigment butt up against one another, jostling for autonomy. The edges are imperfect. On occasion, paint bleeds. The canvasses radiate a magnetic discord.

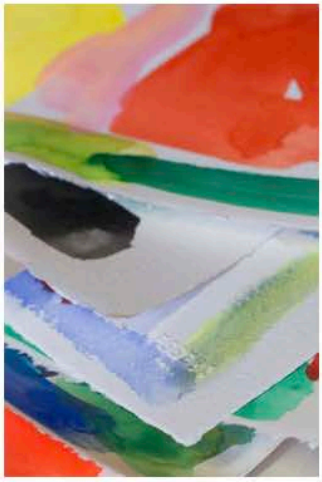
Whitney's current style is the result of a decades-long process of elimination. From his time as an undergraduate student at Kansas City Art Institute, to well after he earned his MFA from Yale, Whitney knew a few things for certain: he wasn't a landscape painter and he wasn't a storyteller. "I had no idea what my subject matter was," he admits, "but no matter what I did, I could always make the work better with colour." Still, he felt no kinship with the Colour Field painters, whose work was, in his opinion, "weak in terms of drawing, and weak in terms of space." In 1968, he moved to New York City, where he was exposed to the likes of Robert Rauschenberg and the Pop Art scene. That wasn't for him either. "There was a lot of 'I don't want to paint this, I don't want to paint that. I'm not this, I'm not that.' That's a difficult phase to be in," Whitney says, "because you're trying to find your voice."

In the late 1980s, Whitney began to get a sense of who he was as an artist. The sparks of what would become his defining aesthetic were lit during a time when Whitney often found himself driving across the country. "I thought a lot about space," he says. "Landscape space and sky space. I wanted to put things down on the canvas immediately — just put the colour down." But the concept wasn't yet fully formed, so Whitney kept ruminating. In the early 1990s, he travelled to Rome and then Egypt, where, inspired by the architecture, he had a revelation. "I kept thinking that if I put the colours side by side, I would lose all the air. I didn't realise the space was in the colour," he says. "Once I figured that out, I could make paintings that were much looser. There was space to get around."

"What you would do is practise with the door, because it can swing," says Stanley Whitney.



"Sometimes I come in here and I can get into it right away. I'm just on. It flows out of me."



"I kept thinking that if I put the colours side by side, I would lose all the air. I didn't realise the space was in the colour. Once I figured that out, I could make paintings that were much looser. There was space to get around."

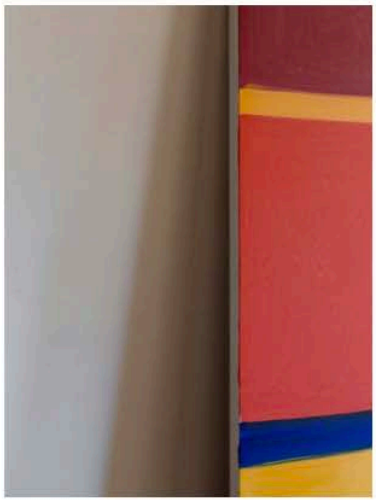
Whitney typically gets up in the morning at around 7.30 a.m., after which, he has a light breakfast — usually oatmeal but sometimes a salad. He takes a car to Ridgewood, Queens, where his studio is, and he works from 10 till two. There are painting days, and there are drawing days. On painting days, he asks his studio manager to come in late so he can be alone. "No one's ever seen me paint," Whitney says. "It's just a whole thing. I don't even know what I really do when I paint." Whitney does admit, however, that according to his wife, artist Marina Adams, he makes a lot of noise when he works. "I'm loud. That's all I'll say," Whitney divulges, before erupting with a burst of mirthful laughter.

The exact shape of the day's work is determined by a rhythm beyond Whitney's control. "Sometimes I come in here and I can get into it right away. I'm just on. It flows out of me." Other times, it's less easy — this is something Whitney has learned to not see as a negative. "Early on, you realise there are no 'bad days'. You might have a day where everything's really off and you can't get anything done. But those are the good days, because those are the days you're trying to raise your level, trying to get to another place. The paintings that are your 'failures' — the ones you really struggle with — are sometimes your best paintings, because you've used up all your tricks, you've tried everything."

Integral to Whitney's practice are his drawings. They are smaller, squirlier works on paper, often less dense than the paintings they will eventually inspire. Around the studio, an army of coloured pencils lays strewn about, awaiting its deployment to one of his many cardboard-fronted notebooks filled with sketches and phrases such as 'Doing Time' and 'In memory of My Neighbour.' The drawings help work out the space on a smaller scale, and, with the space defined, Whitney can confidently get straight to the colour once he moves onto the canvas.

The choice of colours that end up in a Stanley Whitney piece can be attributed to a kind of alchemy. When asked how he does it, the artist offers only one word: 'magic'. "It's like call and response," he adds. "Once you put something down on the canvas, you have a relationship. It's like getting dressed, you know what I mean? This works. That works. It's just how things feel." In fact, Whitney feels he has to approach his works with no premeditated idea of a colour scheme. "If I think about my paintings like, 'Oh, I'm going to do a painting with pink, white, grey, and blue,' then I get locked in. That means I can't let other things in or out. I need to be at a point where I don't have any thoughts," he explains. "No ideas. I don't want any ideas."

Whitney's studio is dim but joyful. Large, finished canvases sit stacked against one another on the floor, awaiting shipment. A series of a dozen, smaller works hang side by side on a wall. Beneath them sit published books and paper drawings. Everywhere the eye travels, it meets a grid. The familiarity of the form, however, never makes the next piece any less enthralling. Nor, for Whitney, does it make it easier to create. "You're always on thin ice," he tells me. "It's always a difficult process. And you don't want it to become less difficult. It's always about risky business. You want to stay there."



Early on, you realise there are no 'bad' days … The paintings that are your 'failures' — the ones you really struggle with — are sometimes your best paintings, because you've used up all your tricks, you've tried everything.

— Stanley Whitney

T The New York Times Style Magazine
13 March 2019

The New York Times Style Magazine

ADMIRATION SOCIETY

Joe Mantello and Stanley Whitney on the '80s and the Evolution of Their Work

Two creative people in two different fields in one wide-ranging conversation. This time: the director and the artist.

Joe Mantello (left) and Stanley Whitney, photographed in New York on Dec. 17, 2018. Sean Donnola

By Boris Kachka

March 13, 2019

The abstract painter Stanley Whitney — known for his signature grids of bold color inspired by jazz, American craft quilting and the midcentury Color Field artists — has been making art in New York for more than 50 years, but only in the last decade has he attracted widespread attention from curators and collectors. One of those

collectors is the Broadway theater director Joe Mantello, who moved to Manhattan in 1984. While Whitney, now 72, has plied his solitary craft since his own arrival to New York in the late '60s — not quite fitting with more overtly political black artists or the white male-dominated Expressionists — Mantello, now 56, blazed through the city's theater scene, first as an actor (in 1993, he originated the role of Louis in Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" on Broadway) and then as a lauded director of shows ranging from extravagant musicals (Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman's 2003 "Wicked") to seminal gay plays (Terrence McNally's 1995 "Love! Valour! Compassion!") to popular revivals (last year's production of Edward Albee's "Three Tall Women"). This month, he brings Lucas Hnath's obliquely political comedy "Hillary and Clinton" to Broadway.

Mantello has often favored simple sets, but the opposite might be said of his West Village townhouse, which is decorated with art in bursting colors. He discovered Whitney's work in 2015, when the painter had his first solo museum exhibition in New York at the Studio Museum in Harlem. They met last December at a Chelsea restaurant close to Lisson Gallery, which was hosting "In the Color," Whitney's show of works from 1996 to 2018, and together they reflected on the vast differences between their disciplines — and their strikingly similar life goals.

JOE MANTELLO: What I envy about your work is that you always know when you're looking at a Stanley Whitney painting. My work is based on underlying material that I am — with a group of people — interpreting, and so it takes on the personality and rhythm of the group. But how great would it be to just have if not a *restriction*, a *point of view* with your work, which you're doing variations on.

STANLEY WHITNEY: A signature style is a very odd thing now. It's not something people really think is a good idea anymore. They feel it's a limitation. So artists now do video and different kinds of things. I don't feel that way, which gives me a lot of freedom. It's almost like playing the same song over and over again. When I heard Ornette Coleman's third album, "The Shape of Jazz to Come" (1959), that's when I figured out who I intellectually wanted to be, how radical I wanted to be and what that meant. I didn't play music, but the music was there before the painting. In my house, there was always music — you'd go to bed with the radio on.

JM: Do you paint to music?

SW: I do. I painted with the same album for 29 years — Miles Davis's "Bitches Brew" (1970). But once you start painting, you sort of become the music. You're not really listening.

JM: Are you alone when you paint?

SW: No one else.

JM: See, that's what I envy.

SW: Well, I was always a loner. I grew up outside Philadelphia with movies as a kid — always matinees — but the idea of live theater was something I never thought I could be part of.

JM: It's fascinating to hear that. I felt that with the art world — like there was this membrane that I couldn't penetrate as somebody who was really interested in collecting.

SW: New York's art scene used to be really tough to access. Now things cross over more. When I came to town in the '60s, there were rules and regulations. If you were a figurative painter, it was hard to be a big player. You couldn't do certain things.

T: But Joe, you've become a knowledgeable collector of work, including Stanley's. Does the art inspire your own?

JM: The painters that I love, there's a simplicity to the work that I also strive for, that is clean. I don't mean to be reductive about Stanley's process, but it's not baroque. It's straightforward and it's strong.

SW: Yeah, there's nothing hidden. Everything's in front of you. There are squares of colors with lines in between, every shape's a different color. It's not a great idea, but —

JM: There is undeniable power to it.

SW: It's like Cézanne painting an apple, it's not a great idea. Early on I would hear, "How do you do this, how do you make that?" I didn't want to have that conversation. I wanted people to see that the paintings are all the same but totally different. Like people.

JM: What I try to do — I don't want a production to be about me. I think there are directors who do that beautifully, but that's never been my interest. I want it to feel absolutely very considered — not a piece out of place — but I want you to walk away and talk about the play. I'm not interested in you talking about me, I've *got* me. And so the people that I admire allow you to just disappear into their work. Stanley, do you consider the viewer when you're painting, or do you paint for yourself?

SW: When I'm painting, I'm the viewer. I don't think there will be anybody as critical as myself. Sometimes I'm really shocked *where* my paintings are in people's homes, but they're really made to be lived with, not just looked at.

Stanley Whitney's "They Come Dancing" (2018).
© Stanley Whitney, courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Stanley Whitney's "We Sing" (2018). © Stanley Whitney, courtesy of Lisson Gallery

T: That's a contrast between your fields. Joe's job is to make an instant, fleeting connection with a large group of people.

JM: I wish I was thinking about the audience a little less, and I think I'm moving toward that, but when someone is paying hundreds for a Broadway ticket, I feel a responsibility to entertain. If I had disdain for the audience, I don't think I would have lasted as long.

SW: How did you get from being an actor to being a director?

JM: There was a theater called the Circle Repertory Company downtown, in the late '80s. It was on-the-job training, and without that kind of nurturing and support, this would never be my profession.

SW: Were you directing when you were an actor? Were you like, "This should be this way or that way" or —

JM: I don't think I was doing it literally, but when I look back, I *was* doing it. I had a keenly developed sense of the overall vision that was running in my head parallel to my own performance that I didn't identify as "being a director" until later. I do envy the idea of going into a studio, closing the door, being by yourself and just making stuff. But what about failure, Stanley — do you allow yourself to make mistakes?

SW: For me, there's no mistake, there's no failure. When I was young, I used to think I had a bad day, but now I realize a bad day is a good day. Because a bad day is when you're trying to get to a different level.

T: But don't you look back and see mistakes you've made?

SW: Yeah, but you're a different person. The person who painted [those paintings from the '90s at Lisson] doesn't exist anymore.

JM: I feel that, too. The only thing I have to compare it to is "Wicked." The show has been running for 15 years, and when I go back and see it now, I think, "The person who directed that show does not exist." I see a younger man's mistakes, a younger man's point of view.

SW: Did you come to New York to get involved with Broadway?

JM: I guess I did in some way. But I went to drama school in Winston-Salem, N.C. I enjoyed my time there, but it was impractical. We were being trained for a regional theater movement that was on its way out. I'm from Rockford, Ill., and I always wanted to come to New York.

SW: Art school saved my life, but it was very different in those days, more like a trade school. If you could draw, you could go. I went from Philly to Columbus to Kansas City and then to Yale for graduate school. I was just trying to beat the draft — 1964, when I got out of high school, was a big draft year. My friends who came to New York right away got drafted.

T: What sort of impression did the city make when you both first got here?

JM: In 1984, it was a much more dangerous place but a much more exciting place. I don't think it was just because I was young. It felt different.

SW: I never thought of it as dangerous. I was used to that kind of danger. But then money changed everything, and, you know, it's a really good thing for me! But it's like, all of a sudden, where are the poets? I never thought I'd have any money, but what you want to do with art is work up to your potential. So now I have money and there's no excuse. I had a lot of dream time — maybe 10, 15 years when no one bothered me. I *wanted* to be bothered. But I painted a lot and threw a lot of things out. Now, for young artists, I think it's very hard to figure out where they are in the world. The gallerists own you right away. They're like sharks to blood.

JM: Broadway has always been commercial, but it's very different than when I moved to the city, when a new play without stars could really flourish. That's pretty rare these days. I was able to develop a way of working when no one was interested, because you have to go down dead ends. I got to make work with no hype and no buzz. And is that possible today? I don't know. But I've been incredibly fortunate. When you have a show like "Wicked" that removes a certain kind of stress, you then have the luxury and the responsibility of making the best use of your time.

SW: One reason I think people got to me very late in my career was I had my own personal vision. I wasn't out to be famous. Basquiat wanted to be famous. I wasn't thinking about that. In the '60s, I wasn't making political art — it wasn't fashionable. There was nothing really to talk about with my work.

T: On the other hand, Joe has always been involved in political art, especially around the AIDS crisis.

JM: I wouldn't say that it was a considered position on my part. I did the things that I was interested in doing, and they spoke to the culture in a larger way.

SW: I think my paintings are very political. People are surprised by who makes them and where they come from — they raise a lot of questions. That opens up a lot of doors. "If he can do that, I can do this." And that's how I'm political.

JM: That's because, in some ways, you played the long game, right? That's what I'm interested in. I feel like no one production that I've directed is the ultimate definition of who I am. I think if I get to the end of my life, if anyone is interested to look back on —

SW: The whole thing.

JM: The whole thing — yes, *that's* the work.

SW: Exactly. That's how I feel. When I title my paintings I think, "When I die, people are going to look at the titles and figure out who I was." People at the Lisson show saw titles [from 2018] like "They Come Dancing," "We Sing" and "The Secret of Black Song & Laughter." But it's a long game. You kind of want to be at your own memorial to see what you did. I knew people who figured out their subject matter early on. It took me a long time to figure out that color was my subject. And now, I'm always sitting there as if it's my first painting. The other paintings don't count. You did all your homework. Let it go, let it go. Jump out the window.

JM: That's the moment. When you arrive at that place, it's so liberating because the only person you answer to is yourself, and that's a glorious feeling.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Hyperallergic
02 December 2018

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Refusing Painting's Obsolescence

My admiration for Stanley Whitney's resoluteness has increased over the years, as well as my sense of his growing authority as a masterful colorist.

John Yau December 2, 2018

688 Shares

Stanley Whitney, "The Secret of Black Song & Laughter" (2018), oil on linen, 96 x 96 inches

Currently, within a few blocks of each other in Chelsea, there are exhibitions of three abstract artists born in the late 1940s, two of which I recently reviewed: *Harriet Korman, Permeable|Resistant: Recent Paintings and Drawings* at Thomas Erben Gallery and *Melissa Meyer: New Paintings* at Lennon, Weinberg. I want to focus on the third exhibition, *Stanley Whitney: In the Color*, which is at both spaces of Lisson Gallery (November 3–December 21, 2018).

Chronologically speaking, Korman began showing first, when she had a solo show in Germany in 1970 and was included in the group exhibition, *Ten Young Artists: Theodoron Awards* at the Guggenheim Museum in 1971. Meyer first gained attention in 1984 when she had a show at Exit Art. By his own account, Whitney made his first mature paintings in the 1990s. There is no timetable for when artists begin defining their own territory or when the art world begins paying attention. In many cases, the two do not coincide.

Committing themselves to abstraction in the 1970s — during a decade dominated by Conceptual Art and the belief that painting had reached its culmination in Minimalism and Color Field painting — these three artists were engaged in activities that had been marginalized by the rise of art as an expanded field. More importantly, they were not artists who used paint to make a product, but artists who painted and drew.

Stanley Whitney, "After Munch" (1997), oil on linen, 72 3/4 x 85 1/4 inches

In Lisson's Tenth Avenue exhibition space, Whitney has four paintings, all slightly wider than tall, dated between 1996 and 1998, along with seven untitled crayon drawings that are just shy of 20 inches high and 30 inches wide, all dated 2013. These two bodies of work show Whitney moving towards the composition and format that have become central to his work: hand-made rectangles of color arranged as stacked rows within a square format, with the largest paintings measuring 96 by 96 inches.

Drawing has always been a central component of Whitney's work. As he told me in an interview that I did with him in *The Brooklyn Rail* (October 2008): "The drawings were very important to me; they were

the key to figuring out the space." This remark got me thinking that I had overlooked something about Whitney's work, which I thought I should be more attentive to.

In the four canvases from the late 1990s, Whitney paints rectangles in four stacked rows of varying heights, with the shortest running along the bottom edge and the tallest at the second tier from the top. In many of the rectangles, one color is loosely applied over another, a dense scribble over a solid plane. By loosely establishing a compositional structure (the four stacked rows, each separated by a brushy, horizontal line of color), Whitney found a way to break down the rigidity of the grid into individual units. Each one could be painted its own color and arrive at its own size.

By synthesizing geometric structure and painterly improvisation, Whitney found his way past Color Field Painting's poured puddles and Minimalism's tendency towards monochrome, strict geometry, hard edges, and the modular repetition favored by Donald Judd in his "stacks." Rather than working within the parameters established by either of these two historically divergent, well-documented tendencies, Whitney reconfigured them into something all his own. I think his smart reconfiguration has nothing to do with strategy and everything to do with his insistence on painting and drawing in color: how do you keep doing these activities when they have been declared obsolete?

Stanley Whitney, "Spring of Two Blues" (2018), oil on linen, 96 x 96 inches

This is the challenge that Whitney and others of his generation took up, and they have never gotten credit for it, despite their solid achievements. They did not stop drawing or give up on the rectangle, nor did they start making "specific objects." The reason that they have never gotten the acclaim they deserve is because they never accommodated themselves to the various, overlapping, institutional narratives and manifestoes proclaiming the death or culmination of painting, a story that the art world's institutions and authorities continue to invest in, even as the 1970s recede in the rearview mirror. They did not try to fit into one of the slots that the art world and, in some cases, social pressure set up for them.

This is one reason why I have never tired of seeing what Whitney has been up to, from his drawings to his monotypes to his paintings, all of which I have written about. Within the loose parameters he has set up for himself, he is far more restless and adventuresome than I think he has been given credit for. I think a comprehensive survey would make this apparent.

My admiration for Whitney's resoluteness has increased over the years, as well as my sense of his growing authority as a masterful colorist. He can stack a slightly off-center, vertical row of four blues in "Spring of Two Blues" (2018) without even remotely repeating that motif in any of the other works in the exhibition. The planes of color are never uniformly painted. He is not interested in looking mechanical or in showing off his hand, which gets him past the two dominant modes of applying paint to a surface.

Stanley Whitney, "Mingus" (2018), oil on linen, 72 x 72 inches

In “Mingus” (2018), depending how we turn our gaze, we focus on the way one color is peeking through another, or else on the matter-of-fact brushstrokes that lay in the color. In a number of works, Whitney paints a line/bar along the top edge or on the sides implying that the painting continues beyond the canvas’s physical square. The off-center stacks conveys Whitney’s process of always finding his way with each rectangle and color, always remembering what he has done and not repeating himself.

The other thing that strikes me about these painting is that all the color rectangles inhabit their own space. As tightly pressed together as they are, they are not all on the same picture plane. There is an earthiness to Whitney’s paintings – which I would set at the other end of the spectrum from Agnes Martin’s ethereal light. As much as I love painters like Martin or Joan Mitchell, I think it is also time for museums and other art world institutions to move on, to show abstract artists from a younger generation, starting with those born in the 1940s. Let me be clear here — I am talking about painters, not artists who use paint.

I also think that it is time for curators to do their work and start promoting painters who are not marketplace stars. Why not stick your neck out a little?

Doing so would be one way to respect what Whitney and others of his generation have been doing their whole adult lives.

Stanley Whitney: In the Color *continues at Lisson Gallery (504 West 24th Street and 138 Tenth Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 21.*

The New Yorker
7 December 2018

ART GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Stanley Whitney

This veteran abstract painter once said, "I always want to use every color in the universe, but then I have to take some out." (It seems an even bet that, someday, he will get around to the omitted hues, too.) In a two-venue show (on W. 24th St. and on Tenth Ave.), two decades' worth of Whitney's loosely gridded, brushy blocks of saturated colors—the focus is solid at one space, scribbly at the other—reacquaint us with his startling dialectic of ravishment and astringency. Arrayed in ranks separated by horizontal bands, the blocks sing arias of optical happiness, but hardly in harmony. Each elbows aside its neighbors to monopolize a viewer's eye. Imagine the instruments in an orchestra playing different pieces of music all at once, at crescendo pitch. How can the result not be cacophony? It isn't. The conductor knows what he's doing, and the work, even as it disconcerts, transfixes and beguiles.

— *Peter Schjeldahl*

The Brooklyn Rail
11 December 2018

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Stanley Whitney: *In the Color*

by Tom McGlynn

LISSON GALLERY | NOVEMBER 3 – DECEMBER 21, 2018

Stanley Whitney, *Untitled*, 1998. Oil on linen, 72 3/4 × 85 1/4 inches. © Stanley Whitney. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

In Stanley Whitney's magisterially unfolding show at Lisson Gallery's dual spaces in Chelsea, the artist presents a cycle of paintings and drawings that resemble a calendar of the conscious, a notational form of painting that checks off time as a series of vividly experienced partitions. Compositions with such evocative titles as *Bird Watching* and *Spring of Two Blues* (both 2018) hold the walls of the gallery with their assured improvisations. The overriding format of these works is an expressively asymmetrical, rectilinear grid animated by high key and contrapuntal color. Think late Hans Hoffman on acid, absent the Abstract Expressionist histrionics. The loose geometric vitality of the Gee's Bend quilts (in a 2013 interview with Lowery Sims, the artist mentions his admiration of the "offbeat, polyrhythmic" musicality of their vivid juxtapositions of color in skewed grids) also comes to mind.

Working alternatively thinly and opaquely with saturated and under saturated oils, the artist lays down his signature stroke within his signature, gridded structures. It is a rather desultory, recursive, thick squiggle that resembles absent-minded doodling and conveys a sense of the painter compulsively filling up his compartmentalized structure (Whitney himself has described his systemic approach to format as allowing him to "make paintings inside of paintings") with sluggish yet insistent brushstrokes that slow down and modify the often jarring juxtapositions of complementary colors (complementary in hue, value, and saturation to varying degrees). Another recurring gesture seems arrived at by drizzling solvent over some areas which gives them a friable fringe. Often these drizzles and drips are much smaller in relation than the overall interior scale of a painting as can be seen in the lower band of *Mingus* (2018). In this way the painter makes the examination of such slight variations an intimate and lighthearted game of discovery, as one is not immediately made to connect the improvisatory part to the cohesive whole. This cohesiveness derives from a serial format that could potentially enervate Whitney's colors and gestures by dominating these subtle variations with its overriding sameness.

Stanley Whitney, *In the Color*, 2018. Oil on linen, 96 × 96 inches. © Stanley Whitney. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

However, the artist clearly refutes the cliché that familiarity breeds contempt by inverting that common conception with a generous range of improvisation in the structural repetition shared by these paintings. A kindred intent can be seen in the works of Sean Scully, with his variable "wall" format, or in Harriet Korman's repetitive cruciform format paintings, which are currently on view at Thomas Erben, and the paintings of Whitney's wife Marina Adams, whose geometric color variations often coalesce loosely into symbolic formats. This shared intent to thematize a format extends a friendly hand of decorum while subverting the idea of mastery of formal address: the instantly recognizable as familiarly egalitarian.[1] In Whitney's case, his format—his decorum—serves as an expansive stage on which he can direct an epic play of color and movement. That color and movement feels strongly influenced by the lyrical palette and fluid compositions of Mattise, as well as the rose and cerulean toned scumblings of Philip Guston, the latter artist who Whitney met in New York in the 1960's.

Stanley Whitney, *Untitled*, 2013. Crayon on paper, 19 × 29 inches. © Stanley Whitney. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

A grouping of seven of Whitney's drawings, each *Untitled* (2013), are featured at Lisson's 10th Avenue space, along with a selection of paintings dating from 1996 – 98 that are composed in a graphic scribble that relate to the more recent drawings. In this portion of the show one can see how the artist treats the process of mark making in a different way than he does when painting. There is a strong resemblance to the ebullient, childlike scribblings of Jean Dubuffet. Whitney, however stands on his own here in these densely overwritten crayon grids. Their manic quality is imparted by the artist revving up his more typically slow stroke into a feverishly circulating overlay of linear color. While still maintained within an approximate grid format, these energetic bundles of crayon lines break the limits of their compartments and point to the energies subsumed within the more restrained gestures in the attendant paintings. They are less lightly composed than barely conducted.

The musician, experimental arranger, and conductor Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris (1947 – 2013) was born a year after Stanley Whitney. Morris became famous for his "Conductions" in which he would direct ensembles of musicians through improvised sections of music. This process, despite its rather unorthodox character, involved a rigorous rehearsal regimen. In a way Morris's "Conductions" are a fitting comparison to the way in which Stanley Whitney's recurring compositional structures allow for an improvisatory "sounding" of color and gesture.

Notes

1. **The aesthetic theory of Jacques Rancière that posits the historical arrival of genre painting and the departure of importance of historical painting as the moment when "all subjects begin to share an equal status . . . the production of works without destination . . . the revocation of the form/matter model and Kant's definition of universality without a concept of aesthetic judgement" might be illuminating here, in terms of Whitney's repetitive habitation of format constituting an abstract genre unto its own universality (if historical painting, in contrast, and to follow Rancière's logic, is limited to its need for a submissive, representational "subject" to form). Quotation from: "The Politics of Aesthetics: Jacques Ranciere Interviewed by Nicholas Vielleschazes" in *Naked Punch*, Jan. 12, 2009**

CONTRIBUTOR

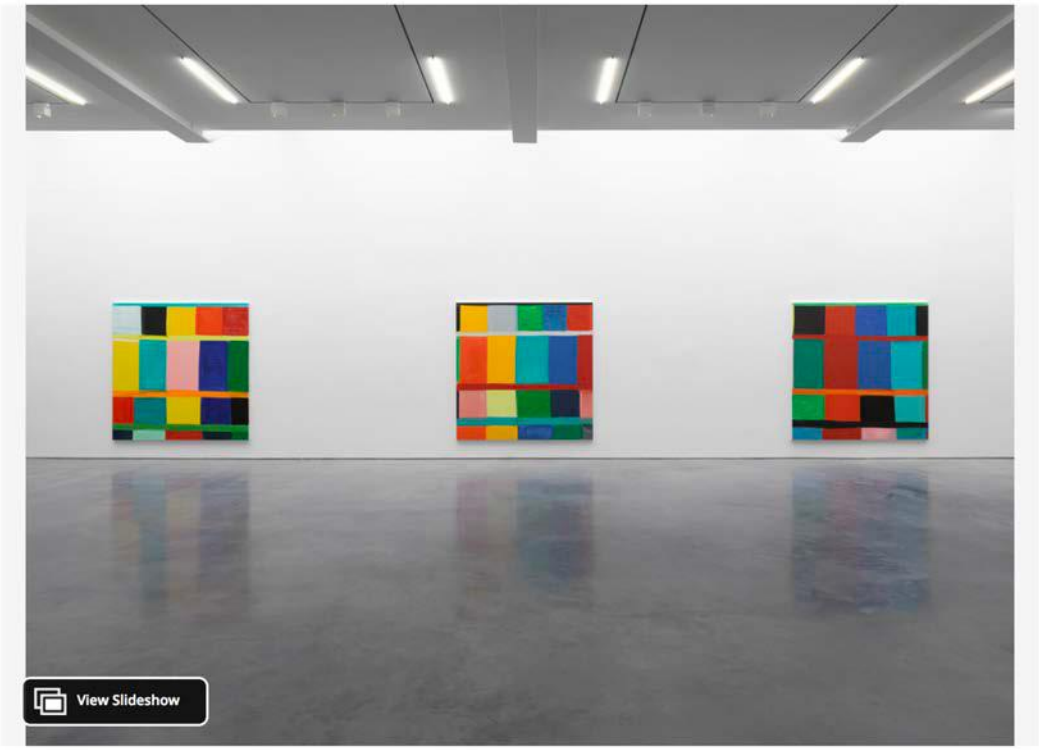
Tom McGlynn

Blouin Art Info
20 November, 2018

BLOUINARTINFO

Stanley Whitney's "In the Color" at Lisson Gallery, New York

BY BLOUIN ARTINFO | NOVEMBER 20, 2018



"In the Color," 2018, by Stanley Whitney, Installation view, Lisson Gallery New York
(Courtesy: Artist & Lisson Gallery)

RELATED

VENUES
Lisson Gallery

ARTISTS
Stanley Whitney

Lisson Gallery is featuring Stanley Whitney's fourth exhibition with the gallery and the first solo show to occupy both of the New York gallery spaces.

The exhibition, on view through December 21, 2018, features paintings and drawings dating back to the 1990s in one gallery and a suite of brand new works in the other, investigating his profound relationship to color and its spatial effects throughout his career.

According to the gallery, color inspires and informs the work of Stanley Whitney, whose paintings explore the many possibilities created by the tessellation and juxtaposition of irregular rectangles in varying shades of strength and subtlety.

"Within the composition of these adjacent nodes – a structure that fluctuates between freedom and constraint, between endless open fields and controlled boundaries – is ultimately a play between complementing and competing areas of color," says the gallery.

The exhibition features paintings and drawings dating back to the 1990s in one gallery and a suite of brand new works in the other.

The gallery reveals that Whitney settled on his signature format – stacked irregular rectangles of color within a square format canvas – following time spent in Italy and a visit to Egypt in the mid-1990s.

About his work, the artist notes, "I didn't know at this point that the space was in the color. I kept thinking the space was around, and the color was all in the space. When I put the colors directly next to each other, I realized they didn't lose the air."

The gallery also believes that over many years his approach to gidded abstract style has been honed, tightened and defined, perhaps in response to the cumulative influence of everything from the meditative, multi-faceted landscapes of Paul Cezanne and the stacked structures of classical architecture, to the expansive color fields of monochrome painting and the bold, color-blocked quilts of African-American textile makers.

"'*In the Color*,' which also demonstrates this increasingly precise 'call and response' between each colored zone of paint. This work has been executed in the largest square format of Whitney's oeuvre, 96 inches by 96 inches, and is comprised of four rows containing a line-up of between five to six colors in each band. The individual rectangles retain a bold, opaque quality with less of the drips and swirling fluidity of the early grid work. The importance is, as always, in the color," the gallery adds.

"In the color" is on view through December 21, 2018 at Lisson Gallery, 504 West 24th Street & 138 Tenth Avenue, New York, USA.

For details, visit: https://www.blouinartinfo.com/galleryguide/283267/305457/home-overview

Click on the slideshow for a sneak peek at the exhibition.

LISSON GALLERY

Artforum
November 2017

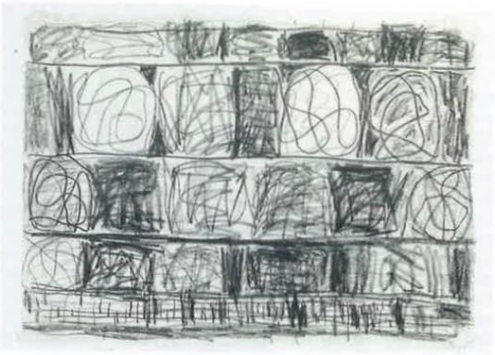
ARTFORUM

Stanley Whitney
LISSON GALLERY

I'd been waiting for a show of Stanley Whitney's drawings for a long time. Catching sight of them periodically in his studio, or in the back room of a gallery, I'd always been amazed. Whitney is, as should now be apparent, among the supreme colorists of contemporary painting, but what's amazed me in his drawings has been his mysterious ability to communicate the variable weights and densities of color, as he does in his paintings—without actually using color at all, instead relying on pure line to express, as if through metaphor, chromatic differentiae.

Conjuring color through its absence turns out to be just one of Whitney's tricks with drawing. This densely hung selection of seventy-five works on paper, all *Untitled*, included works in both black-and-white (mostly graphite) and color (acrylic marker, colored pencil, or crayon) and showed unexpected range. This diversity might have surprised many of the artist's admirers, who have grown used to his rigorous adherence to the same basic structure for all of his paintings: rows of loosely rectangular color zones separated by a mortar of horizontal bands. Here, a pair of drawings using water-soluble crayon and dated 2009 hewed closest to the paintings' recipe. When the artist maps out such structures using line in place of color, the drawings can read like abstract comics—though it's the rare comics artist who can coordinate the dynamics of the individual frame in tandem with those of the page as a whole as adroitly as Whitney does.

Whitney has often spoken in interviews of how the ancient architecture he saw on a 1992 trip to Italy and Egypt gave him the idea that he could stack colors in this way, but here, works from 1989 through 1991 showed him already on the way to that realization. He was still teaching himself how to put that idea into practice in another group dating to about 1994–97. The forms he was using were not yet the irregular quasi rectangles he was later to settle on; the main shapes were more often roughly circular, meaning that there were in-between spaces to fill. These interstices are not exactly backgrounds—individually colored, they do not suggest a continuous space behind the primary spherical forms—but they create an alternation of major and minor elements, which later would occur only on the horizontal plane.



Stanley Whitney, *Untitled*, 1996, graphite on Japanese rice paper, 12⅛ × 16¼".

The drawings dating from the past few years, on the other hand, suggest that Whitney may now be questioning the blocky architectural structure that has served him so well for the past couple of decades. Some incorporate inscriptions: NO TO PRISON LIFE, RIMBAUD WENT TO AFRICA . . . , DANCE WITH ME HENRI, HOOT & HOLLER. Only one of the earlier drawings contains writing, a 1990 piece that illuminates the words HEY JIMMY / AIN'T YOU HEARD / RACE AND ART / ARE FAR APART / POSTCARD FROM LANGSTON HUGHES TO JAMES / BALDWIN 1962; I'm not sure whether Hughes's apothegm names a problem or its solution. In any case, the use in that drawing of letter shapes as the work's main theme—not a captionlike addition as in the more recent drawings using text—highlights the way the sometimes insouciantly scrawled marks in many of the drawings early and late can vaguely suggest handwriting.

A couple of works from 2009 suggest the graphite outlines of the gridded blocks of color typical of Whitney's paintings. But when he creates similar structures by means of variously colored acrylic markers in some works of 2013, we can no longer read them as outlining potential color areas—the lines themselves function as independent chromatic elements against the white ground of the paper. In another drawing from that year, the lines completely break with the grid to become wavy, overlapping meanders somewhat reminiscent of the gestures in Brice Marden's paintings, and many of the most recent works follow suit. Whitney is broaching a lighter, airier approach to color. Does that portend an unexpected shift in his practice as a painter? Not one to jump into waters whose depths he hasn't tested, Whitney won't mind waiting as long as it takes before he's ready to show us where his experiments are leading.

—*Barry Schwabsky*

LISSON GALLERY

Hyperallergic
10 August 2018

HYPERALLERGIC

"I Want to Paint Every Color in the World"

By rejecting monochrome and the grid's guarantee of homogeneity, Stanley Whitney has transformed aspects of Minimalism and Color Field painting into something all his own.

John Yau

Stanley Whitney, "Untitled" (2017), monotype on handmade paper, 47 7/8 x 71 7/8 inches (all images courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, New York)

For long time I have been particularly interested in drawing, and I have written about a number of artists' drawings and works on paper, which some people might consider of less interest or importance than so-called major works. The artists I have paid particular attention to, as well as written about a range from such well-known figures as Joan Mitchell, Jasper Johns, and Brice Marden, to the lesser-known Arpita Singh, Josh Marsh, and Angela Dufresne.

This interest in drawing started years ago, in the early 1980s, when I used to travel around town with Paul Cummings (1933 – 1997), who was the adjunct curator of drawings at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1975-1987), to look at drawings by artists as different as Paul Cadmus, Jim Nutt, David Smith, and A. R. Penck. He taught me a lot about looking. One thing he said has stuck in my mind all these years: "You can't lie in a drawing." I never got around to asking him what he meant that afternoon, while we were eating lunch in a midtown French restaurant, and I wish I did.

Drawing is certainly one of the avenues I took into Stanley Whitney's work, which I first saw in his studio in the mid-1980s. In an interview I did with him in 2008, he said:

> [...] I began working in this studio in '72. The paintings were going nowhere. I remember that I always liked Van Gogh's drawings, and there were always some at the Guggenheim. So I made these big black-and-white landscape drawings that were reminiscent of the works of Van Gogh. The drawings were very important to me; they were key to figuring out the space. Even now with the paintings, no matter how structured they are, the lucid stuff really belongs to drawing.

Stanley Whitney, "Untitled" (2018), monotype in watercolor on Lanaquarelle paper, 47 5/8 x 71 3/4 inches

In 2015, Whitney had a show of five paintings and 81 works on paper at Karma (June 15 – July 26) titled: *Stanley Whitney in the 1990s*. Shortly afterward, he had his first museum exhibition in New York, *Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange*, at the Studio Museum in Harlem (July 16–October 25, 2015), which contained a selection of 29 paintings and works on paper he made between 2008 and 2015. I reviewed both exhibitions as well as *Stanley Whitney: Drawings* at Lisson Gallery (September 8 – October 21, 2017).

The one constant running through all of my writing on Whitney is his works on paper, which I am thinking about in the broadest sense — from the densely linear graphite concatenations he made in the late 1980s to the gouaches in fruity Popsicle colors from the past few years. It is clear to me that Whitney's works on paper form a distinct body within his oeuvre, and that within this group he has gone down a number of different paths in his exploration of lines, grids, colors.

The reason I mention this is because I went to Whitney's studio twice this summer to look at some of the monotypes he did at Two Palms between 2016 and 2018. For these monotypes, which range in size from 8 ¼ by 10 ¾ inches to 48 by 72 inches, Whitney used either watercolor or watercolor and crayon. The monotypes were transferred from a wood surface, which Whitney had used to make the drawing, to moistened handmade or Lanaquarelle paper. Run through the press, the pattern of the wood grain is visible to varying degrees in the prints.

Something that Whitney said in our 2008 interview came back to me:

> Color for me is all about touch. Whether it's thicker or thinner — how you touch the canvas is different. If I put it on at a different weight, it's a different color. The question for me is whether to repeat a color. I want to paint every color in the world.

The paintings Whitney is known for — which he started working on in 1996, shortly after he visited Egypt — are composed of stacked rectangles of color within a square format. The swirling, meandering, twisting lines in his paintings of the late 1980s and early '90s vanished, replaced by planes of solid color tightly fitted together. In these paintings, Whitney usually divides the square horizontally into four uneven bands of quirky rectangles, with the second band usually the widest and the fourth, which runs along the bottom edge of the canvas, always the narrowest. The clearly defined border between the bands is marked by one or more horizontal lines, each a single color, generally the width of the brush he chose to make the line.

Stanley Whitney, "Untitled" (2018), monotype in watercolor on Lanaquarelle paper, 47 1/2 x 71 3/4 inches

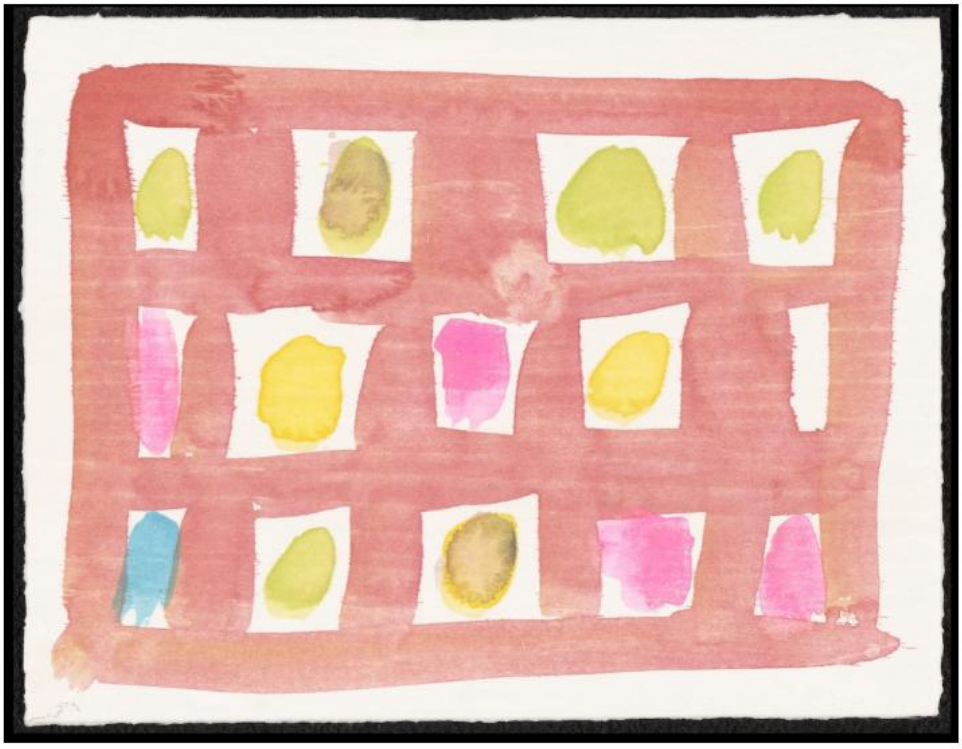
By dividing the square into uneven bands, Whitney structures color in a way that is open to unexpected changes from one tonality to another without establishing an overall rhythm or grid. We see a field of clearly delineated rectangles of color holding each other tightly in place.

By rejecting monochrome and the grid's guarantee of homogeneity, Whitney transformed aspects of Minimalism and Color Field painting into something all his own. He found a way forward at a time when the art world's attention was predictably directed elsewhere. He did so by establishing a different set of constraints than the ones utilized by a previous generation of abstract artists. The other thing that strikes me about Whitney's paintings is their evocation of architecture. The top bands evoke a frieze running along a wall, while the painting's square format resists being incorporated into that narrative. Looking back on the change that took place in Whitney's art in the mid-1990s, it is clear that only after he jettisoned the restlessness of his previous marks, could he attain the density of color and solidity that he had long desired.

In the monotypes, he does something, actually two things, different. One is deliberate and the other arises from the materials he is working with – watercolor and crayon on paper, a print rather than direct action.

First, he incorporates the white paper with the luminosity of the watercolor, as opposed to covering a canvas with the density of oil paint. Second, he uses colors that he cannot obtain in his paintings — watermelon red, magenta, and grape, just to name three. However, Whitney does more than recognize material differences. He establishes different compositions as well as works on formats that are not square, but horizontal, recalling in scale an entablature running along the front of a Greek temple.

The other thing that struck me about the monotypes is Whitney's commitment to playfulness, to getting out of his comfort zone, to avoid mimicking in one medium what he does in another: these are not high-end copies of his paintings. They are not about branding. Rather, they are about testing limits and experimenting with form.



Stanley Whitney, "Untitled" (2017), monotype in watercolor on Lanaquarelle paper, 8 1/4 x 10 3/4 inches

In one of the small monotypes I saw at the studio, Whitney painted a loosely brushed ground of watermelon red in which he set three horizontal rows of unpainted, irregularly shaped rectangles, squares, and trapezoids, four in the top row and five in the middle and bottom rows. Within all but one of the rectangles Whitney laid a brushstroke or two of color, like a fingerprint, ranging from yellow to greenish-yellow to turquoise blue and magenta. Sometimes the color sits inside the confines of rectangle, other times it extends beyond. The wood grain pattern is visible in the watermelon-colored ground. There is no predetermined pattern to the colors he places within the irregular white rectangles. Structure and improvisation have become inseparable. Whitney, who has long stated that he is a process painter, has never settled into a mechanical approach: the hand is always involved, even if that is not immediately evident. In these works, which are slight in scale, the artist's touch is evident without calling attention to its presence. Whitney has never been a theatrical artist.

In the large, horizontal monotypes, which measure 48 x 72 inches, Whitney divides the surface into four horizontal bands, as he does in his square-format paintings. He uses watercolor and crayon to carve the horizontal bands into a succession of rectangles. When he applies a color inside the rectangle, he doesn't completely fill the white space. There are places where the color bleeds, and others where he has gone back into one color with a darker version of the same color. He also uses the crayon to draw lines over the rectangle. The horizontal format compels us to read these elements differently than we do in the square formats encountered in his paintings, while the looping, scribbled lines evoke his work from the 80s and early 90s.

What bears sustained attention is the way Whitney treats each rectangle differently, again without calling attention to his approach. This is true in his paintings, of course, but it is more evident in the monotypes. The density of the color shifts more markedly from rectangle to rectangle. There are places where the paper isn't painted at all, and others where the rectangles are covered with a rapid welter of lines. The rectangles of color bump against each other, jostle for attention, yet remain separate and distinct. No matter how small, Whitney's works establish a tension between the overall structure and the individual elements that never plays out in a predictable way.

As I pointed out earlier, the horizontal format and the division of its surface recall entablatures. While the divisions loosely acknowledge architecture, Whitney's incessantly varied use of color and line within them asserts their individuality. Nothing he does seems programmatic; he literally finds his way across the surface. These airy, luminous monotypes are visual paradoxes, simultaneously structured and open. Watching him work in these formats, in which he has incorporated colors unavailable to him in oil paint and attained a luminosity that we associate with watercolor, not to mention his decision to bring drawing and line back into the mix, I cannot help but think that Whitney will eventually absorb some of what he has done here into his paintings. In the meantime, in his monotypes and other works on paper, Whitney has found new ways to expand the domain of pleasure his work offers us.

The New Yorker
7 December 2018

THE NEW YORKER

ART GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Stanley Whitney

This veteran abstract painter once said, "I always want to use every color in the universe, but then I have to take some out." (It seems an even bet that, someday, he will get around to the omitted hues, too.) In a two-venue show (on W. 24th St. and on Tenth Ave.), two decades' worth of Whitney's loosely gridded, brushy blocks of saturated colors—the focus is solid at one space, scribbly at the other—reacquaint us with his startling dialectic of ravishment and astringency. Arrayed in ranks separated by horizontal bands, the blocks sing arias of optical happiness, but hardly in harmony. Each elbows aside its neighbors to monopolize a viewer's eye. Imagine the instruments in an orchestra playing different pieces of music all at once, at crescendo pitch. How can the result not be cacophony? It isn't. The conductor knows what he's doing, and the work, even as it disconcerts, transfixes and beguiles.

— *Peter Schjeldahl*

The Brooklyn Rail
11 December 2018

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Stanley Whitney: *In the Color*

by Tom McGlynn

LISSON GALLERY | NOVEMBER 3 – DECEMBER 21, 2018

Stanley Whitney, *Untitled*, 1998. Oil on linen, 72 3/4 × 85 1/4 inches. © Stanley Whitney. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

In Stanley Whitney's magisterially unfolding show at Lisson Gallery's dual spaces in Chelsea, the artist presents a cycle of paintings and drawings that resemble a calendar of the conscious, a notational form of painting that checks off time as a series of vividly experienced partitions. Compositions with such evocative titles as *Bird Watching* and *Spring of Two Blues* (both 2018) hold the walls of the gallery with their assured improvisations. The overriding format of these works is an expressively asymmetrical, rectilinear grid animated by high key and contrapuntal color. Think late Hans Hoffman on acid, absent the Abstract Expressionist histrionics. The loose geometric vitality of the Gee's Bend quilts (in a 2013 interview with Lowery Sims, the artist mentions his admiration of the "offbeat, polyrhythmic" musicality of their vivid juxtapositions of color in skewed grids) also comes to mind.

Working alternatively thinly and opaquely with saturated and under saturated oils, the artist lays down his signature stroke within his signature, gridded structures. It is a rather desultory, recursive, thick squiggle that resembles absent-minded doodling and conveys a sense of the painter compulsively filling up his compartmentalized structure (Whitney himself has described his systemic approach to format as allowing him to "make paintings inside of paintings") with sluggish yet insistent brushstrokes that slow down and modify the often jarring juxtapositions of complementary colors (complementary in hue, value, and saturation to varying degrees). Another recurring gesture seems arrived at by drizzling solvent over some areas which gives them a friable fringe. Often these drizzles and drips are much smaller in relation than the overall interior scale of a painting as can be seen in the lower band of *Mingus* (2018). In this way the painter makes the examination of such slight variations an intimate and lighthearted game of discovery, as one is not immediately made to connect the improvisatory part to the cohesive whole. This cohesiveness derives from a serial format that could potentially enervate Whitney's colors and gestures by dominating these subtle variations with its overriding sameness.

Stanley Whitney, *In the Color*, 2018. Oil on linen, 96 × 96 inches. © Stanley Whitney. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

However, the artist clearly refutes the cliché that familiarity breeds contempt by inverting that common conception with a generous range of improvisation in the structural repetition shared by these paintings. A kindred intent can be seen in the works of Sean Scully, with his variable "wall" format, or in Harriet Korman's repetitive cruciform format paintings, which are currently on view at Thomas Erben, and the paintings of Whitney's wife Marina Adams, whose geometric color variations often coalesce loosely into symbolic formats. This shared intent to thematize a format extends a friendly hand of decorum while subverting the idea of mastery of formal address: the instantly recognizable as familiarly egalitarian.[1] In Whitney's case, his format—his decorum—serves as an expansive stage on which he can direct an epic play of color and movement. That color and movement feels strongly influenced by the lyrical palette and fluid compositions of Mattise, as well as the rose and cerulean toned scumblings of Philip Guston, the latter artist who Whitney met in New York in the 1960's.

Stanley Whitney, *Untitled*, 2013. Crayon on paper, 19 × 29 inches. © Stanley Whitney. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

A grouping of seven of Whitney's drawings, each *Untitled* (2013), are featured at Lisson's 10th Avenue space, along with a selection of paintings dating from 1996 – 98 that are composed in a graphic scribble that relate to the more recent drawings. In this portion of the show one can see how the artist treats the process of mark making in a different way than he does when painting. There is a strong resemblance to the ebullient, childlike scribblings of Jean Dubuffet. Whitney, however stands on his own here in these densely overwritten crayon grids. Their manic quality is imparted by the artist revving up his more typically slow stroke into a feverishly circulating overlay of linear color. While still maintained within an approximate grid format, these energetic bundles of crayon lines break the limits of their compartments and point to the energies subsumed within the more restrained gestures in the attendant paintings. They are less lightly composed than barely conducted.

The musician, experimental arranger, and conductor Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris (1947 – 2013) was born a year after Stanley Whitney. Morris became famous for his "Conductions" in which he would direct ensembles of musicians through improvised sections of music. This process, despite its rather unorthodox character, involved a rigorous rehearsal regimen. In a way Morris's "Conductions" are a fitting comparison to the way in which Stanley Whitney's recurring compositional structures allow for an improvisatory "sounding" of color and gesture.

Notes

1. **The aesthetic theory of Jacques Rancière that posits the historical arrival of genre painting and the departure of importance of historical painting as the moment when "all subjects begin to share an equal status . . . the production of works without destination . . . the revocation of the form/matter model and Kant's definition of universality without a concept of aesthetic judgement" might be illuminating here, in terms of Whitney's repetitive habitation of format constituting an abstract genre unto its own universality (if historical painting, in contrast, and to follow Rancière's logic, is limited to its need for a submissive, representational "subject" to form). Quotation from: "The Politics of Aesthetics: Jacques Ranciere Interviewed by Nicholas Vielleszazes" in *Naked Punch*, Jan. 12, 2009**

CONTRIBUTOR

Tom McGlynn

LISSON GALLERY

New York Times
13 September 2017

The New York Times

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER and WILL HEINRICH SEPT. 13, 2017

Stanley Whitney's "Untitled," a drawing from 1989. Credit via Lisson Gallery

Stanley Whitney
Through Oct. 21. Lisson Gallery, 138 10th Avenue, Manhattan; 212-505-6431; lissongallery.com.

In the earliest drawings of this loosely chronological show, visitors can see Stanley Whitney's signature sort-of grid taking shape. (It's an arrangement of irregular rectangles that nods at modernist severity but looks more like the type case for some kind of Apollonian letterpress.) A couple of untitled, monochrome crayon drawings from 1989 contain just a few quick loops and dashes, like klatches of unicellular life-forms ready to make the leap into more complexity. In others, the ovals are filled with multicolored hash marks and scribbles too frenetic to read as separate gestures, but loose enough that the artist can put a clear, clanging blue right on top of a fire-engine red and know that the colors will harmonize, like the instruments of a brass band.

In more recent drawings, Mr. Whitney allows his line to luxuriate across its little compartments instead of struggling to cover them, and nearly every wiggle or meander demonstrates a delicately meditative balance of spontaneity and control. A few untitled

graphite pieces combine a plaidlike grid of angles, crosses and string-theory loops with short phrases, such as “HOOT & HOLLER” or “Dance With Me Henri”; two primary-colored, acrylic marker grids have the complicated luminosity of a sun shower.

LISSON GALLERY

Interview
20 September 2017

Interview

HOW TWO OFFBEAT ARTISTS MADE NEW YORK THEIR OWN

BY PIMPLOY PHONGSIRIVECH
PHOTOGRAPHY ALEXANDER ROTONDO

Stanley Whitney likes to sing at the top of his lungs—an unsurprising fact, perhaps, for those familiar with his work. Music (in particular jazz) seems to not only inspire, but also emanate from Whitney's paintings: shapes swim, colors swarm, and lines tremble in improvised harmony. Known for freehand geometry, irregular grids, and fierce hues that flitter on canvas, the 70-year-old abstractionist spent over four decades delving into color as the subject of his work.

Born in Philadelphia, Whitney was the only member of his family in the arts ("No one knows what happened," he explains. "I fell on my head—I don't know."). Whitney drew on walls, in elementary school, for local newspapers; he attended a small art school in his neighborhood at 10, earned a B.F.A from Kansas City Art Institute, an M.F.A. from Yale, and moved to New York in the late 1960's.

Around that time, Brooklyn-native painter and friend Joyce Pensato was studying at the New York Studio School (which Whitney also briefly attended). "You have the circles and squares," she said to Whitney. "And I draw the ducks and mice."

Pensato's dripping enamel paintings that feature familiar yet eerie faces—Mickey Mouse, Batman, Donald Duck—may seem antithetical to Whitney's solid blocks of color. The pair's careers, however, have shared somewhat similar trajectories. Now, Whitney's paintings have been assembled for *Stanley Whitney: Drawings*, at New York's Lisson Gallery. Pensato, in her signature outsized wraparounds, is set to join a group exhibition at ICA Miami. Both have come a long way from sleeping on hardwood floors...

STANLEY WHITNEY: Should we talk about when we came to New York? Let's talk about that.

JOYCE PENSATO: I've been here. Never got out, thank you. When did you get here?

WHITNEY: I came to New York really in ‘68. I have a new studio in Bushwick now and you grew up there.

PENSATO: I grew up in Bushwick and I will never go back. [*laughs*]

WHITNEY: So I got out of high school and wanted to come to New York to study at the School of Visual Arts in a three-year program.

PENSATO: Did you always feel like this was what you wanted to do?

WHITNEY: Yes, I was always an artist; I didn't know what kind of art but I knew I was an artist. I spent high school looking out the window ... I was a terrible student and just barely got through [*laughs*]. But then when I got to art school, that was a big thing. That was a big change for me. When did you first start showing?

PENSATO: Officially, I think the early ‘90s. I was in group shows at Luhring Augustine and 303 Gallery and my head was very big. Then a French dealer invited me to do my first show in Paris. I came back and asked Luhring Augustine, "When am I getting the ring?" [*laughs*] I can't believe I actually said that with a big smile on my face. And they couldn't make a decision to take the art or not.

WHITNEY: Bet they regret it now.

PENSATO: The ship came back in the last 10 years so ... knock on wood.

WHITNEY: The same thing happened with me. I ended up going to Yale and then I started teaching right away. People were showing but I wasn't—it was a depressing time ... I couldn't get my foot in the door.

PENSATO: That was the hardest thing. People would say, "Where are you showing?" "I'm showing in my apartment!" [*laughs*] Later when I showed in Europe, in Paris, I could be free and develop my paintings. Then, you come to New York and well ... [*pauses*] But I think both our ships came in. This is it.

WHITNEY: That's true. Now we're doing well.

PENSATO: And we're doing what we love and now people are loving it too. I mean, we've been doing the same fucking thing for I don't know how long. You have the circles and squares and I draw the ducks and mice.

WHITNEY: We've been doing it forever. It's funny because even in the drawings show, there are drawings in there that I said, "These are rejects—I'm not showing these." But now they look good!

PENSATO: It's alive and it's fantastic! Also when I think of your work, I look at it and I go, "Oh my God, I've been doing Mickey for I don't know how long."

WHITNEY: You started drawing those at the [Studio] School, right?

PENSATO: I started with pop culture in the ‘70s.

WHITNEY: I read that interview where you said that you didn't want to draw this cast thing—

PENSATO: Still life. Horrible thing.

WHITNEY: And she said, "Well, draw whatever you want." And you go across the street, bought the Mickey Mouse thing, and you drew that.

PENSATO: It was Batman and the other guys and I set it up as a still life. [*laughs*]

WHITNEY: Why did you go to the abstract stuff? Were you drawing one thing and painting something else?

PENSATO: In the ‘80s I was so torn, I was like two different people. I loved to do drawings of the dolls or whatever and I was trying to get a hold of how to make a painting. And when I started to paint, I lost the graphics and they became abstract.

WHITNEY: It's funny about all of that, being so ambitious when you're young and you do so many things. With me I was always doing too many things: I would have a studio and I would have things all over the walls—art postcards that I write would go floor to ceiling. I just had stuff everywhere. I had work everywhere.

For a long time I didn't know how to market my work but I didn't really know how to think about what I wanted from the art world. I wanted to be successful, but I didn't know what that meant. I'd just work and work and work. I think in the long run, it's a good thing.

PENSATO: Well, you have to love what you do and not do what you don't.

WHITNEY: And I love what I'm doing. I just couldn't figure out, really, what that meant in terms of outside the studio. People couldn't figure out for a long time what I was. Like, "What kind of animal are you?" I think that was a big thing. For me, race is a big thing.

PENSATO: You always were about color, too. To me, you always had color.

WHITNEY: I was always about color. People used to come see me and ask if I was from the islands. There was always a lot of color.

PENSATO: To me when I see your work and feel your work, it's music.

WHITNEY: The music was always there because in my house, growing up in Philadelphia—it's a big music town. You go to sleep with the radio on; you wake up with the radio on. Music was always playing—music, music, music. In fact, when I was in junior high, in my neighborhood, the black neighborhood, the most important thing you did when you came home from school was you learned to dance.

I got involved with this guy in my neighborhood [who] played piano-jazz. He had these records—Thelonious Monk, and Ornette Coleman. When I heard that stuff, I was home. This is it. That's it right there for me. Music was always there. My mother once told my wife, Marina, that I was always singing.

PENSATO: Do you still sing?

WHITNEY: Yeah, I sing when I'm on a bicycle. I sing at the top of my lungs—I think no one can hear me. [*laughs*] I always sing.

PENSATO: [*laughs*] You need to make a recording of that.

WHITNEY: Never! [*laughs*] I sing a lot.

PENSATO: Wow, who knew!

WHITNEY: Sometimes I don't even know it. [*laughs*] Music for me is what set my work apart from the other people with the color in the room. I think as an artist or painter, there are so many paintings that you have to bring something else to it.

PENSATO: Well, you bring your heart—yourself.

WHITNEY: What you do in terms of your drawings—you bring so many different things to it. You kind of extend that idea.

PENSATO: It's an emotion. I don't think of myself as a cartoonist, I bring my sense of humor—

WHITNEY: You add a whole new link to the chain, you know what I mean? You always have to add something to it. For me it's the color, the music. It's a rhythm. It's really like an Afro-American rhythm to it. That's the thing.

PENSATO: I'm in a position where I could do whatever I like. And so I'm bringing my whole self, which is my sense of humor.

WHITNEY: I think it's great. I think now we can work. As an artist you want to work to your potential. And I think now we can. Whatever you wanna do, you can do.

PENSATO: Whatever dream you have, you can make that dream happen. [*laughs*] Did you always feel like you were going to make it? Like something was there for you?

WHITNEY: No, I didn't really. When you're young, people think it's a race. People were showing right away and I wasn't. I really got devastated—sick, even! I overate. I just couldn't believe it because I was a big success in art school, and then after art school, nothing happened.

PENSATO: You had to start from the bottom!

WHITNEY: Right from the bottom! I realized you don't compare your career to anybody else because if you do, it's gonna eat you alive.

PENSATO: You get trapped in that.

WHITNEY: Right, and the worst thing about it is that you become bitter. And I thought, "Well, Stanley, you know, you're making a mediocre living, you're not doing bad, you're doing okay." I'm

just going to do my work and have a really good life no matter what.

PENSATO: And you did.

WHITNEY: And I did. And now things worked out, but if they hadn't I'd probably be doing the same thing anyway. Thinking about being older, the money and the comfort is nice. [*laughs*] When you're young you could sleep on a hardwood floor—you could sleep on anything! I could sleep on this floor! Now, I need a comfortable bed.

PENSATO: Once you had a taste of the good stuff, that's it. You can't go back.

WHITNEY: That's how I see it.

PENSATO: Are you having the best time now?

WHITNEY: Of course.

PENSATO: Me too.

WHITNEY: Now I'm in my beautiful studio all the time.

PENSATO: You have a great gallery, you have a beautiful son. Marina is great. Look at you! Look at me! I'm having the best time.

WHITNEY: Yeah, it's really great. Knock on wood.

PENSATO: Knock on wood. [*knocks*]

LISSON GALLERY

New York Magazine
21 August 2017

NEW YORK

Stanley Whitney
Through 10/21
at Lisson Gallery
Devotees of Whitney's brilliant, abstract explorations of color will appreciate this peek behind the curtain into his process. On view will be the drawings in which he experiments with the same structures and shapes seen in his paintings.

LISSON GALLERY

ARTnews
Summer 2017

ARTNEWS

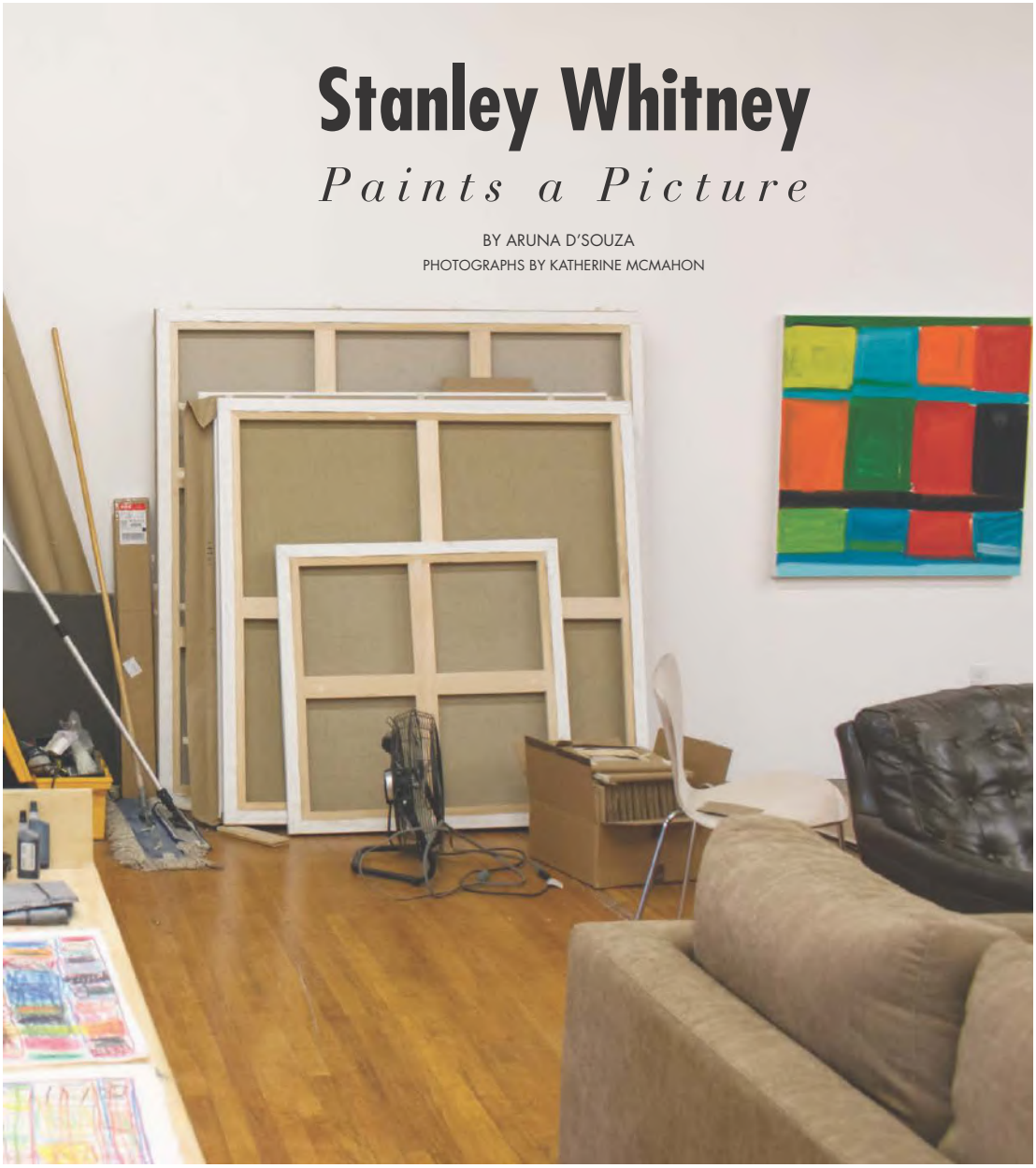
Stanley Whitney photographed in his Ridgewood, New York studio on March 13, 2017

Stanley Whitney

Paints a Picture

BY ARUNA D'SOUZA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHERINE MCMAHON



In 2015 Stanley Whitney had his first solo museum show in New York—"Dance the Orange," at the Studio Museum in Harlem—after a long career, much of it spent under the radar. The exhibition was widely praised as a revelation of sorts, introducing to a wider audience an artist who has been admired for injecting new life into abstract art's potential. The 2017 Documenta in Athens and Kassel, Germany, will give us another chance to see a concentration of Whitney's work. As he was preparing for that exhibition, ARTnews *spoke with him in his studio in the Ridgewood area of Queens, New York.*

A few minutes into my visit, Stanley Whitney gave me a look that can only be described as side-eye. "You're trying to get me to reveal all my trade secrets," he said.

Whitney went on to talk animatedly and at length about his approach to painting, his technique, his art-historical loves, his opinions about today's painting scene—but at the end of the conversation, I realized he'd never answered my first question, about his special alchemy of pigment and base, even though he'd asked and answered many others.

This seems entirely appropriate for a painter whose abstract canvases are at once almost unimaginably forthright in their formal qualities and maddeningly complicated in their optical effects. Like the artist, they don't give up their secrets easily.

It was only after several minutes of standing in front of one large painting—eight feet square—that its effects started to become apparent to me. The composition is simple: rectangles of different dimensions (the largest in the middle tier), stacked four rows high, and divided by horizontal stripes. The palette is riotous, as if the artist's goal were to get as many colors into the painting as he could: lemon yellow, Tiffany and robin's-egg blues, ultramarine, indigo, various shades of red, orange, and coral, and an occasional green show up, along with a sparing amount of black. He does the colored blocks freehand, and some of their edges lean and overlap; you can see where he has taken his brush to their edges, adding an emphatic stroke of paint to keep them from overstepping their bounds. The paint application ranges from flat and brushless to gestural and transparent, but in all cases, the surface is both matte and luxurious. In some blocks you can see where thinned-down paint has dripped, creating a pattern on the surface. There is evidence that some blocks started out an entirely different color from what they ended up—green may have become red, in some patches—but it is more or less impossible to decipher the painting's history from looking at its present state.

The total effect is mesmerizing: your eye refuses to settle at any one spot on the surface, but instead is drawn here, then there, then over there. Gentle, but insistent. You are fixed in place as the painting dances around you.

Whitney had just sent off a batch of canvases to Athens, for the first installment of this year's Documenta, and was now deciding which to send to Kassel for the second installment of the exhibition, opening in June. He pointed to works arrayed around his studio: "I'm thinking I'll take that one for one wall, that one for another, maybe those two for another—or maybe that one can hold the wall on its own. Or maybe I'll put those two together."

"I follow the paintings—the paintings run to the door, through the door, around the corner, and I run after them."

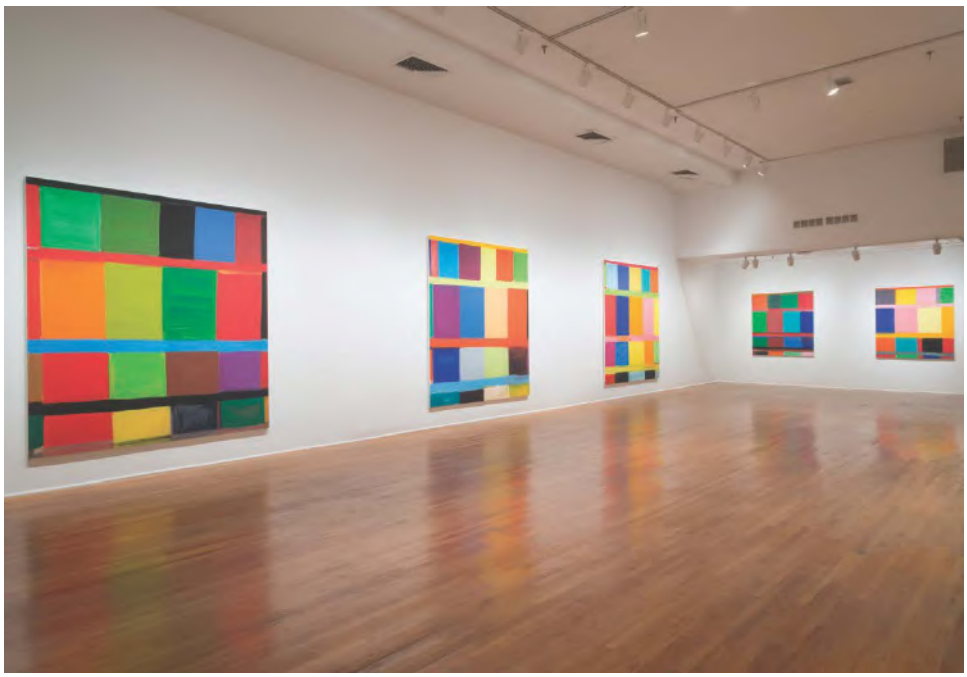
The morphing checklist was not so much owing to indecision as to a keen sensitivity to how the paintings would interact with one another in the space. Ultimately, he said, he'll end up sending more than he'll hang, because "even one can hold a wall."

Whitney called his paintings "demanding," and for all their sheer and almost untoward beauty, the word fits—they are not paintings that can be readily perceived in one eyeful, despite first appearances. But it's not just the viewer on whom demands are made; it's the painter, too.

"They aren't hard to make," he said, with a self-deprecating smile. "But they are hard to see. They're hard for me to see."

Whitney is a self-described process painter. While he may start with a standard structure, his shapes, colors, arrangement, and touch—really, every new painterly decision—are made in response to what came before. His approach is all about contingencies and improvisations, and he speaks in musical terms—rhythms, harmonies, and counterpoints.

The challenge of these works is rooted, in his telling, in the fact that he has staked so much on color.



"The color makes the structure," he said. "I wanted a system that allowed me to lay color down when I felt like it—I wanted nothing to get in my way. When I start these paintings I have no idea what it's going to be. I don't start with a sketch or an idea. I start by laying as much color down as I possibly can. Once I've laid it all out and see what I have, then I start to mentally engage and figure out what I think is working and what I don't."

The painting can happen in one sitting or over the course of several. Often, Whitney doesn't know what he has until the paint—he works in oils on oil-primed linen—has dried. He showed me one canvas that he finished on a Friday and worried about all weekend, because he wasn't entirely sure that a patch of ultramarine was going to end up "sitting" where he put it, optically speaking. It was only when he looked at the painting on Monday that he realized it worked.

"It's a balancing act," he said, pointing at a passage in one of the large paintings leaned against his studio wall. "It's all about the transitions between the colors—the blue shouldn't get away from the orange. That has a lot to do with drawing and scale as much as it does with color. The difficulty for me in making these paintings is, if you fall in love with this red, can you get out of that red so that everything equals out and there's no beginning or no end to it all?"

In describing the process, Whitney makes the paintings sound comically animate—they don't just tell him what to do, they boss him around. "I've always been one to follow the paintings—not that I've always liked where the paintings go. When they started getting less gestural, I tried to take them in a different direction, to take them back to something more gestural, but it didn't work. I follow the paintings—the paintings run to the door, through the door, around the corner, and I run after them. The paintings start doing something, and I think, 'What the hell are these paintings doing now?'"

For all his joking about the paintings' dictatorial attitudes, it's clear that Whitney's method results from a long and intense study of color, and that mastery over his medium brings new challenges. "It's hard to believe that, all of a sudden, you can do certain things. It's shocking, in a way, that things get done before you think they will."

ADAM REICH

ABOVE "Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange", installation view, The Studio Museum in Harlem, July 16–October 25, 2015.

But it's in the continuing contingencies of his medium that he finds the greatest pleasure, and he works hard to figure out how to keep those accidents happening. "I've been painting for a long time. If you put an orange down and then you put a blue down next to it, you can think you know what it's going to do, but you don't actually know what it's going to do until you see it. In a way you want them to behave, but you don't want them to behave too. Because otherwise it's boring."

Depending so much on the process—rather than on a predetermined system—makes the question of when a painting is finished that much more fraught. "I can keep painting them because they don't end—I could have made that line a little straighter, I could have made this bigger, I could have done this, I could have done that, I could move that," he explained, pointing out specific passages in a dark-toned, somber work.

"What keeps you from just endlessly reworking a canvas?" I asked. For one thing, he said, it's a huge risk to keep going: "If I change one part of a painting, the whole thing falls apart. So making a decision to add something means risking everything. I have to decide, because you can't fix it. You have to either tear things down and build [them] up again or leave it alone."

Because of that, he often stops himself even if he has an urge to go on, an act of supreme self-control (sometimes aided by his wife, the painter Marina Adams). "It is what it is," he said. "It's done. The thought's not done, but the painting's done."

The move to square canvases—whose dimensions range from 40 by 40 inches to 96 by 96—was driven by his desire to challenge himself in new ways. "I used to always work horizontally, and I decided to go to the square because it was harder to get the rhythm in the square—it's sort of a non-shape. So to get the rhythm with the square takes me out of the landscape space I had with the horizontal shape and into a more architectural space."

The walls of his studio are lined with gouache-on-paper works, but these aren't sketches—they're instances of working out the problems of painting in a different register, he said, with different constraints and pleasures, adding, "the paper I use is so beautiful, I didn't want to cover it all, the way I do with the paintings. So they breathe differently."

Indeed, in their use of white, the works on paper seem entirely antithetical to the paintings, which refuse any notion of figure and ground. No trace of canvas appears between the colored blocks in his paintings—they are all surface.

"It's easy for white to carry the color—but I really want the color not to rely on white that way," Whitney explained. "I fought the color field for a long time. When I first came to New York and saw what the Color Field painters were doing, I'd put down a gray ground and then put the color on the field. But eventually I just wanted the color—I didn't want the field," he added.

"Until I went to Egypt, I had this idea that if I put the colors right next to one another there wouldn't be any air. I wanted color like Rothko, but I wanted air like Pollock. I didn't realize that the space was in the color. But the architecture of Rome and Egypt taught me that space was in the color, not the color in the space."

The leap from color to architecture puzzled me—it took me some time to figure out that Whitney was talking about the way in which the pyramids and the Coliseum were built out of massive blocks with no interstitial spaces. They were stacked—and recognizing this prompted him, after the mid-1990s, to simply stack his colors rather than array them on an open ground.

"That was the last piece of the puzzle for me. Once I did that I had it," he said.

Whitney is keenly aware of history, including his own. "The great thing about being older is, now you have a history, so now you can go back and revisit your own history," he laughed. He recalled his early years as a painter in New York, where he arrived from Philadelphia in 1968 when he was 22, and the pressure he felt to find his voice as a painter in an art world that he describes as competitive, dogmatic, and intense.

For him, finding his voice would mean grappling with color, but without adopting the puritanism he saw around him.

"When I first came to New York there were a lot of people working with color—[Frank] Stella was working with color, [Kenneth] Noland was doing his stuff," he said, "but I felt they were all giving too much up. They gave the hand up, they were focused on being flat against the wall, what you see is what you get—I didn't like that idea. I didn't want to give up Courbet, I didn't want to give up Goya, I didn't want to give up Velázquez—I didn't want to give up anything. I wanted to paint where I could do anything."

"All those people were one-dimensional—it's like painting was a pie and they each took one piece of it, one thing that they made their own. I wanted the whole pie. Everyone was trying to figure out how to make a painting that wasn't a painting—with a mop or a broom or not with a paintbrush or not with a de Kooning gesture. I found that very limiting. They'd take on one thing. But I wanted to take on many things."

The voraciousness Whitney describes seems to apply, too, to his approach to art history—over the course of our conversation, it's not just the immediate influences of the artists of the 1960s and 1970s that came up (Rauschenberg, Guston, Morris Louis, Mary Heilmann, Al Taylor, et al.), but historical examples like Cézanne, Munch, Morandi, Matisse, and countless others, as well.

When I raised my eyebrow at one of the books open on his worktable—a catalogue of paintings by Munch, a relatively angst-y choice for an artist whose work doesn't wallow in emotion—he laughed. "I never think about anything but the paint. What you paint, your subject matter—you never have any choice about that, that's just who you are. But the question is what you do with it, how you treat paint and color."

Next to it was another book, this one on the subject of African tribal fashion, opened to a photograph of women with elaborate body decoration. "I'm not interested in the exoticism of these images," he explained. "I'm interested in how the women must think about space and time and what things are. How does space and time feel to them, how does the world touch them? That's the thing about the paintings—how does the world touch us? That's what they're about. It has to do with life itself."

Blackness has always been at play in Whitney's career, from his early alignment with Color Field painters, who were, to his mind, "more interested in black culture and jazz and great parties" than were the rest of the largely white New York School scene, to the spotlight in which he finds himself today.

He described his experience as an abstract painter in the mid-1960s as "painting through the war": "I think about it like Matisse sitting in Nice making his paintings while the Nazis were marching down the street. Gorgeous little paintings of women with their clothes off while the war was going on—and you think, 'What the fuck were you doing, man?' But that was me. It was 1966, 1967, and I was painting—I didn't even know what I was doing yet, I was just painting—and the black nationalists would be asking me, 'What the fuck does that do for the race?'

"It was a radical time. I painted in my basement and when the Black Panthers came around I'd say, 'Tell them I'm not here.' [George] Wallace was running for president, the riots happened, things burned, and I was busy painting. Not that I knew what I was painting—I was still trying to figure it out—but I was busy painting. It didn't seem like what you should be doing—I wasn't sitting on the buses or going down South or anything. I was painting. I just felt I had to do it. I couldn't defend my position at the time, but that was the only position I could take."

When I asked whether curators or dealers tried to put him in the category of "black artist" over the years, he explained that his insistence on pursuing abstraction made him unreadable as such, to the extent that many people don't even realize his background. (He tells of at least one collector, himself African-American, who refused to buy a painting when he found out Whitney was black.)

"They can't deal with me as a black artist—they really can't. I don't fit. That's why they got to me so late—they couldn't deal with me. People are always expecting black artists to explain themselves, like I'm some totally different animal. I mean, I do dance better than they do"—he roared with laughter—"but really, it's like [James] Baldwin said: I'm not your Negro. I've always refused that position."

"Americans have a hard time figuring out where the blackness is in these paintings," he continued, "but at the same time, when Africans see the work, they can see the blackness of it—they can see the rhythm, they can see the music, they can see the movement. Basically it's just a dance—get the rhythm, get the rhythm, get the rhythm." ■

Financial Times
02 September 2015

FINANCIAL TIMES

September 2, 2015 6:03 pm

Stanley Whitney, Studio Museum, Harlem, New York — review

Ariella Budick

Whitney's shimmering paintings are poised between order and improvisation

Stanley Whitney's 'Untitled' (2014)

Last summer, the Studio Museum in Harlem turned its spotlight on Charles Gaines, an unsentimental minimalist who deployed numbers as a defence against emotion. Fortunately he didn't succeed; the show shimmered with not-quite-suppressed feeling.

This year, the museum turns to another cool abstractionist, Stanley Whitney, who also underpins every one of his paintings with a grid. Like Gaines, he relies on geometry to organise his passions. Unlike him, Whitney performs this ritual of self-discipline with the eye of an unabashed sensualist. There is no abstemiousness in his square canvases, which he marks off into patches of brilliant colour. His uneven patterns dance, their jumpy vertical beats anchored by thick horizontal lines. Here and there a stroke wanders slightly off course, letting the shapes go pillowy and soft, all within an unyielding structure. He achieves an ecstatic rigour, a rhapsody of rules.

Whitney builds each of his paintings using a methodical procedure. He starts in the top left corner and works his way, plot by plot, through each row before going on to the next. When he reaches the bottom right corner, he's done. In spirit, the result resembles a comic strip without pictures, each frame's scene buried beneath a solid curtain of colour. The textures vary: one block is washy, a luminous skylight covered by a translucent screen; the next is a seamless mass, more a barrier than an opening.

Lined up in the gallery, Whitney's pictures glow like a wall of stained glass windows. Those floating shapes and spectral plays of colour recall Rothko, but Whitney is no seeker of the abstract sublime. He has less lofty — or pretentious — goals. Rothko expressed horror at the notion that his work might be considered decorative; Whitney seems to embrace it. In that sense, he's more like an American Matisse, in pursuit of serenity and uncomplicated beauty. Standing before these cheery lattices, I thought of Matisse's desire for an art "devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter . . . a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue".

Whitney's 'Untitled' (2014)

But Whitney's works are neither sleepy nor static; they buzz and pulsate like the wildly abstract jazz of Ornette Coleman. Whitney has struck an exquisite balance between sturdy framework and fluid improvisation. Patterns are clear, details unpredictable, and complex harmonies come together with deceptive ease. The paintings evoke pages from an avant-garde score, its strange sounds measured out in syncopated colour. Paul Klee, who also stands out in Whitney's artistic genealogy, taught that art, like music, divulges itself in a series of instants. It can be both immediately perceived and progressively understood, unfolding from right to left or up to down, suggesting a past, present and future. A painting contains layers of time, histories packed like geological sediments into a single frame.

Born in Philadelphia in 1946, Whitney earned an MFA from Yale in 1972. His mobility through the art world was hampered by his allegiance to abstraction, not a popular choice for a black painter in those days. Gaines, who is two years older, explained the difficulties facing African-American abstractionists of their generation. "At the time, there was a real interest in discernibly black art, art that's associated with some idea of black culture or black community."

That's a gentle way of saying that African-American artists who followed their visual instincts away from social issues were attacked as cop-outs and traitors, their work dismissed as extraneous to the all-pervasive struggle. Whitney recalls the pressure to put his creativity to work for the cause: "The Black Panthers would say, what are you doing brother? But I felt compelled to paint. I felt like that was really my calling, to paint, but I couldn't say what that was or what the need for it was."

Whitney has found ways to represent his blackness indirectly. He draws, for instance, on the tactile, grid-like patterns of Gee's Bend quilts. The women artists who toil in their small Alabama town compose each quilt more or less from scratch, following a series of internal clues. A shirttail might suggest an adjacent patch of corduroy; a pretty scrap of turquoise cotton might call for the sateen of a pale green negligee. Yet these are not just haphazard products of circumstance and a tradition of making do. They spring from self-assured imaginations. Whitney's canvases adopt the same sort of equilibrium of rules and rupture. The kinship between his work and the quilt lies, he says, in "the way it's a little offbeat, polyrhythmic; the way that things move. Nothing's straight. Nothing's regular. Everything's a little crooked."

A room of watercolours suggests another reading of Whitney's vision — one that may even not even be conscious on his part. In these lightly brushed works, geometric form gently morphs into organic shapes. The bright horizontal lines that furrow his oils here stretch across the paper like long arms reaching around the shoulders of a group of friends. The watercolours, though still abstract, feel thronged with human presence. The familiar grids have come to life, metamorphosing into crowds of cube-headed, square-torsoed people, a joyous community of colour joined in unspecified celebration.

To October 25, studiomuseum.org

The New Yorker
03 August 2015

THE NEW YORKER

THE ART WORLD | AUGUST 3, 2015 ISSUE

SHAPES AND COLORS

Stanley Whitney at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

It's remarkably difficult to find words for the flustering magnetism of the color abstractions by the painter Stanley Whitney, whose first solo museum show in the city, "Dance the Orange," has just opened at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The works present wobbly grids of variously sized and proportioned blocks of full-strength color in friezelike arrays, separated by brushy horizontal bands. Whitney, sixty-eight, grew up outside Philadelphia. He has lived and worked mostly in Manhattan since 1968, with sojourns in Parma, Italy, where he and his wife of twenty-five years, the painter Marina Adams, have a second home. He belongs to a generation of resiliently individualist American painters—Mary Heilmann, Thomas Nozkowski, David Reed, and Jack Whitten come to mind—who have hewed to abstraction throughout periods of art-world favor for figurative and photography-based styles, if not of blanket disdain for the old-fangled medium of oil on canvas. Whitney has earned the passionate esteem of many fellow-painters and painting aficionados; now should be his moment for wider recognition. His recent work is his finest, and the case that it makes for abstract art's not-yet-exhausted potencies, both aesthetic and philosophical, thrills.

A word I've hit on for the Whitney effect is "antithetical," with the thesis being an expectation aroused by gorgeous hues: clarion primaries and secondaries interspersed with flavorful tertiaries and, sometimes, black. The glamour of the work alerts you to an onset of beauty, pending the appropriate feeling and an endorsement in thought. But the juxtapositions and the compositional rhythms of the colors, jarring ever so slightly, won't resolve into unity. What's going on? Does the artist aim at order and miss, or does he try, and fail, to destroy it? It's as if you can't quite get started looking, but you can stop only by force of will. The paintings deny you the relief of

disappointment. At length, beauty does arrive, though clad in its judicial robes, as truth. Your desire and its frustration, impartially sustained, are ruled the work's subject.

As a child, Whitney lived in a black neighborhood in Bryn Mawr. His father ran a small accounting business, and his mother was a secretary with the Philadelphia board of education. Those years, he told me recently, were "very 'Our Gang' comedies"—socially rambunctious but peaceable. All the same, he added, "at eighteen, I was desperate to get out of there." Whitney says that he "was born a painter": he studied at the Kansas City Art Institute and then at Yale, where, in 1972, he received an M.F.A. Music has always been an inspiration. In a catalogue interview with the Studio Museum's former director, Lowery Stokes Sims, Whitney says, "We all practiced our dance steps before we did our homework." Jazz clubs in Philadelphia and New York pulled him into a cosmopolitan bohemia. Analogies between music and painting are often strained, but drawing equivalents in Whitney's style to, say, the harmony-shredding melodies of Ornette Coleman is fairly irresistible. In an interview with *BOMB* magazine, Whitney spoke of the impact that Coleman's 1959 album, "The Shape of Jazz to Come," had on him, when he was still in junior high school. He said, "It wasn't easy. I liked it, it wasn't bourgeois, it wasn't N.A.A.C.P., it wasn't part of this boring conversation about race or integration. It was something totally different—a bigger part of the world. And that was where painters tried to take their painting."

VIEW FULL SCREEN

"Loveroot" (2008).
COURTESY MARTHA AND JOHN GABBERT

In 1968, Whitney had attended an art program at Skidmore College, in Saratoga Springs, New York. His teachers included Philip Guston, who befriended and mentored him—to paradoxical effect. Guston, who was about to abandon august abstraction for raucous figuration, encouraged Whitney to paint street scenes. Whitney took the urging as an expression of Guston's new stylistic bent. But many black artists, at the time, felt pressured to turn to figurative work as a means of representing their racial experience. Whitney, like other first-rate African-American abstractionists, including Whitten and the Washingtonians Alma Thomas and Sam Gilliam, had to come to terms with being regarded, in the art world, as a special case. For the first, struggling two decades of his career, while he supported himself by commuting to Philadelphia to teach at the Tyler School of Art, he showed seldom, and obscurely, with a reputation buoyed mainly by informed word of mouth. He dates a liberating change in the reception for black artists of every stripe to the triumph of Jean-Michel Basquiat as the best of the era's American neo-expressionists.

"I knew I wasn't a storyteller," Whitney says. While grateful for Guston's approval, he veered from tentative emulations of Old Masters (Veronese and Velázquez remain favorites of his) toward the auras, though not the forms, of Barnett Newman's stark Abstract Expressionism, Donald Judd's minimalist rigor, and the chroma of color-field painting. For many years, he concentrated on drawing to develop the kinds of spatial structure, always entailing grids, that he wanted for painting: zones of scribble and glyph elbow one another in pictures that I've seen reproduced. In the catalogue interview, Whitney dates his mature style to the nineteen-nineties, when he travelled in Egypt and lived and taught in Rome. He became fascinated by the still-lifes of Giorgio Morandi, with their exquisitely subtle translucencies of pictorial space. Whitney told Sims, "I realized I could put forms, colors, and marks together and still have a lot of air." He explained that "the space is in the color, not around the color." (Another current show, at the Karma gallery and publishing house, on Great Jones Street, focusses on transitional works by Whitney from that period.) Drawing is an inconspicuous strength of Whitney's Harlem show, which is curated by Lauren Haynes and limited to work made since 2008. Tellingly, several black-and-white as well as some colorful, splashy gouaches feel more investigative of formal issues than the artist's big matte oils do. They provide keys to an underlying deliberation, in the paintings, which lets the colors feel spontaneous and inevitable in orchestrations that look similar at first but distinguish themselves by decisive adjustments of design.

It's as if, for each painting, Whitney had climbed a ladder and then kicked it away. A viewer on the ground can only wonder how he got up there. A picture's dynamics may seem about to resolve in one way: heraldically flat, for example. But blink, and the shapes swarm in and out—a Cubistic fire drill. I had the thought that I can't live long enough to wear out the works' alternate readings. Meanwhile, there are continual rewards of eloquent color. "I always want to use every color in the universe,

International New York Times
16 July 2015
http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/arts/design/review-stanley-whitneys-paintings-reinvent-the-grid.html?_r=0

International New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Review: Stanley Whitney's Paintings Reinvent the Grid

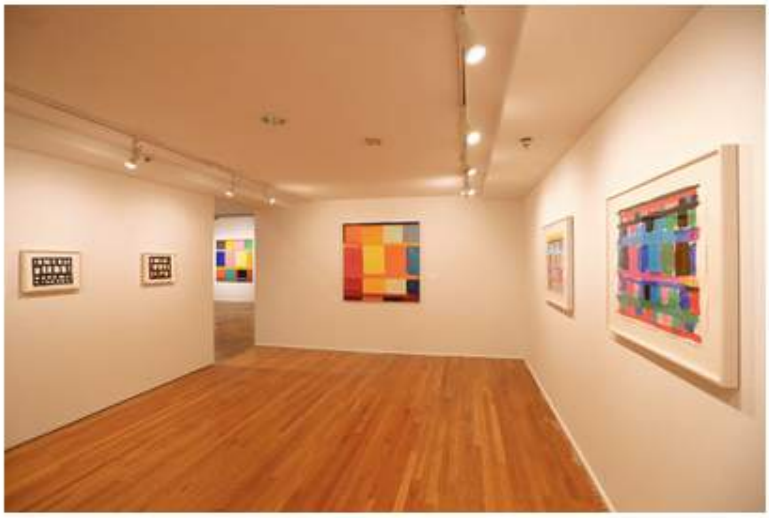
By ROBERTA SMITH JULY 16, 2015

Abstract painting moves in mysterious ways. Sometimes it leaps ahead and challenges us to keep up, as with Malevich's black square of 1915, Jackson Pollock's dripped skeins from the late 1940s, or Frank Stella's shaped canvases and metallic stripes of the early '60s. And sometimes abstract painting seems to stall, its devotees settling for cautiously repeating accepted conventions — monochrome, grids, stripes and so forth.

Stanley Whitney's work "My Name Is Peaches" is at the Studio Museum in Harlem.
Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

But certain artists stick with these conventions until they find themselves in them and show us something new. An example is Stanley Whitney, who, with a freehand geometry and a fierce and extensive range of color, found his way to a painting style all his own, one that neither stops history in its tracks nor repeats it, but has quietly and firmly expanded abstraction's possibilities of both form and meaning.

This much is demonstrated by two excellent complementary exhibitions that combine paintings and works on paper to their great benefit. "Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange," at the Studio Museum in Harlem, features efforts from the last seven years, when Mr. Whitney greatly heightened the power and clarity of his work. And Karma, a gallery and artists' book publisher in the East Village, has mounted a group of little-seen works from the 1990s that give some idea of the diligence that led to the pieces in Harlem, most exuberantly in a wall hung salon-style with scores of drawings in graphite or crayon and tiny oil studies. (For a more detailed account of Mr. Whitney's creative path, a new Karma book reproduces 311 drawings and paintings, dating from 1978 to 2015 — and no text.)



The exhibition "Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange" at the Studio Museum in Harlem includes the 2013 title work, center, surrounded by four untitled paintings, with "My Tina Turner" visible in the outer gallery. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

He has energized abstraction for himself and others by using saturated color and the Modernist grid for their mutual reinvention. In so doing, he has devised an improvisatory, enriched Minimalism, whose hard edges, ruled lines and predetermined systems have been loosened and destabilized, whose colors are more random — all of which gives the viewer an immense amount to look at and mull over.

Mr. Whitney's system is flexible and simple: On square canvases, he arranges sturdy blocks of singing color into vibrant grids, without benefit of straight edge, reinforcing them with at least three horizontal bands. When these bands match the blocks, space is altered by the effect of banners hanging from ribbons. These grids are always irregular, and slivers of color often intrude from the edges, implying other blocks that might yet slide into view, creating a different arrangement.

Another exhibition, "Stanley Whitney," is at the Karma gallery on the Lower East Side. Courtesy the artist and Karma, New York

All of these relationships are in play in every painting at the Studio Museum, but they occur with special complexity in "Dance the Orange," the 2013 work that gives the show its title. Five different oranges crowd an expansive block of yellow, reinforced by horizontal bands of orange that blend — or don't — with them. Their conflagration is balanced on the right by a stack of two blues and a black.

Like all of the work by this African-American artist, the painting encourages an epiphany: Every block of color is different, with its own shape and proportion, as well as its own hue, surface and relationship to the whole. This is a condition rich in visual, philosophical and political implications.

The Studio Museum show features work from the last seven years.
Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Mr. Whitney was born in Philadelphia in 1946 and grew up there. He moved to New York in 1968 after earning his B.F.A. at the Kansas City Art Institute, and he received an M.F.A. from Yale in 1972. As he suggests to Lowery Stokes Sims, a former director of the Studio Museum, in an interview that is the catalog's most substantial text, his artistic development may have been somewhat prolonged by his blackness. He always knew he was a painter, but it took him until the late 1970s to feel entirely at ease with being an abstract one, and until the early '90s to hit his stride. He had to contend with the assumption that, as a black artist, he should tackle social issues head-on. Referring to his blackness and maleness and to "just being a human being," he tells Ms. Sims, "When you're facing a blank canvas, you need all these things to make it something." His totality as a person would be evident in his paintings if they were strong and truly his own.

Mr. Whitney's art has affinities throughout the history of 20th-century painting. His palette echoes that of other African-American artists, in particular the figurative artists Bob Thompson and Jacob Lawrence, both advocates of bright, opaque color, who rarely use white.

Untitled works from 2014. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

The virtual absence of white in Mr. Whitney's work creates a great visual heat and internal pressure — an alloverness that reflects his careful study of Pollock — but, of course, it also has symbolic overtones. It links Mr. Whitney's paintings to textiles that minimize white — Amish and Gee's Bend quilts and African kente cloth — and also to the unrelenting black, green and red of the Pan-African flag. It also reflects a society in which nonwhite skin tones are proliferating, and whiteness, both as a construct and a fact, is changing and shrinking.

Although "Dance the Orange" is a line from Rilke, the titles of Mr. Whitney's paintings sometimes touch on political attitudes or cultural identity: "Radical Openness" and "Unpronounceable Freedom" (at Karma); and, at the Studio Museum, "Congo" and "James Brown Sacrifice to Apollo." Also at the museum, "My Tina Turner" conjures a special, private understanding, and repossession, of a widely celebrated black artist. The exceptionally beautiful "My Name Is Peaches" is titled with a line from Nina Simone's "Four Women."

But Mr. Whitney has many connections to a more mainstream Modernism. His intuitive, improvised color, for example, echoes Matisse's but from within a formal structure closer to Mondrian's. In the catalog interview, he admires Hans Hofmann's bright canvases (the best of which lack white, by the way) and Giorgio Morandi's narrow yet intuitive focus on still life. There are comparisons to be made with Josef Albers's concentric squares of color and also Mary Heilmann's freehand geometries.

You can see the primacy of color emerge in the Karma show. Here, the color blocks are more like irregular stones and covered with bright, contrasting scribbles that evoke graffiti and children's drawings. In the Studio Museum show, which was organized by Lauren Haynes, the associate curator, the blocks have filled out, closed off the background and gone solid. Scribble-free, they are opaque monochromes — smooth and delicate as skin, and matte — although the brush and underlying colors are sometimes visible. Undiluted, with no reflections, color is greatly empowered.

At a moment when looking at a static art object is often dismissed unnecessarily by advocates of performance, participatory or social-practice art for encouraging only "passive contemplation," Mr. Whitney's paintings are opulently interactive and engaging. Instead of "What you see is what you see," Mr. Stella's closed-off pronouncement about his own early abstractions, Mr. Whitney might propose, "What you see is where you start." To speed our journeys, each one different, his paintings provide a nearly inexhaustible cache of provisions.

Correction: July 21, 2015

An art review and schedule information on Friday about "Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange," at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and "Stanley Whitney," at the Karma gallery, misidentified the area of Manhattan where the gallery is situated. It is in the East Village, not the Lower East Side.

"Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange" runs through Oct. 25 at the Studio Museum in Harlem; 646-242-2142, studiomuseum.org. "Stanley Whitney" continues through Aug. 16 at Karma, East Village; 917-675-7508; karmakarma.org.

A version of this review appears in print on July 17, 2015, on page C19 of the New York edition with the headline: Seeing the World in Living Color. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

BOMB
March 2013
http://bombmagazine.org/article/7094/stanley-whitney

BOMB

BOMB — Artists in Conversation

Stanley Whitney
by David Reed

Goya's Lantern, 2012, oil on linen, 72 × 72 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

A painter colleague, Fabian Marcaccio, uses a phrase to describe a certain kind of artist. He says that they are "long runners." Stanley Whitney is a long runner.

Stanley and I have been colleagues for over 40 years, and I closely follow his paintings. We are almost exact contemporaries, both born in 1946. We developed our approach to painting in the '70s, a time when attempts at innovative painting we e under attack from all sides. Traditionalists wanted to go back to what painting had been. Others didn't believe that any kind of painting was possible. Minimalism was an influence on his early wo k and mine. Despite Donald Judd's and Dan Flavin's discoveries in color, minimalism was seen then as a rejection of color. (David Batchelor analyzes this situation in more detail in h s book *Chromophobia* .) Color at the time seemed a false direction, superficial and superfluous to more important concerns. However, it turns out that color was the great opening for painting and other forms of art as well. Color within painting has its own history of meanings, and these meanings can be combined with the new artificially produced colors in our environment, "found color," and experiences of new technologies such as portable electronic screens. Fresh meanings can emerge from these combinations of old and new, meanings that are powerful but hard to articulate.

It takes a lot of experience and self-reflection to begin to understand color. Looking back, it is clear that color was the possibility for the "long runners," those willing to spend time and thought working on this problem. There are many references inside and outside art through Stanley Whitney's use of color, and yet it's always original.

Working on this interview, I realized that Stanley and I have never had our paintings together in an exhibition. I have missed out—I always learn about my work when I see it contextualized by that of my colleagues. How could this have happened in New York where we both live? But this will change this summer when each of us will have a painting in a group show curated by Raphael Rubinstein, *Reinventing Abstraction: New York Painting in the 1980s,* at Cheim & Read Gallery.

David Reed So Stanley, you have that wonderful Bob Thompson drawing up on the wall. I first saw his work in a show at the New School in '69—

Stanley Whitney Yeah, '69. On my way over to the *Village Voice* to check out the listings, because I was looking for a place to live, I encountered this small show of Bob Thompson's work at the New School. I didn't know who he was and I didn't realize he was African American. Seeing his work, I was just blown away, I couldn't believe it—the color, the drawing. Here I was looking at Goya, here at Velázquez, and I thought, That's just what I've been thinking about.

DR It was a memorial exhibition.

SW Done fairly soon after he died. Before I moved to New York, when I was in high school and lived in Philadelphia, I used to come to New York on the weekends. I had decided to go to art school in the Midwest to beat the Vietnam War draft. Going to the Midwest was probably a good thing for me. It got me out of the confusion about the race stuff and the drug thing. I don't know if I would have survived if I had met Bob Thompson. What interests me about Bob's work is his use of color, which really came out of black American music, and his love of European painting. He developed a great combination of Western painting and color as sound stemming from music, especially the music of Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Ornette Coleman. Those were really, really tough times, and I was very confused about art and race, you know—how to really negotiate them.

DR There are very few painters exactly our age, and I think it's because of the draft. It was hard to get a deferment to go to art school in those years. I was at the New York Studio School while on a fellowship through Reed College, so I was safe.

SW How to beat the draft was always on top of your head. Finally, in '68,'69, I got out on a medical deferment because I had asthma as a kid. Late in the war, there were antiwar doctors, and I went to one and got a letter saying I still had asthma. At the draft physical here in New York, I went to the last guy at the table, handed him the letter, and thought, If he says I'm going to be in, I will kick this table over. But he said, "You're out."

DR I had a similar experience. I took the physical in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I had starved myself so I weighed about 90 pounds. When the doctors couldn't draw blood, I was separated out from the others. When we first arrived at the induction center, we filled out forms that asked if we had belonged to a long list of "subversive" organizations. I had been involved in a lot of antiwar and protest demonstrations and had tried to be a conscientious objector, so I was able to check off a lot of boxes including the NAACP and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Being a member of those organizations and my weight kept me out. Like you, I remember going to an officer at a desk and being handed a slip of paper that said I had the 1-Y deferment. The officer threw my forms in a trash can and said he was glad they didn't have to bother with investigating me.

SW Are those the paintings from your catalog? Those are beautiful. The techno quality, the looseness of the brush, it's just so much like your work now—the way you move the brush, the way you make that shape. There's a unique tactile quality to your work. For a long time, I got rid of all the markmaking in my work because I didn't want it to be abstract expressionism. Traveling around Europe by train, I saw graffiti all over and thought, I don't really want to go graffiti. That's why I got rid of the gesture of markmaking. Now I'm trying to rethink what that means. I'm getting more tactile with the painting.

DR For a long time my paintings have been affected by experiences of media: film, video, photography. I distrust traditional tactile surfaces in painting because they are so easily nostalgic. I want to create screens of light but now I find that such screens can incorporate more painterly qualities than I suspected. Painting can retaliate against media from the inside. Painterly surfaces keep appearing in different ways. I have to go with it.

SW I'm thinking similar thoughts about that. I don't force the work. The work doesn't follow me; I'm following the work. It has to be a slow mental and physical process. And that is where printmaking and drawing come in.

DR The prints are just in black and white?

SW Yeah, I'm only rethinking the drawings, loosening up, not thinking about the paintings, and just seeing how that goes.

DR It's strange how our paths have crossed and missed during our years in New York. I wish they had crossed more often. When did you come here for good?

SW I came to New York in '68. I ended up living in Brooklyn, on Dean Street, because Dick Letham, who was my professor in Kansas City, was from Brooklyn and had bought a house. After graduating in '68, a bunch of us lived at his house. I didn't want to live in the Lower East Side. Even with Slugs being the place to go, it was just too rough for me.

DR Who were some of the others who came from the Art Institute in Kansas City?

SW Don Christensen had a loft on 94 Bowery. When I came here, Peter Young's work was everywhere—all those dot paintings. He was a real phenomenon. Larry Stafford had a loft, which Al Taylor later took over. Al and I came to town at the same time from Kansas City.

DR I didn't know Al was also at the Art Institute.

SW Yes, I met Al at the Art Institute in '66. We went to the Whitney program when it was on Cherry Street; Donna Nelson was also there. And I was at the Studio School for a short time. Before Al moved, he had a loft on Canal Street above the 3 Roses, which I took after moving from Brooklyn.

DR We used to call the 3 Roses "The Bouquet." That was a tough bar. They tell me that Blinky Palermo hung out there.

SW It was a fun bar Friday night. It had a great jukebox, and all the workers were partying before they went home. I remember the sign very well. You'd walk home in the winter and see the 3 Roses light blinking and realize you were close to home.

DR There were no lights downtown in those days. One could walk all the way from the village and not see a single light.

SW Exactly. You could walk in the middle of Broadway and there would be nothing. Downtown was totally empty, totally dark.

DR How did it affect your painting to see the work by other artists in New York?

SW I was coming from made-up, figurative work where I'd paint self-portraits and things out of Goya or Velázquez. In Kansas City, all those paintings were right there at your doorstep, in the museum across the street. But I realized I wasn't a storyteller and there wasn't a story I wanted to tell anyway. The paintings got a little too psychological, and it became too complicated for me in terms of what story to tell. Race is a big issue, and I didn't know if I wanted to tell black stories or white stories. I didn't really want to bring all that into my studio. Then Dick Letham showed me a picture of a Morris Louis painting. I saw the pure color, and I thought, Oh, that's really something. I'm gonna go off and find some new heroes. I was trying to figure out how to move into the modern world. My work was changing so I dropped out of the Studio School. I just didn't think that the Studio School was part of the modern world.

DR It sure wasn't. I was at the Studio School a few years before you.

Songbird, 2012, oil on linen, 48 × 48 inches.

SW I didn't really want to hear stories about the abstract expressionists, although now I love to hear them. And so when I came here, I tried to do the Max's Kansas City thing. Although it was hard to get into Max's in those days, at least for us.

DR I went a few times. I was scared to death of that place. I'd heard about the fights at the bar. People wouldn't talk to you if they didn't think you were important. I mostly sat alone.

SW No, they wouldn't talk to you. It was the type of bar where the Hells Angels would come in and start fights—pick on some guy with his girlfriend, beat him up. The artists who were friends with the owner, Mickey Ruskin, had their own table upstairs. Al Taylor and I were two young guys, not two young girls. They didn't really want us to come in. However, sometimes we did, and we would be there all night.

DR And you were just watching?

SW They wouldn't really let you participate. So you could watch artists argue; you know, in those days people still argued about art, whether it be Frank Stella or Andy Warhol or Dan Flavin. I knew the Greenberg people because of Dan Flavin, but I didn't fit into that crowd either. I didn't know where I fit in. I didn't meet a lot of black artists at that point in time. Al Loving, Gerald Jackson, and Peter Bradley I met a little later. Bradley was more connected to the Greenberg world, so I met a lot of other African American artists through him.

DR In 2006, Katy Siegel and I met with you and David Hammons while we were doing the research for our exhibition, *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*. We all sat and talked at Spring Natural restaurant. I hadn't realized until then that Greenberg and the critics and artists around him were more open toward African American artists, for a short time anyway. If I remember correctly, the way you put it was that the door opened in the late '60s and then closed by the mid-1970s.

SW It was the use of color that really brought it into focus and the fact that African American artists were more involved with music. The black jazz musicians were the ones who really opened the door. They weren't the black bourgeoisie. They were the artists. Miles Davis was "the person," he set the tone—what did Miles do, how did Miles dress? I would say that didn't change until Basquiat. As Gerald Jackson once told me, the jazz thing never really happened in a big way, say like the Rolling Stones or rock and roll. It never became a mainstay because it's such difficult music. Even for me. In high school, when I first heard Ornette's *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, it wasn't easy. I liked it, it wasn't bourgeois, it wasn't NAACP, it wasn't part of this boring conversation about race or integration, it was something totally different—a bigger part of the world. And that was where painters tried to take their painting. The scene around Greenberg was open to that kind of black underbelly of America.

DR Did you talk to Greenberg himself?

SW No, I never did. You know, if you were at a party and Greenberg was there with his people in the corner talking, when you went over, they would stop. They wouldn't talk to you. Maybe I was also shy. So I just kind of watched. I don't know if I was happy about it but that's what I could do. When you're young, you wonder, What is this art world and how do I fit in?

DR What kind of jazz interested you?

SW Well, there were all kinds of jazz. I used to go to Slugs, to the Village Gate or Vanguard to hear music. It was confusing since there was a lot of great music. I listened to John Coltrane, but I liked the Beatles, too. But jazz was deeply part of me. Music was always part of my life, before painting. I hung out with musicians but I realized I couldn't be a musician because I couldn't take the lifestyle. I couldn't run around all night, playing at clubs after hours. I wanted to go home to bed. In fact, I like painting best in the morning. Teaching worked out well for me. It gave me financial stability and the time to work. Looking back, the teaching career at Tyler was a good career. I had a lot of good students. I could have walked away a few years earlier but then I taught five years in Rome. I got to Europe, really, through teaching.

DR You have a good career in Europe. It seems to me that your work was appreciated there before it was here. In the '90s, I kept up with your paintings by seeing them at the art fairs in Cologne and Basel, especially at the booth of Galerie Christine König from Vienna.

SW I think New York is really Warhol's town; pop is just bigger here. In Europe, they have a sense of what abstraction is. They have a real sense of painting.

DR Yes, conceptual aspects of painting are more accepted there. I've also had more of a career in Europe. But I consider myself an American artist, so it's a conflicted situation.

SW They like the New York School in Europe and they have a sense of its history. I think I do New York paintings. I grew up being a real American painter.

DR I love that anyone can come to New York from anywhere and decide, for themselves, to be New Yorkers. In the same way you can decide to become part of the New York School, and then, through an appreciation and understanding of the visual culture here, be able to grow and hope to contribute new possibilities.

SW In those years, the infrastructure was very different. Artists moved into downtown warehouses, housing was cheap, people had two or three lofts, and you could find a job. I worked for a carpenter; I worked at the Strand Bookstore; I worked at Pearl Paint. If your rent was $150, you could make that in a week. Then, when SoHo became official, it became harder and harder. And that's when the teaching thing came in. I didn't even look; people offered me jobs, and I took them. In those days, they were looking for women and minorities to teach. That's how I got into Yale's graduate school. I always say, "A lot of black people went to jail, and I got to go to Yale." And because I went to Yale, I became visible.

DR Living was cheap, but it was tough to be a painter in the '70s in New York. It was assumed that painting was impossible.

SW Yeah, one of the last types of "young painting talent" exhibitions was *Ten Young Artists: Theodoron Awards* at the Guggenheim in 1971. After that, things kind of shut down. It felt like, well, we have enough to work with. We don't need much else. And for me, as an African American, it felt like there was a quota.

DR I was struck to hear you once say how much you learned from Donald Judd.

Studio view, 2013.

SW Well, the thing about Judd—when I first saw Barnett Newman's works, he was the hot painter in New York at that time. I had no idea what to do with his paintings. It's not like looking at a Cézanne or a Velázquez or a Goya. You have a color and a line down the middle or the side. I liked it, but what do I do with it? Judd was able to take that idea from Newman and turn it into sculpture, as a way of abstract thinking. Judd's late work with color and structure opened the door for me. His work was everywhere, and its architectural, classical quality and its simplicity interested me. It's like going back to BC, you know, basic stuff.

DR To be provocative, I've sometimes told students, "No good modern painting has more than three or four colors." This isn't true, but I've found in my own painting, that as I add more colors, I get into trouble. I try to keep down the number of colors. You do just the opposite.

SW Well, I always want to have every color of the universe in the painting—if that's possible. When I was ten years old I went to a little art school in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, where I'm from. They had us do a self-portrait. I felt really weird—I was little, I was poor (in a very rich area), and I was the only black kid in the class. So I used every color on the palette. The teacher loved it, but my parents said, "What is that?" I never went back to the class. I had the color, but I wanted to be like everyone else.

DR You didn't go back because you felt your use of so many colors made you different from the other students? And your parents gave you a hard time about that?

SW Well, they had no idea about art; they didn't know where the art came from for me. You have to understand, my parents grew up not even being allowed to enter a museum because of their skin color. My older brother was a boy scout, so I thought that it was just too weird for me to go to art school. My first year in art school, I saw a Cézanne painting and I just fell in love with it. And that was it. I knew I was going to paint. In high school, I painted these really colorful paintings, but it took me a long time to figure out how to make color a subject matter.

DR What amazes me about your color is that your paintings are not decorative.

SW I agree, and that's one thing I had to work hard on. You have to put color in the right space, and that's where drawing comes in. The Greenberg people didn't draw. I didn't realize that until I went to graduate school at Yale from 1970 to '72. I was in Al Held's drawing class, but we didn't really draw; we would talk all the time, and Al would tell stories. But when I got out of school, I would try and paint and the painting wasn't going anywhere. I realized that I had to go back to drawing. I started with these pen-and-ink drawings. I had the color in the paintings, so in the drawings I worked just in black and white. I wanted to put a mark down that I couldn't erase. I was also inspired by Van Gogh's pen-and-ink drawings but I didn't work from a landscape. I just worked on the space and on the structure. It was like working on the bare bones, the skeleton, not relying on color. That's when I realized that, for the color not to be decorative, it had to be in the right space. So I just worked on the space.

Just Like Ornette, 2010, oil on linen, 96 × 96 inches.

Then, when I was in Italy and Egypt in 1992, I understood that the last piece was density. Seeing the Colosseum and the Pantheon in Rome and then in Egypt, the pyramids and temples, I realized that I could stack the color together.

DR Your paintings are always special networks of connections between the colors that are next to each other and in vertical and horizontal sequences. To make this all the more complex, the relations between colors work in different ways when moving along horizontally or vertically. And on top of this, there's not one red, but five reds in the painting. So the reds in a painting have their own separate network of connections. A viewer can connect colors that are alike, or connect pairs of colors or colors along a vertical or horizontal band, or connect same-sized rectangles or rectangles related by transparency or by brush marks. You can look at each of your paintings in a million different ways.

SW Painting is like music. When I first saw Cézanne, I thought, This is like Charlie Parker, only painting. It's like polyrhythm, a beat and a beat and a beat and a beat, like call and response, you know— in the middle of the beat there's another beat. Cézanne was key and a big source for me. Going back and forth—the music, the color, the rhythm, the beat.

DR Your connection between Cézanne and jazz is really beautiful. I've spent hours looking at the late multicolor Judd sculptures, trying to figure out his system or decide if there even is a system. Your paintings have that same effect on me.

SW The only system I have really is top, middle, and bottom. Even if I wanted to make a red painting, I couldn't do it. I have to let the color take me wherever it takes me. Sometimes I paint little paintings, not like studies, but just to keep working. And sometimes I go, Oh, I can turn this into a big painting. But then I can't do it because I have to be totally open to wherever the painting takes me. The idea is that color cannot be controlled and that it has total freedom. One color can't overpower another color, you know. It's very democratic, very New York.

DR Because it's very hard to articulate what colors mean, color is a great opportunity for painting to give us a way to process our experiences in the world. We don't have the language to describe colors, much less their meanings. So color operates on a more unconscious level than other aspects of the world. All that meaning is there and will come out, even if we don't know how to say what it is.

SW If you go to, say, Senegal, or India, or South America—of course, there's a lot of color in these cultures traditionally. But even here in the States or in Europe, people are now much more open to color. There's lots of color in TV shows, in sports. The black culture that has been the underbelly of America is now right there, front and center—color is there. So, for me, it works out great. But I have to say, the reason I paint only a certain size is because some people are like, "Oh, too much color."

Nigerian Smile, 2012, oil on linen, 72 × 72 inches.

DR Both of our work comes out of '70s minimalism. In those days it was thought that you had to eliminate color to be considered a serious artist. Color was seen as decorative or emotional.

SW I think artists have tried to explore color but not in a real worldly sense. When I say that I mean that if you go to India, there are worlds and worlds of color—10,000 shades of orange on the street. I really want the hand to be a part of it. I want color to shift if I put it on thicker or thinner. I want the human touch.

DR The specificity of your colors often comes through transparency and layering. You couldn't get those colors in another way. Glazing or transparency is sometimes considered to be old-fashioned, when in fact, it's just the opposite. Transparency is the way most modern colors are created, both in terms of technology and material. Transparent colors are the new colors.

SW That's true. You know, I love to look at Courbet, or Velázquez, or Goya, it's like the red slash. I want to have some of those elements in my painting. I never really paint subject matter, I just like what the paint is doing. So for me to go look at, say, Velázquez is really important. I want those ideas about color, light, and touch—I just want all those aspects of painting.

DR You're chasing a particular kind of subject matter that only comes through the color.

SW If I look at Courbet's *Portrait of Jo (la belle Irlandaise)*, I might be thinking about the way he painted that hair, the weight of the color. Or, in a Manet, I might look at what the white in the dress is doing. He changed the touch, and it's a cloud. Those are the things that interest me and that I'm trying to adopt. But it took me a long time to get those kinds of colors. Earlier, I painted marks in a gray field. I couldn't make a lot of color. I couldn't really control the space.

DR Sometimes I imagine what it would be like to go to another planet and be the first to see unexpected, unknown colors. Stanley, perhaps we can take that trip while still on this planet.

Tags: Color, Jazz, Race, Minimalism, Vietnam War, Downtown New York, Abstraction, african american culture