

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Stanley Whitney

Press Packet

Velasco, David. "Project: Stanley Whitney." *Artforum* 59, no. 1, September 2020, pp. cover, 138–41.

Fyfe, Joe. "Stanley Whitney's Machine for Painting." *Hyperallergic*, July 13, 2019.

Bahn, Jenny. "Space Within the Colour: In the Studio with Stanley Whitney." *Cereal Magazine*, March 2019, pp. 150–55.

Mantello, Joe, Stanley Whitney, and Boris Kachka. "Joe Mantello and Stanley Whitney on the '80s and the Evolution of Their Work." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, March 24, 2019, pp. 84, 86.

D'souza, Aruna. "Stanley Whitney: Paints a Picture." *ARTnews* 116, no. 2, Summer 2017, pp. 88–93.

Ballard, Thea. "Stanley Whitney." *Modern Painters* 27, no. 11, November 2015, p. 80.

Budick, Ariella. "Stanley Whitney, Studio Museum, Harlem, New York: Review." *Financial Times*, September 2, 2015.

Panero, James. "Gallery Chronicle." *New Criterion* 34, no. 1, September 2015, pp. 50–52.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Shapes and Colors: Stanley Whitney at the Studio Museum in Harlem." *The New Yorker*, August 3, 2015, pp. 66–68.

Smith, Roberta. "Review: Stanley Whitney's Paintings Reinvent the Grid." *The New York Times*, July 16, 2015.

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Indrisek, Scott. "Studio Check: Stanley Whitney." *Modern Painters* 25, no. 4, April 2013, pp. 42–43.

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# ARTFORUM

SEPTEMBER 2020

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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







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# HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews Weekend

## Stanley Whitney's Machine for Painting

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

by Joe Fyfe

July 13, 2019



"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.

Fyfe, Joe. "Stanley Whitney's Machine for Painting." *Hyperallergic*, July 13, 2019.

Oehlen 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



"Stanley Whitney / Yves Klein: This Array of Colors" (2019), installation view, Galería Cayón, Menorca, Spain; "Good News Day" (2019); photo: Joaquín Cortés



"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

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.

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.



"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)

Fyfe, Joe. "Stanley Whitney's Machine for Painting." *Hyperallergic*, July 13, 2019.



"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)

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 paint 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.

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.

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.

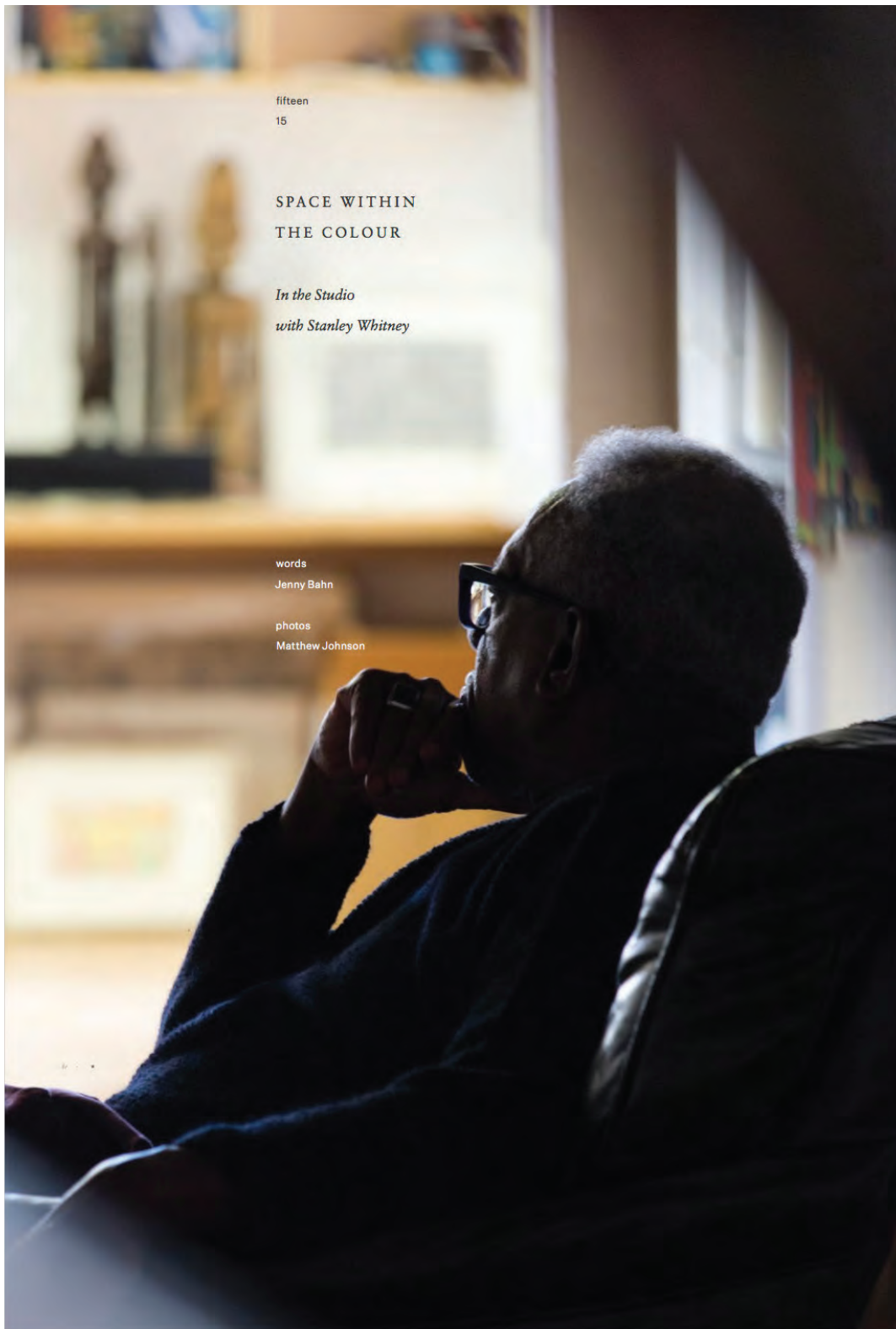
But in each work, he manages to disperse the historical singularity that is so often accompanied by a direct address to the viewer. The paintings at this point seem to embody the transitory. They also draw on a wide range of known events within the history of painting, but still return maximum playful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

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# C E R E A L



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15

SPACE WITHIN  
THE COLOUR

*In the Studio  
with Stanley Whitney*

words  
Jenny Bahn

photos  
Matthew Johnson

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.

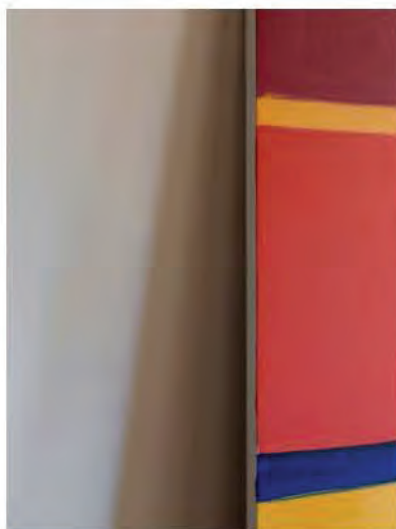
The exact shape of the day's work is determined by a rhythm beyond Whitney's control. "Sometimes I come in here and I can get into it right away. I'm just on. It flows out of me." Other times, it's less easy — this is something Whitney has learned to not see as a negative. "Early on, you realise there 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."

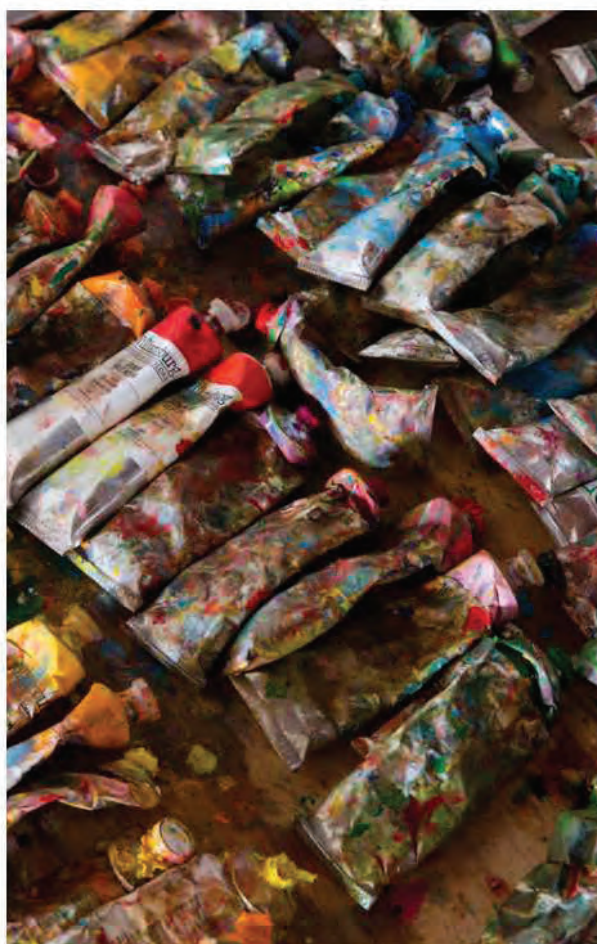
Whitney's studio is dim but joyful. Large, finished canvases sit stacked against one another on the floor, awaiting shipment. A series of a dozen, smaller works hang side by side on a wall. Beneath them sit published books and paper drawings. Everywhere the eye travels, it meets a grid. The familiarity 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

PEOPLE

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

## Joe Mantello & Stanley Whitney

By Boris Kachka Photograph by Sean Donnola



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.

84 T: THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

**JOE MANTELLO (above, left):**

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.

**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,

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

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. ▣

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*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

'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.' — Joe Mantello

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,

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

**Boris Kachka** is the books editor of New York magazine and the author of the forthcoming guide "Becoming a Veterinarian." His home is in Brooklyn. For this issue, he facilitated a conversation between the theater director Joe Mantello and the artist Stanley Whitney (ADMIRATION SOCIETY, Page 84).

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# ARTNEWS



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

D'souza, Aruna. "Stanley Whitney: Paints a Picture." *ARTnews* 116, no. 2, Summer 2017, pp. 88–93.

# 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

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

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."

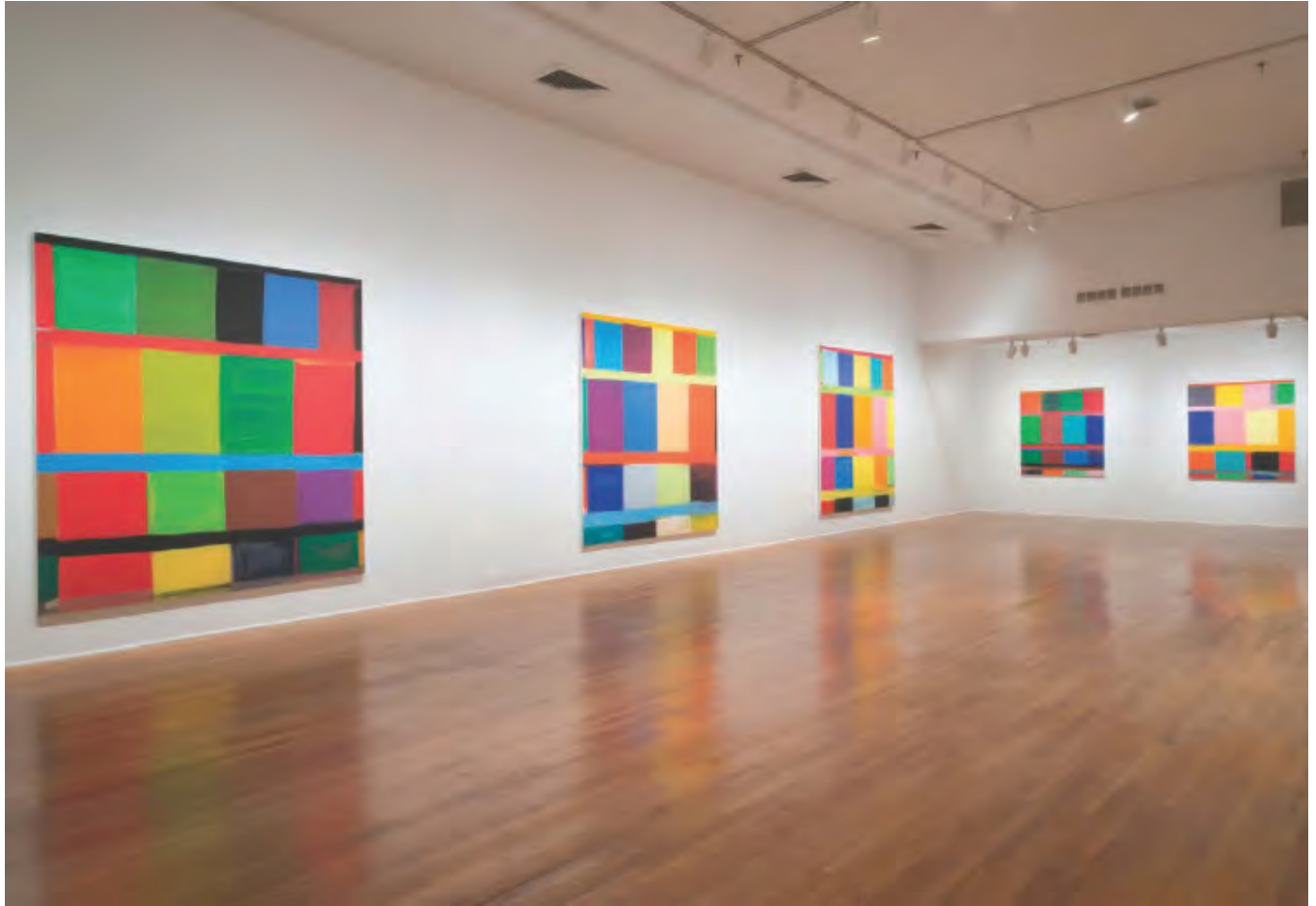
The morphing checklist was not so much owing to indecision as to a keen sensitivity to how the paintings would interact with one another in the space. Ultimately, he said, he'll end up sending more than he'll hang, because "even one can hold a wall."

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.”



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." ■

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# MODERN PAINTERS

## REVIEWS

### NEW YORK

## Stanley Whitney

*Studio Museum in Harlem // July 16–October 25*

ALL PRESENT debates around “zombie formalism” aside, Whitney’s lush abstract paintings, borrowing their deceptively simple architecture from the grid—energetic squares of color arranged in rows that are then bound by horizontal bands stretched across the canvas—make an extremely strong case for the ongoing generative potential of the medium. Philadelphia-born Whitney is some four and a half decades into his career as a painter, during which he has been primarily based in New York, but his exhibition at the Studio Museum is, shockingly, his first major institutional solo show in the city. The 28 works here were made between 2008 and 2015, and include black-and-white gouaches on paper alongside his larger, denser oil canvases, a range demonstrating the layers that comprise his refined style.

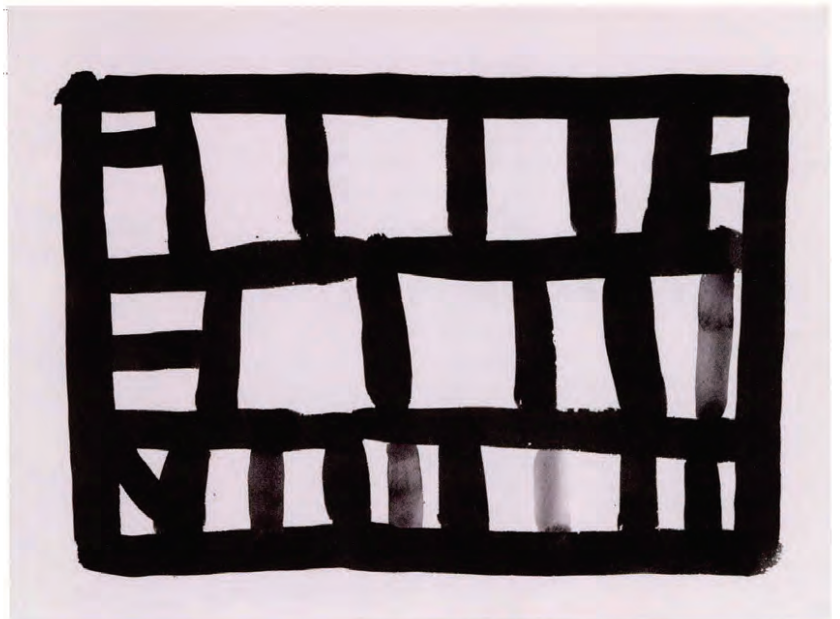
**Stanley Whitney**

FROM TOP:  
*Untitled*, 2014.  
Black gouache  
on fabiano  
paper, 11 x 15 in.

*Dance the  
Orange*, 2013.  
Oil on linen,  
48 x 48 in.

The boxes that make up Whitney’s grid are rhythmically disheveled, uneven in size and giving off a sequential quality that reinforces for the viewer a closeness to the artist’s process and hand. Rich and

immediate as his palette is—walking into the exhibition’s main room, the space nearly hums with energy—viewers are rewarded, too, for looking close. Colors





quietly bleed together at the margins: An uncharacteristically icy third of a square in the bottom center of *My Name is Peaches*, 2015, contains smears of grass and lilac over a cloudy sky blue, while in *Hearts and Brains*, 2012, a brushstroke of lime scrapes to reveal lemon beneath. *James Brown sacrifice to apollo*, 2008, is all sunset-colored stripes, but energy is pushed into jittery strata at its edges, with layers of magenta, beige, kelly green, and bright orange. Should this all begin to overwhelm, smaller-scale oil-on-canvas works, such as the gold-tinged *Lightnin*, 2009, bring the experience down to a more intimate scale.

Whitney's work possesses a near-synesthetic quality, particularly given his titles, which reference the likes of Nina Simone and James Brown; the arc of his combinations is easy to compare to the nonlinear sonics of, say, a jazz composition, volume amplifying and pulling back, notes conflicting and intermingling as the eye traces a series of blocks. Informal like a favorite record, Whitney reminds us that there's real pleasure to be had in looking.

—Thea Ballard

FROM TOP: STANLEY WHITNEY AND TEAM GALLERY, NEW YORK; THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

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## FINANCIAL TIMES

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

Whitney's shimmering paintings are poised between order and improvisation



Stanley Whitney's 'Untitled' (2014)

**Ariella Budick** SEPTEMBER 2 2015

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".

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



Whitney's 'Untitled' (2014)

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.

# The New Criterion

## Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

Stanley Whitney is a painter of color, a double identity that has long complicated his role in the story of art. As an abstract colorist, Whitney has drawn from an array of influences to arrive at a signature style of stacked square fields interwoven with rhythm, a synesthetic syncopation of visible music. As a black painter born in Philadelphia in 1946, one who places aesthetic above sociological concerns, Whitney has never fit within the assumptions of what an artist of his identity is supposed to do or be. “Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange,” a must-see exhibition of his recent work now at the Studio Museum in Harlem, curated by Lauren Haynes, helps to right this wrong.<sup>1</sup> It also reminds us of the joys and sorrows, the feeling for art that has been missed, and the many artists who, for too long, have been marginalized, sidelined, and left out of view because of the politics of identity.

Whitney’s enigmatic paintings do not answer questions. Instead they question answers. As Whitney explains in his catalogue interview with Lowery Stokes Sims: “The thing about reading abstract art is that you have to be open, you have to bring a lot to it. You have to be willing to admit you don’t know.” In the loft-like main gallery of the Studio Museum, his work absorbs easy assumptions and returns a complexity of emotions.

<sup>1</sup> “Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange” opened at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, on July 16 and remains on view through October 25, 2015.

Whitney explores these feelings through a similar but not serial framework. His structure can call to mind Josef Albers, who had been a teacher of deep influence at Yale University, where Whitney earned his MFA in 1972. Like Albers, Whitney also composes his color in blocks, mostly large and square, but next to rather than on top of one another, with softer edges and with fields of various transparencies that can at times reveal their brushwork and the colors beneath, while others float fully on the surface.

Whitney’s blocks rest on strips of color that divide his canvases vertically into shelves of varying height, often compressing in size the lower he goes, as though pushed down by the weight of the blocks above. Whitney explains how these divisions in part emerged from a stay in Rome, when he visited the Etruscan museum in Volterra: “I saw how they just had everything stacked up—all these funeral urns just stacked up, and I said, ‘You know, Stanley, you’re going to stack the color and let the magic be in the color.’” A series of small untitled black gouaches on paper, included in the Studio Museum exhibition, isolate these divisions.

Just as his compositions are pressed top to bottom, Whitney’s colors also squeeze side to side, distilled through another set of untitled gouache studies on paper that get cut down to square when translated to canvas. “Right now I’m looking at a lot of Paolo Veronese’s painting and it’s funny because when I look at his paintings, I think about weight,” he explains. “I think about transitions. I think

about the color. I think about how well he draws. I think about how something sits, how something touches.”

Like the best studio painters who came of age in the post-minimalist scene of the 1970s, Whitney has a keen sense for what edges of color can do: whether colors lay on top of one another, or push and pull, or rub together with an energized friction. He also considers how colors balance together, weaving edges to help counteract a single sense of front and back, figure and ground, dominance and recession. “I worry more that my work has good transitions and that there’s a lot to look at and that you can get in and out of the spaces,” he says. “In other words, if you fall in love with that blue, your eye can get out of that blue and move to the red or the pink. I think more about transitions that way.”

Whitney explains how his sense for composition emerged from another Italian. Through Giorgio Morandi, he says, “I got more into an architectural kind of space. . . . I liked how quiet they were.” For this abstract painter, the buttercream softness of Morandi’s paint handling comes off as a more direct relation than the overt gestures of Abstract Expressionism: “The gesture is in the paint itself, like laying the paint down—whether it’s thick or thin.” Further influences include Velázquez (“the way he touches the canvas”), Hans Hofmann (“he opened a lot of doors for people”), even Egyptian art: “I realized I could put forms, colors and marks together and still have a lot of air. The space was still there. This was important because I thought previously that if I put colors or forms next to each other that I would lose the space. Then I realized that the space is in the color, not around the color.” Whitney’s color fields weave together like the warp and weft of textiles. Quilting traditions, such as the folk quilts of Gee’s Bend, the site of a former cotton plantation in Alabama, find another resonance in his work: “To me color is all about being tactile, so definitely it’s about textiles. . . . I feel like I’m from there.”

Beyond these examples, Whitney’s greatest influence, as with most abstractionists, has been Cézanne, whom he calls a “revelation.” Like Cézanne, Whitney weaves his colorful

compositions into synthetic wholes that shake apart as much as they come together. They vibrate and sing with a synesthetic soul that goes to the heart of modernist abstraction and that has always been rooted in music. Cézanne, explains Whitney, “used color in terms of music. I felt his color had great rhythm. I was thinking of Charlie Parker. It was then that I could see that what you bring to the paintings is your culture. There is something about my work in terms of the rhythm it has—a kind of polyrhythm.”

Several of the titles of the large paintings on display, one up to eight-feet square, allude to music and stimulate these aural-visual associations. The painting *James Brown Sacrifice to Apollo* (2008), with its yellows, oranges, and reds, feels like the lights of a hot stage bursting with music and motion. *My Tina Turner* (2013), with its blocks full of pink, conveys a more feminine lead. *Dance the Orange* (2013), the title of another painting as well as the exhibition itself, comes from Rilke’s *Sonnets of Orpheus*, which include the synesthetic exhortation to “Dance the flavor of this fruit as we experience it! / Make of the orange a dance.”

The attraction of Whitney’s work is undeniable, exhibiting a seriousness of purpose and a mastery of form that have come out of a lifetime of studying, feeling, and experimenting with paint on canvas. “I became interested in abstraction by the openness of it all. I saw endless possibilities,” he says. Yet despite its endless possibilities, his work has been far less known and shown than it deserves, living mainly through the work of his students at the Tyler School of Art. Part of this reflects the general resistance that all abstract painters now face from a museum establishment that largely insists on tapping the superficial veins of art rather than mining the deeper riches that the market chooses to ignore. “To be a signature abstract painter in the twenty-first century is a really odd thing,” Whitney admits.

Still, it must be said that abstract artists who are black now find themselves in a particularly odd isolation: in a world that claims to embrace the voice of black artists, their art is at odds with what an overwhelmingly white art

establishment believes the voice of black artists should be. "I don't think there's anything more complicated than the subject of black artists and abstract art," says Lowery Stokes Sims at the start of her interview with Whitney. "There is always this idea that it's not connected to the black experience."

Singular black artists have long been out of step with what is supposed to be "black art" and the culture and institutions that promote it. During the Harlem Renaissance, Romare Bearden wrote vociferously against the identity of a black arts movement and the bad results of good intentions behind those promoting it. "There are quite a few foundations that sponsor exhibitions of Negro artists," he wrote in "The Negro Artist and Modern Art." "However praiseworthy may have been the spirit of the founder the effect upon the Negro artist has been disastrous," he continued, singling out the poor quality of exhibitions of black artists produced by the Harmon Foundation. "Its attitude from the beginning has been of a coddling and patronizing nature." In "The Negro Artist's Dilemma," Bearden expanded this critique and wrote against painting what others might expect of him: "It is not my aim to paint about the Negro in America in terms of propaganda, [but] to paint the life of my people as I know it."

For many black painters, a turn to abstraction, away from overt statements of race, paralleled the rejection that white painters expressed against the realist demands of the Left. "Proletariat art is poor art for poor people," declared Arshile Gorky to Willem de Kooning at the height of the WPA and amidst the prerequisites of the American Scene. Likewise Norman Lewis, perhaps our most overlooked abstractionist, defiantly rejected what he considered to be hopeless racial themes for the transcendence of paint on canvas. Considering he died in 1979, it is astonishing to realize that Lewis is only now receiving a major museum treatment with "Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis," opening this November at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, an institution that

more often than not proves the exception to the rule in the art world.

Last year, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston similarly broke ranks from the party line with a two-part exhibition called "Black in the Abstract" organized by the senior curator Valerie Cassel Oliver, who set out to show the "abstract practices of black artists as a continuous trajectory as opposed to an anomaly or a phenomenon that ebbs and flows over time." This exhibition, along with the tireless advocacy of galleries such as June Kelly and Michael Rosenfeld, among others, has attempted to turn the tide by exhibiting the earlier generation of black abstract artists, such as Charles Alston, Harold Cousins, Beauford Delaney, Lewis, Alma Thomas, and Hale Woodruff, alongside the more recent work of McArthur Binion, Frank Bowling, Edward Clark, Melvin Edwards, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, James Little, Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, William T. Williams, and Jack Whitten, on through their many descendants.

Yet the marginalization of these artists has by and large only intensified as Black Power and white mandates have come together to promote a narrowing sensibility for racial identity. Stanley Whitney recalls a time back in Kansas when the Black Panthers questioned him for painting abstract. "Those were hard times because I really wanted to paint," he remembers. Similarly we now see institutions such as the Whitney Museum, purportedly dedicated to American art, promoting artists with cartoonish appeals to identity politics while excluding modern masters like Lewis. This not only does a disservice to art history. It is also grounded in an assumption that black artists have nothing to say beyond addressing their superficial racial identity. It implies that transcendence from one's immediate circumstances is the prerogative of white artists alone. It says that the work of black artists cannot be imbued with multiple levels of meaning (as in the case of Whitney, who it should be noted is not in *the Whitney*).

The brilliance of Stanley Whitney is his ability to capture life not in black and white but in full color: "I realized that color was the subject in and of itself."

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# THE NEW YORKER

THE ART WORLD AUGUST 3, 2015 ISSUE

## SHAPES AND COLORS

*Stanley Whitney at the Studio Museum in Harlem.*

By Peter Schjeldahl

July 27, 2015

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.



Whitney's "My Name Is Peaches" (2015). The title is a line from the 1966 Nina Simone song "Four Women." Photograph by Tobias Hutzler

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



Courtesy Martha and John Gabbert

"Loveroot" (2008).



Courtesy Emily Todd Collection

"My Tina Turner" (2013).

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.”

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-lives of Giorgio Morandi, with their exquisitely subtle translucencies of pictorial space. Whitney



Courtesy Frederick and Merle Fish Collection

*"Dance the Orange" (2013).*



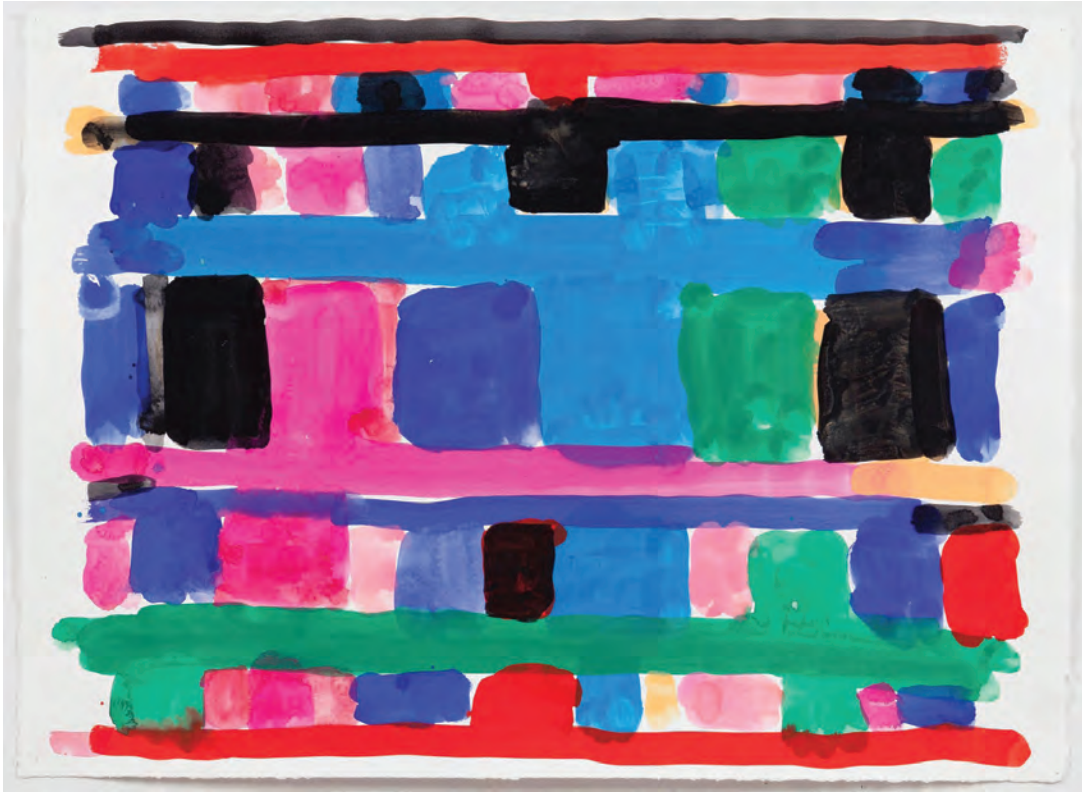
Courtesy Team Gallery

*"Untitled" (2013).*



Courtesy Team Gallery

*"Untitled" (2014).*



Courtesy Team Gallery

*"Untitled" (2014).*

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Shapes and Colors: Stanley Whitney at the Studio Museum in Harlem." *The New Yorker*, August 3, 2015, pp. 66–68.



Courtesy Team Gallery

*"Untitled" (2014).*

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, but then I have to take some out," Whitney told me. His palette runs to tube-fresh cadmiums, ultramarine, cobalt, and ivory black, often tweaked in mixtures, layered, or inflected with brush

marks that enliven without feeling gestural. Oranges and yellows star in the justly titled “My Name Is Peaches” (2015). Darkling blues and greens brood in “Loveroot” (2008). It is possible to focus on individual blocks, as discrete monochromes that bestir sense memories. In fact, digressive moods may be the most immediate payoff of Whitney’s art.

“Dance the orange” is a twice-repeated phrase from the fifteenth of Rainer Maria Rilke’s fifty-five “Sonnets to Orpheus” (1923), a work that Whitney says he finds reliably inspiring. The poet starts from the intense, fleeting first savor of an orange—the fruit, not the color. He implores some girls to express it in dance (in Edward Snow’s translation): “Create a kinship / with the pure, reluctant rind, / with the juice that fills the happy fruit!” Analogous kinships abound in Whitney’s art: tastes, scents, sounds. They are ajumble, cacophonous. You may raid their pantry, fixing on a color and having it transport you in memory to a place of natural or cultural epiphany. The correlatives will be as evanescent as the surprise of the orange. (“Wait . . . , this taste . . . Already it’s escaping,” Rilke’s sonnet begins.) Then you will be back to floundering in the amplitude of Whitney’s instrumentations.

**T**he show is a coup for the Studio Museum and a tribute to its sophistication and forcefulness, under the directorship of Thelma Golden, as a mirror and a generator of African-American perspectives on contemporary art. A group of activists, artists, and philanthropists opened the museum in a loft space on upper Fifth Avenue in 1968. In 1982, it moved to modest but elegant quarters on West 125th Street. Golden, who had been a trailblazing curator at the Whitney Museum, succeeded Lowery Stokes Sims as director in 2005.

The Studio Museum has grown in importance throughout its history, but it has done so lately at a faster pace, in tandem with greater racial integration in the wider art world. Accordingly, it’s welcome news that the museum has just embarked on a project to replace its current building with a larger one, designed by the architect David Adjaye. What the museum will be like in its next incarnation is anticipated by the stirring Stanley Whitney show. ♦

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## The New York Times

# Review: Stanley Whitney's Paintings Reinvent the Grid



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

**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.

Smith, Roberta. "Review: Stanley Whitney's Paintings Reinvent the Grid." *The New York Times*, July 16, 2015.

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.)

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.



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



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

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.

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.

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.

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.

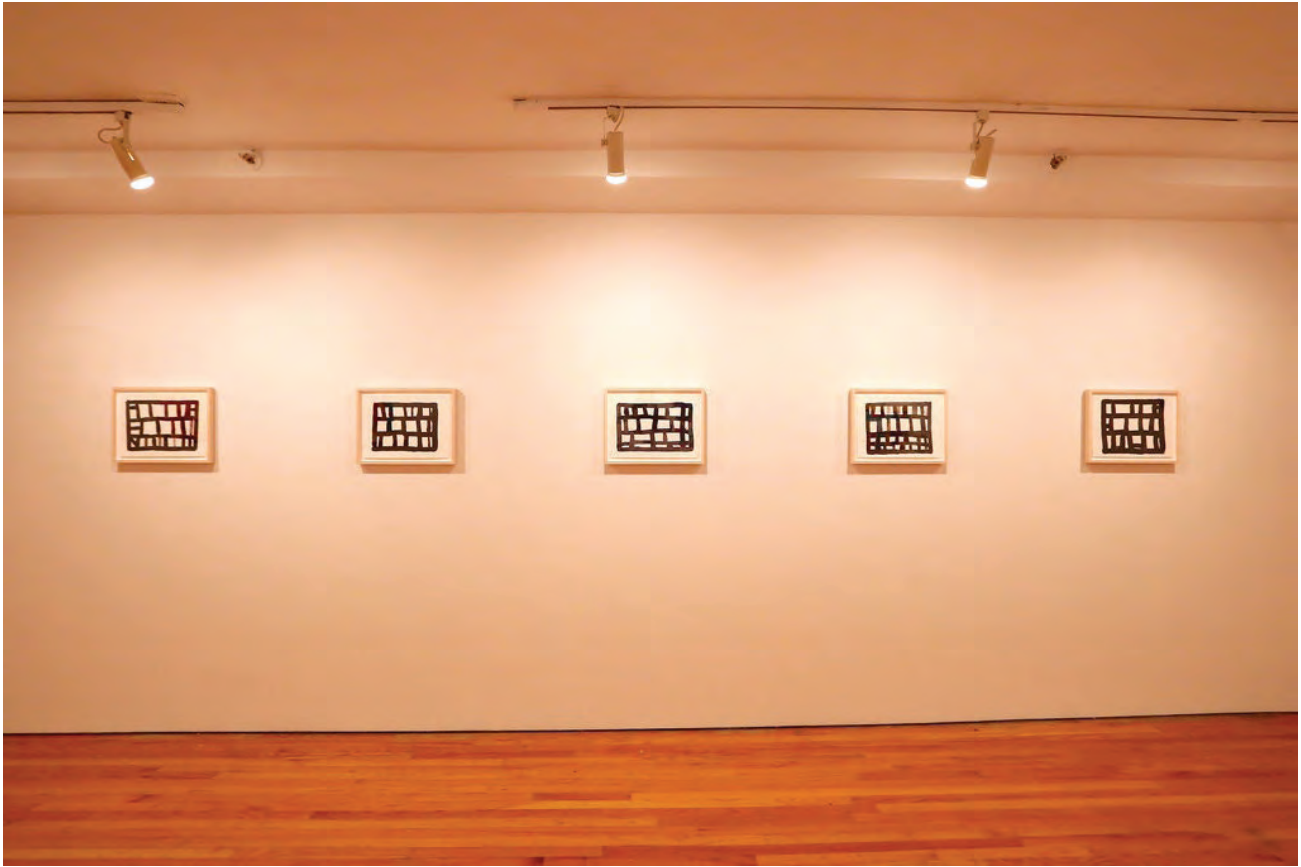
Although “Dance the Orange” is a line from Rilke, the titles of Mr. Whitney’s paintings sometimes touch on political attitudes or cultural identity: “Radical Openness” and “Unpronounceable Freedom” (at Karma); and, at the Studio Museum, “Congo” and “James Brown Sacrifice to Apollo.” Also at the museum, “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.



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

Smith, Roberta. “Review: Stanley Whitney’s Paintings Reinvent the Grid.” *The New York Times*, July 16, 2015.



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

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](http://studiomuseum.org). “Stanley Whitney” continues through Aug. 16 at Karma, East Village; 917-675-7508; [karmakarma.org](http://karmakarma.org).

Smith, Roberta. “Review: Stanley Whitney's Paintings Reinvent the Grid.” *The New York Times*, July 16, 2015.

# BOMB

## Stanley Whitney by David Reed

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 were 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 work 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 his 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

**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 When I went to the draft physical, there was not a single white person in the place. I didn't wear any underwear on purpose. I walked up nude and they said, "Put your pants back on." And everyone laughed at me. There were guys in there with gunshot wounds and all kinds of things, and they were taking everybody. I was really worried. But luckily I had my letter from the doctor. I just wasn't going to go. It's funny that my son's first trip abroad with his high school was to Vietnam. I'm paying to send my son to Vietnam! But back to Albuquerque, were you painting there?

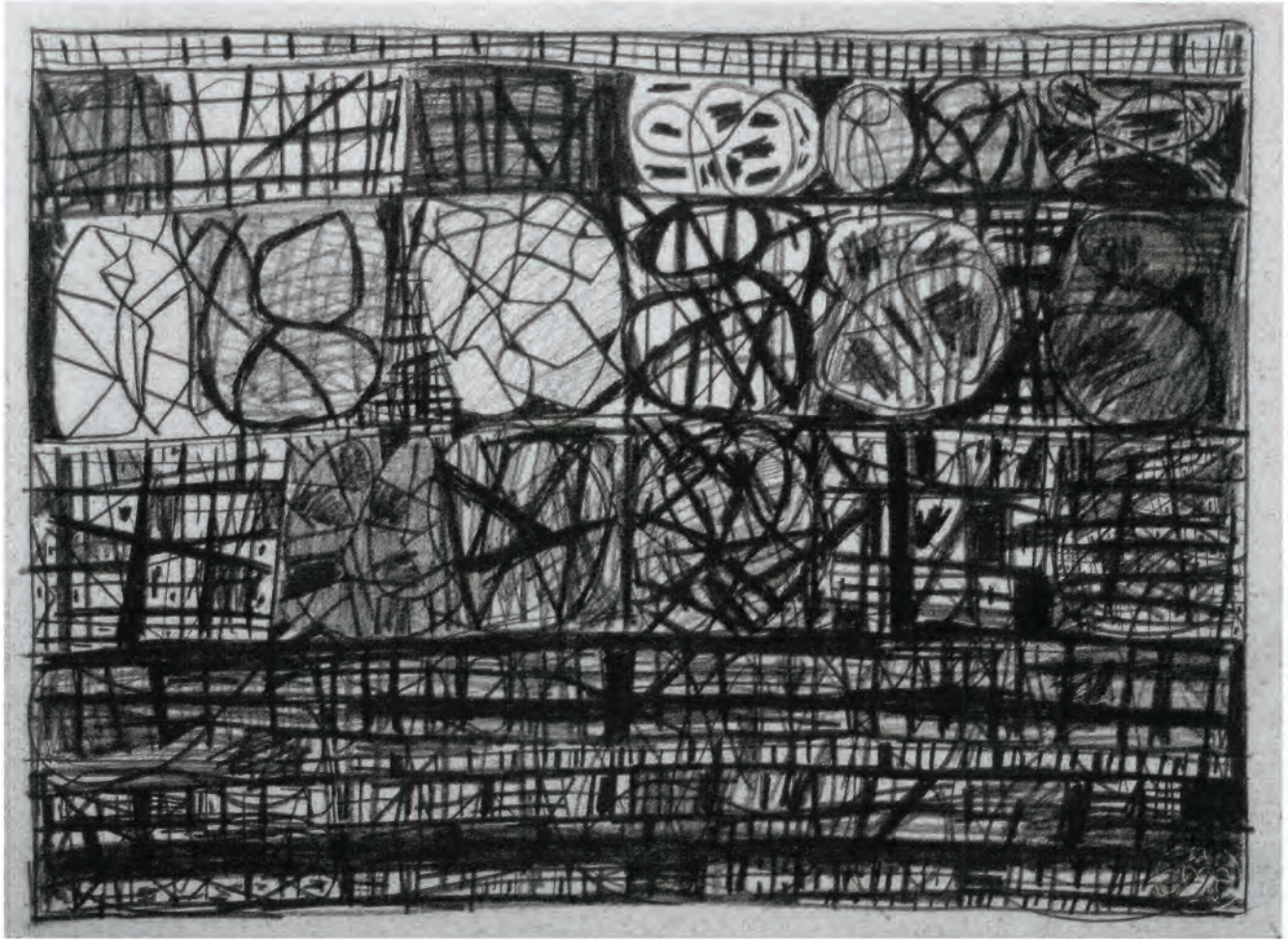
DR I was living near Abiquiú, New Mexico, on some land in an adobe house that I had bought from Georgia O'Keeffe's adopted son. I was painting the landscape.

SW Are those the paintings from your catalog? Those are beautiful. The techno

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



*Untitled*, 1998, graphite lead on paper,  
22 × 30 inches.



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.

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?

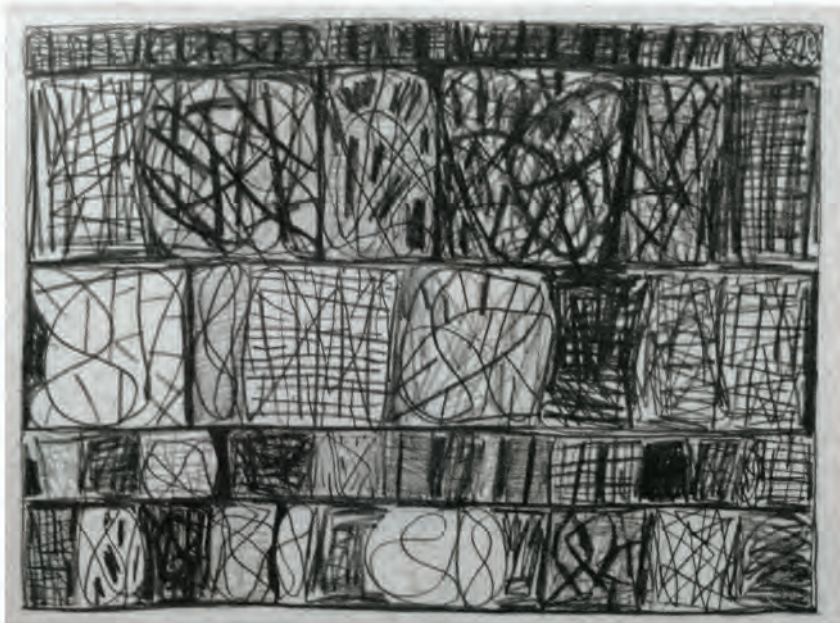
**SW** Yeah, I'm only rethinking the drawings, loosening up, not thinking about the paintings, and just seeing how that goes.

**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



*Untitled, 1998, graphite lead on paper, 22 x 30 inches.*

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.

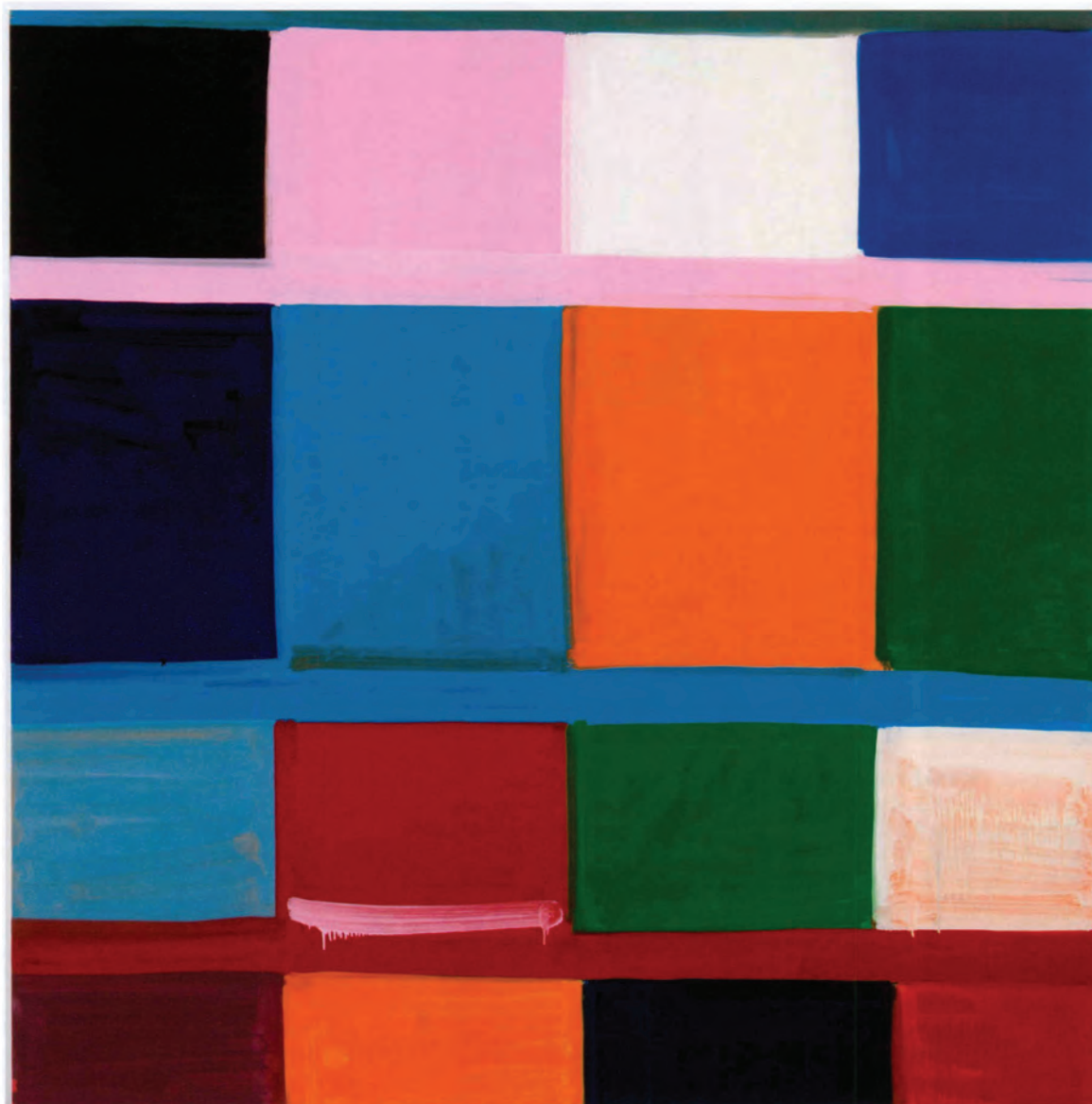
**DR** How did it affect your painting to see the work by other artists in New York?

**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.

**SW** I didn't really want to hear stories

*Nigerian Smile*, 2012, oil on linen,  
72 x 72 inches.



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



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 mainstream 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.

SW Well, the thing about Judd—when I first saw Barnett Newman's works, he was the hot painter in New York at



*Studio view, 2013.*



*Just Like Ornette, 2010, oil on linen, 96 x 96 inches.*

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.

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.*"

**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.

## MODERN PAINTERS



# Stanley Whitney

TEXT BY SCOTT INDRISEK | PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTINE LARSEN

"I NEVER THOUGHT I'd paint colored squares," Whitney says, describing his signature abstract canvases. "I feel like you don't have much choice about what you paint, in terms of subject matter: It's who you are." The artist has lived and worked since 1973 in a cavernous loft on Cooper Square in Manhattan; he took the space (formerly used to house small birds for sale) for about \$200 a month. Now, after extensive renovations, it serves as one of two places where Whitney paints: In the summer, he decamps with his wife and son to a converted stone barn in

Parma, Italy. Whitney spent five years teaching in Rome, and the influence of Italian architecture found its way into his work; his later travels in Egypt provided "the last piece of the puzzle, the idea of density," he says. An artist who paints within fairly strict parameters, and generally in a large-scale format, Whitney explains that what's important to him is evidence of a human touch on the canvas; transitions between the blocks of pigment; and, of course, color. "I like things to be natural and a little off," he says. "I want them to be sit-down paintings. People

can live with them, and they change."

The studio is adorned with pieces by former teachers (Philip Guston), students (Trenton Doyle Hancock), and peers (Robert Rauschenberg, David Hammons, Al Taylor). Whitney works surrounded by stacks and shelves of books, an extensive music library, and examples of African art (a barbershop sign, a beaded container, wooden masks) that piqued his aesthetic interest. During our visit, the artist was gearing up for two shows, one opening March 29 at Galerie Albert Baronian, in Brussels, the other on April 11 at Team Gallery, in New York. **MP**



#### B&W DRAWINGS

"I have always liked color and wanted to make color my subject matter. But these allowed me to really work with space. I was thinking of Van Gogh's drawings, with the idea of each area being a different 'color.' Even though they're black-and-white, every area has a different kind of richness."



#### BOOKS

"My day is spent in the studio either painting or reading, everything from novels to history to art biographies. I don't read much science fiction but someone turned me on to a black sci-fi writer, Octavia Butler, who's very interesting. Reading keeps me in shape and mentally tough, which helps with the work."



#### HANDMADE PLATES

"The artist Steve Keister made these in collaboration with Mary Heilmann. The mold is from a case for speaker covers, and he put legs on them. They become these Mexican plates that are great for a dinner party, with all these different colors, and you can stack them when you're done."



#### NATIVE AMERICAN BOWL

"A friend of mine in Arizona dug this up and glued it back together. I love that you can see how the artist dipped the ink; it goes from dark to light, because the ink is running out. You can feel that someone made it. I want that in my painting, the idea of the human hand, that you can see it was touched."



#### STUDIO WALL

"(1) The small paintings keep me fluid. I have to do them to make the big ones. (2) This Matisse is so difficult, it's struggle, struggle, struggle. Even the little turtle. It's such an ugly painting, but so beautiful. (3) An image of a Cézanne portrait I've had since graduate school. (4) A photo of Africans that I love because of how dense it is. It's a density I want in the paintings. (5) I made David Hammons give me his heart and sign it. (6) Al Taylor came to New York around the same time I did in the late '60s. This is one of the first 'Puddles' he did. (7) A picture of my son when he was 2 or 3 by Judy Linn, a really underrated photographer."