

An abstract painting featuring a grid of various colored squares and brushstrokes. The colors include orange, lime green, pink, green, blue, red, black, yellow, and dark blue. The brushstrokes are visible, giving the painting a textured appearance.

# Stanley Whitney

MCCABE FINE ART



## Stanley Whitney

**b. 1946, Philadelphia, PA**

**Lives and works in New York and Parma**

Stanley Whitney has been exploring the formal possibilities of colour within ever-shifting grids of multi-hued blocks and all-over fields of gestural marks and passages, since the mid-1970s. His current motif, honed over many years, is the stacked composition of numerous saturated colour fields, delineated by between three to five horizontal bands running the length of a square-formatted canvas. The cumulative effect of Whitney's multicoloured palette is not only one of masterly pictorial balance and a sense of continuum with other works in this ongoing series, but also that of fizzing, formal sensations caused by internal conflicts and resolutions within each painting. Taking his cues from early Minimalism, Color Field painters, jazz music and his favourite historical artists – Titian, Velázquez and Cézanne among them – Whitney is as much an exponent of the process-based, spatially-gridded square in art as Josef Albers, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin and Carl Andre.

Stanley Whitney was born in Philadelphia in 1946 and lives and works in New York City and Parma, Italy. He holds a BFA from Kansas City Art Institute as well as an MFA from Yale University and is currently Professor emeritus of painting and drawing at Tyler School of Art, Temple University. Select solo exhibitions include 'Focus – Stanley Whitney' at the Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX (2017) and 'Dance the Orange' at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015). Whitney has been included in many prominent group exhibitions at, among others, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, (2018); documenta 14, Kassel/Athens (2017); the American Academy of Arts and LeGers, New York (2017); Camden Arts Centre, London (2016); Logan Center for the Arts, Chicago, and Contemporary Art Museum Houston (both 2014); Belvedere, Vienna (2012); The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (2008); Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach (2007); Art in General, New York (1998); Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania (1991); The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (1981); and Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield (1976). He is the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship (1996) and Pollock-Krasner Fellowship (2002) and won the first Robert De Niro, Sr. Prize in Painting (2011) and the American Academy of Arts and LeGers Art Award (2010). Whitney's work is included in public collections around the world, including the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

## Stanley Whitney

b. 1946, Philadelphia, PA

Lives and works in New York and Parma

### Education

1972	MFA, Yale University, New Haven, CT
1968	BFA, Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, MI
1966	Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus, OH

### Public Collections

A.A.M. Architettura Arte Moderna, Modena  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY  
The Alford Collection of Contemporary Art at Rollins College, Cornell, FL  
Arts Museum, Winterpark, FL  
The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, UAE  
He Art Museum, Foshan, China  
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY  
Magazzino d'Arte Moderna, Rome  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY  
The McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX  
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, TX  
The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY  
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON, Canada  
Moderna Museet, Stockholm  
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO  
Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, KS  
Palazzo Magnani, Reggio Emilia, Italy  
The Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, CA  
Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA  
Perez Art Museum, Miami, FL  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY  
The Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, NE

The Smithsonian Museum, Washington DC  
The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY  
The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY  
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA  
The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT

### Awards, Grants and Fellowships

2011	First Robert De Niro Sr. Prize in Painting
2010	American Academy of Arts and Letters Art Award
2006	Temple University Great Teacher Award
2002	Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship
1996	John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship

### Solo exhibitions

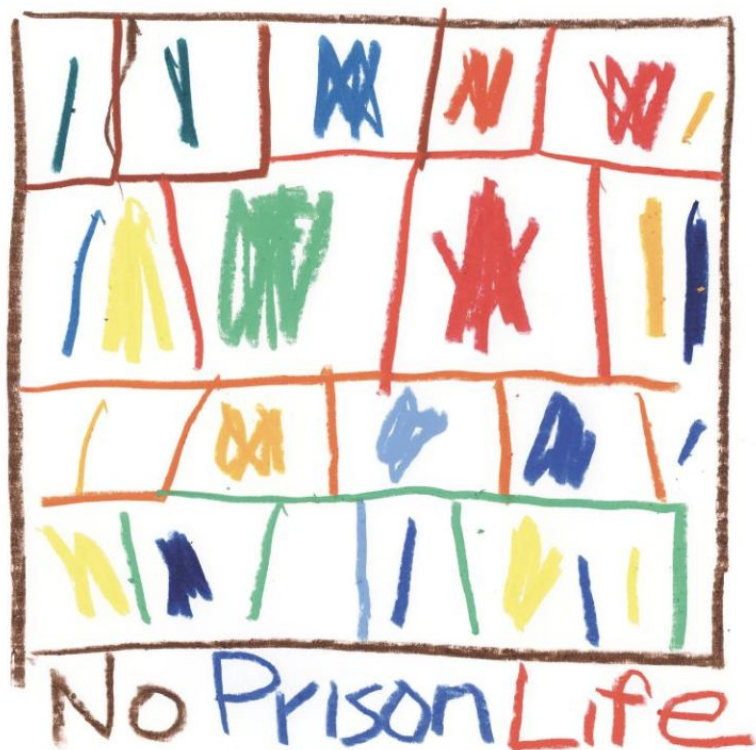
2020	'FOCUS: Stanley Whitney', Lisson Gallery, East Hampton, NY, USA 'No to Prison Life', Online Exhibition, Lisson Gallery 'Bertacca Paintings', Gagosian Gallery, Rome, Italy
2019	'Stanley Whitney: Afternoon Paintings', Lisson Gallery, London, UK
2018	'Stanley Whitney: In the Color', Lisson Gallery, New York, NY, USA 'Stanley Whitney, Paintings', Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin, Germany
2017	'Stanley Whitney: Drawings', Lisson Gallery, New York, NY, USA
2016	'Focus – Stanley Whitney', Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX, USA 'Here Comes the Sun', Nordenhake, Stockholm, Sweden 'Radical Times', Lisson Gallery, London, UK
2015	'Dance the Orange', The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY, USA 'Stanley Whitney: Paintings', Lisson Gallery, Milan, Italy 'Stanley Whitney', Karma, New York, NY, USA 'Team Colors', Team (bungalow), Venice, CA, USA 'Paintings', Galleri Opdahl, Stavanger, Norway
2013	'Other Colors I Forget', Team Gallery, New York, NY, USA 'Goya's Lantern', Albert Baronian, Brussels, Belgium
2012	'Yellow, Noon and Night', Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin, Germany 'Lei to Right', Team Gallery, New York, NY, USA 'Six Paintings', Omi International Arts Center, Ghent, NY, USA





2011	'Reverie', Salon Zurcher, New York, NY, USA 'Two Colors', Kathleen Cullen, New York, NY, USA 'Refocusing the Spotlight: 21 American Painters', Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, NY, USA 'bodybraingame', Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, IL, USA 'The VeneMans', Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI, USA	2002	'Quiet As It's Kept', Christine König Galerie, Vienna, Austria 'The Annual: 2002', National Academy Museum, New York, NY, USA
2010	'2010 Ceremonial Exhibition', American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, NY, USA 'Ecstatic Structure', Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, KS, USA 'The Jewel Thief', Tang Museum, Saratoga Springs, NY, USA	2000	'Gallery Artists', Bill Maynes Gallery, New York, NY, USA 'Universal Abstraction', Jan Weiner Gallery, Kansas City, MO, USA
2009	'Cave #1', Gresham's Ghost, New York, NY, USA 'Infinite Patience: James Drake, Kunie Sugiura, Stanley Whitney', Haunch of Venison, New York, NY, USA 'Einarsson, Rhodes, Whitney', Team Gallery, New York, NY, USA	1999	'Drawings', Jan Weiner Gallery, Kansas City, MO, USA
2008	'Present Tense', Spanierman Modern, New York, NY, USA 'Sparks', The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, USA	1998	'Crossing Lines', Art in General, New York, NY, USA 'Bang on a Can' (benefit), GAGA Gallery, New York, NY, USA
2007	'The Color Line', Luanda Triennial, Luanda, Angola; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY, USA; Centre international d'exposition de Larouche, Québec, Canada; Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa; Galerie Fokus Wien, Kunstraum, Innsbruck, Austria 'Horizon', EFA Gallery, New York, NY, USA 'Something About Mary', Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA, USA 'Paintings of Color', Tribes, New York, NY, USA 'Matt Connors, Ryan McLaughlin, Shannon Mustipher, Stanley Whitney', Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Detroit, MI, USA 'Music to My Eyes', Esso Gallery, New York, NY, USA 'ArteFiera', Esso Gallery, Arte Fiera, Bologna, Italy	1997	'Colorflex', Apex Art, New York, NY, USA
2006	'I Was a Sunbeam: Eleven Works on Paper', David Krut Projects, New York, NY, USA 'Ten Years of Esso Gallery', Esso Gallery, New York, NY, USA	1996	'Deliberate Hand', The Banyan Tree, New York, NY, USA
2005	'Esso Gallery on Stage', Nomadic Space, Turin, Italy		
2003	'Utopia Station', 50th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy Jack Tilton Gallery, New York, NY, USA 'Stanley Whitney / Andreas Reiter Raabe', Christine König Galerie, Vienna, Austria		

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, 10 1/2 x 10 1/2".

Following spread, from left: Stanley Whitney, *Untitled (2020—Prison Voices)*, 2020, graphite and crayon on paper, 10 1/2 x 10 1/2". Stanley Whitney, *Untitled (Can You Hear Us—No to Prison Life)*, 2020, watercolor and graphite on paper, 10 1/2 x 10 1/2".

IN THE DRAWING on the cover of this issue and in the three images that follow, the pioneering artist Stanley Whitney incorporates words into his enduring compositional touchstone, the four-by-four grid, within which he carries out his virtuosic adventures with color. The result is a group of potent pictures with a potent message: No to prison life. "Creating space within color involves experiments with density, vibrancy, saturation, and even with matteness," Whitney told the art historian Andrianna Campbell-LaFleur in 2015. "It is not just formal for me—color has great depth; it can bring up great emotion and immense feeling." Within the framework of Whitney's artistry, the straightforward refusal has the power of the absolute. No to prison life, these images say. But more than that, they suggest

that until our jails and prisons and detention centers are shut down, until we stop enlisting the punitive to preserve our romance with safety, there is no such thing as non-prison life. The ethical imperative infuses our collective existence. We must all say no, irrevocably and unequivocally, right now.

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

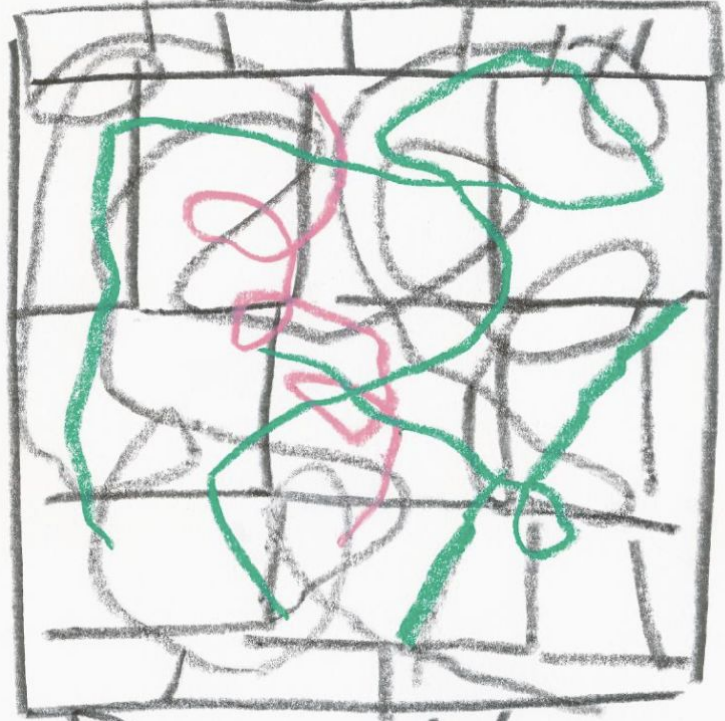
—David Velasco

Can You Hear Us...



No to Prison Life

2020



Prison Voices



## Stanley Whitney's Machine for Painting

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

 Joe Fyfe July 13, 2019



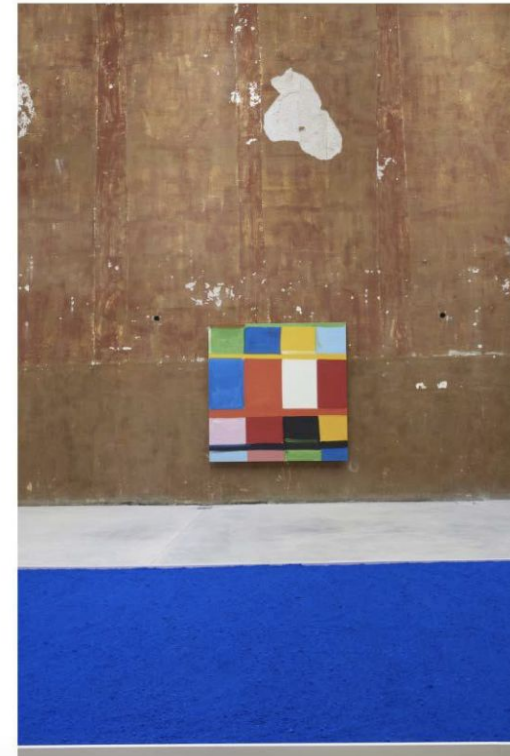
"Stanley Whitney / Yves Klein: This Array of Colors" (2019), installation view, Galería Cayón, Menorca, Spain, photo: Joaquín Cortés (all images courtesy of the artist and Galería Cayón)

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.

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 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 19<sup>th</sup>-century former theater with a ceiling 40 feet high and a balcony. The theater has been largely gutted, but its distressed, pockmarked, discolored walls have been retained. Whitney's five paintings surround a long, wide, shallow trough filled to the rim with the crumbled pigment of Yves Klein International Blue. It is an attractive juxtaposition, and the anything-but-neutral repurposed exhibition space fully becomes a third participant.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

fifteen  
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."

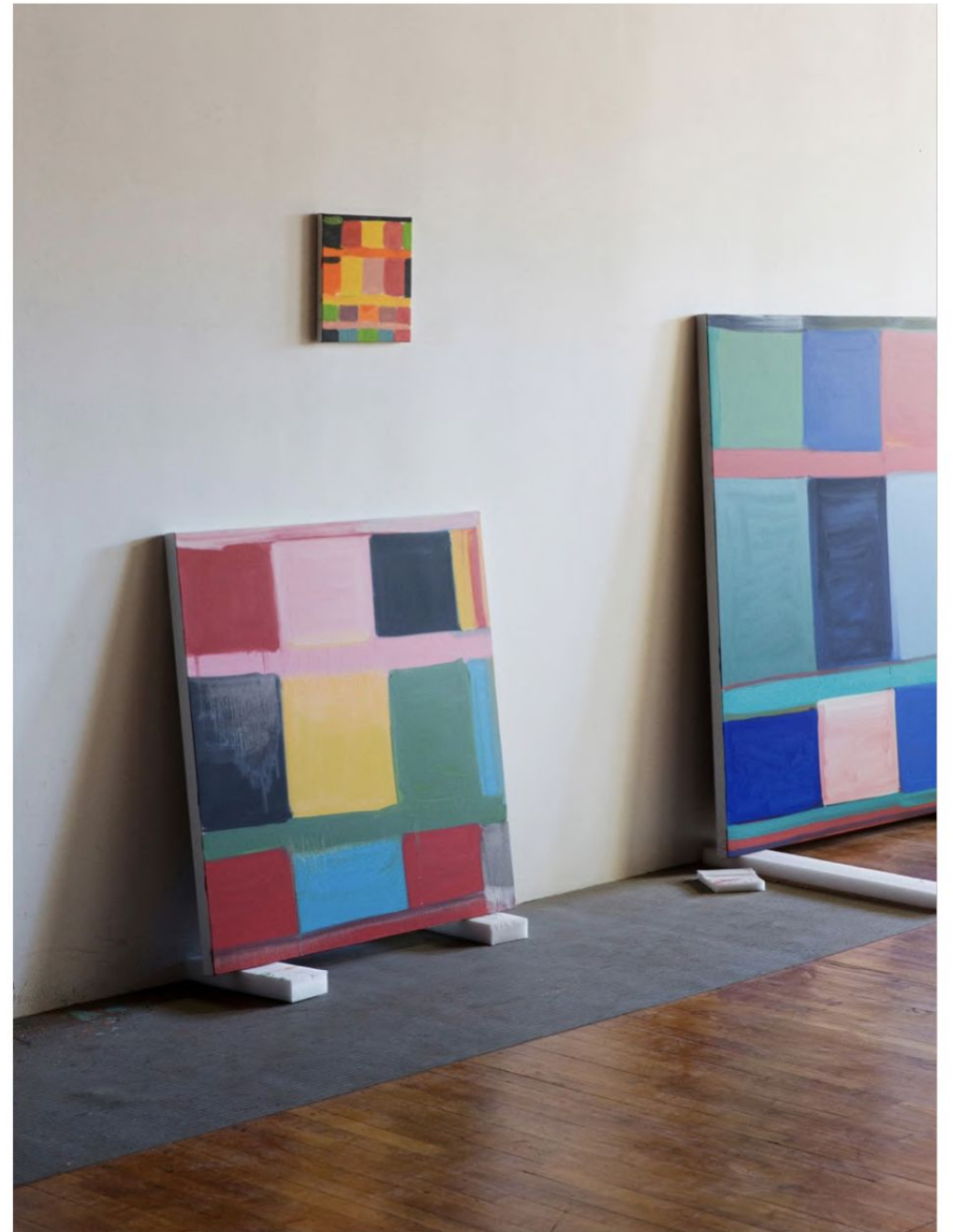
Whitney typically gets up in the morning at around 7.30 a.m., after which, he has a light breakfast — usually oatmeal but sometimes a salad. He takes a car to Ridgewood, Queens, where his studio is, and he works from 10 till two. There are painting days, and there are drawing days. On painting days, 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.

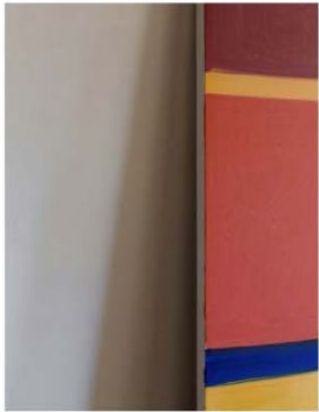
The exact shape of the day's work is determined by a rhythm beyond Whitney's control. "Sometimes I come in here and I can get into it right away. I'm just on. It flows out of me." Other times, it's less easy — this is something Whitney has learned to not see as a negative. "Early on, you realise there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





Exhibition

# Stanley Whitney

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Dance the Orange

STUDIO  
MUSEUM  
HARLEM



# Stanley Whitney

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Dance the Orange

July 16 / October 25, 2015

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The Studio Museum in Harlem is proud to present *Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange*, the first New York City solo museum exhibition of the work of a painter (born Philadelphia, 1946) whose intensely color-based abstractions have won steadily mounting recognition since the mid-1990s. The exhibition will feature twenty-eight paintings and works on paper created between 2008 and 2015, including the 2013 title work. Following time spent in Italy and then later in Egypt in the mid-1990s, Whitney developed the weighty, almost architectural approach that has now become his signature style. Rhythmic and lyrical, with a combination of pre-ordained structure and improvisation inspired in part by his love of jazz, the square-format paintings arrange rectangles of vivid, single colors in a deliberately irregular grid, with the close-fitting, many-hued “bricks” or “tiles” stacked vertically and arrayed in horizontal bands.

*Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange* is organized for the Studio Museum by Lauren Haynes, Associate Curator, Permanent Collection.

A full-color catalogue will accompany the exhibition, featuring contributions by Lauren Haynes, Robert Storr, Lowery Stokes Sims and Stanley Whitney, with a foreword by Thelma Golden.

*Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange* is made possible thanks to support from the following government agencies: The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency; and the New York City Council.

Additional funding is provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.



Installation image from "Stanley Whitney – Dance the Orange", Studio Museum Harlem, New York, 2015.



Installation image from "Stanley Whitney – Dance the Orange", Studio Museum Harlem, New York, 2015.





Installation image from documenta 14, Kassel/Athens, 2017.

FEATURES SUMMER 2017. THE GRAND TOUR

## ‘The Color Makes the Structure’: Stanley Whitney Paints a Picture

BY **Aruna D’Souza** POSTED 05/30/17 1:09 PM

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Stanley Whitney photographed in his Ridgewood, New York, studio on March 13, 2017.  
©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. Documenta 2017 gives us another chance to see a concentration of Whitney’s work. As he was preparing for Documenta, ARTnews spoke with the artist in his studio in the Ridgewood area of Queens, New York.*

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

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

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

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

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

Whitney had just sent off a batch of canvases to Athens, for the first installment of this year’s Documenta, and was now deciding which to send to Kassel for the second installment of the



exhibition, opening in June. He pointed to works arrayed around his studio: “I’m thinking I’ll take that one for one wall, that one for another, maybe those two for another—or maybe that one can hold the wall on its own. Or maybe I’ll put those two together.”

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.”



Installation view of “Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange,” 2015, at The Studio Museum in Harlem.  
ADAM REICH

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."



A table of paints and materials in Stanley Whitney's studio.

©KATHERINE MCMAHON

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.”



Stanley Whitney photographed in his Ridgewood, New York, studio on March 13, 2017.  
©KATHERINE MCMAHON

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."

## Visual Arts

### 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.

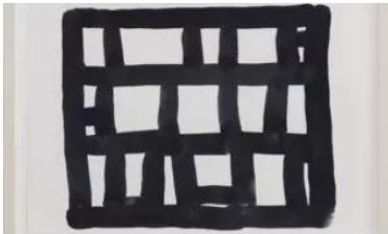
This year, the museum turns to another cool abstractionist, Stanley Whitney, who also underpins every one of his paintings with a grid. Like Gaines, he relies on geometry to organise his passions. Unlike him, Whitney performs this ritual of self-discipline with the eye of an unabashed sensualist. There 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".



Whitney's 'Untitled' (2014)

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

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

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

Whitney has found ways to represent his blackness indirectly. He draws, for instance, on the tactile, grid-like patterns of Gee's Bend quilts. The women artists who toil in their small Alabama town compose each quilt more or less from scratch, following a series of internal clues. A shirrtail might suggest an adjacent patch of corduroy; a pretty scrap of turquoise cotton might call for the sateen of a pale green negligee. Yet these are not just haphazard products of circumstance and a tradition of making do. They spring from self-assured imaginations.

Whitney's canvases adopt the same sort of equilibrium of rules and rupture. The kinship between his work and the quilt lies, he says, in "the way it's a little offbeat, polyrhythmic; the way that things move. Nothing's straight. Nothing's regular. Everything's a little crooked."

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

To October 25, [studiomuseum.org](http://studiomuseum.org)

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