

Stanley Whitney at Team Gallery

Posted: 04/10/2012 4:02 pm by Liz Markus

I first met Stanley Whitney in the early 90's, when I was working for José Freire at his first gallery, fiction/non-fiction. Years later, Stanley was one of my grad school professors at Tyler School of Art. I've always loved Stanley and his work, so I was excited to visit the artist in his Manhattan studio before his new show opened where we caught up and viewed some of the new paintings that are currently featured in his second solo, *Left to Right*, with Team Gallery, José Freire's current gallery.

Liz Markus: When I worked for José Freire, we often spoke about context and how that can drastically affect the reading of an artist's work. Hanging a painting in a gallery known for showing painting is very different than hanging it in a gallery known for conceptual work. Finding yourself in the latter position at Team Gallery as you are painting for a show, how aware of its future context are you, and does it affect any of the decisions you make in the studio?

Stanley Whitney: No, I just make my paintings. My paintings are shown in all different kinds of contexts, and what people remember are the paintings. I don't think of painting as a conceptual item. It's really great to show at Team amongst all of the gallery's different artists because I'm one of the few painters. Painting needs to be shown in a cutting edge context, which I think Team is, a breath of fresh air in this New York art world.

LM: You're a master colorist. When I first saw your work there were swirling layers of circles divided horizontally by lines, a structure on which you could hang color but that also conveyed motion. The new work forgoes motion for masonry, the color appears built up, brick by brick, and it is the pulsing rectangles that move the eye around the canvas. The new paintings contain a powerful stillness. Was motion something you consciously thought about conveying in the earlier work and stripped out over the years?

SW: The paintings have always dealt with polyrhythm, the same idea of timing, motion or stillness. The fact that they have become more architectural is just because it became a better way for me to get more involved with color. It's always been about the color. I think what you are referring to is really gesture, not motion. I took a lot of those gestures out of the painting because I wanted the work to be even more about color, for the color to have an even greater impact. I didn't really want that gesture of abstract expressionism or graffiti. I still feel the paintings have gesture, but it's a different idea of gesture.

LM: You travel a lot. I recall you coming back from Egypt and talking about how the pyramids and other ancient structures changed your sense of scale. What does that mean, exactly?

SW: The first time I went to Egypt was in 1994, after living in Rome for one year. Egypt clarified the last piece of the puzzle to making my mature work: density. It gave me a way at building the structure of color and really making color subject matter. This first started from experiencing and living with the great architecture in Rome: the Colosseum, the Pantheon, the facade of the Vatican, Piazza Farnese, and even just the general architecture of Rome. I understood that I needed a simple format that would allow the color to dominate. At the Etruscan Museum in Volterra, I saw the small Etruscan tomb reliefs and funeral urns, stacked up, one on top of each other, in a simple but classical format. It was really basic and very direct.

Going to Egypt reinforced this: the ancient architecture is very human and basic. It is simple structure with great scale. Seeing the pyramids, the temples, and the sheer size of the 12-ton columns, I realized I could stack the color and not lose the air. Before that I had everything on a field because I wanted things to have a lot of air, but didn't realize that the air was in the color. Therefore I could put the color side by side or stacked, and there would still be air.

With the pyramids, as with the Colosseum, it feels like you can get from one brick to the whole thing. It is simultaneously intimate and monumental. It is human and yet majestic. Giving color architecture allows the color to sing. The color makes the structure not vice versa. The power of simple, direct and classical.

LM: You've often said to me "It's all about confidence." I've found that to be true. Yet it can be hard to push the neurosis of the artist aside in favor of confidence. Or they go back and forth. When I went to your studio this time you said you weren't afraid anymore. What's that like?

SW: I learned many years ago that a bad day is a good day. Sometimes you do something you don't recognize and it's okay if you don't recognize it right away.

LM: You spoke about depth but I can't remember exactly what you said. Let's say the canvas definitively transformed from window to wall with Pollock. Your canvases play with depth, but it's a fluid, flickering depth, more of a pulsing. For that reason, and it may seem like an odd comparison, they made me think of Paul Klee, his "Ancient Sound" for example. He very much captured the play of light in water. Have you thought about Klee in relation to your work? What *did* you say about depth?

SW: I never think about Paul Klee. I think more about Morandi and Mondrian. Mondrian's drawings and his paintings, once he gets to *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. I'm more interested in Edvard Munch or even Cezanne or VanGogh. Their work is compelling because it's risky business.

LM: The thought of Klee reminds me that I wanted to ask you about the role of humor in your work. Klee was one of the first artists I liked as a kid because I really enjoyed his sense of humor. It's rare that humor and something as weighty as "great art" go hand in hand, and certainly I don't think of the Abstract Expressions as light-hearted in their approach to painting. Your paintings demand to be taken seriously, but also have a welcoming, laid-back feeling, as do you. I myself often have to pull out of an overly serious funk around painting in order to get anything done. I've written about it in terms of alternately listening to De Kooning and Warhol in the studio. I'm wondering what your thoughts are concerning gravity and levity in painting.

SW: What I mean by depth is really intellectual depth. I want the paintings to have all the aspects of what it is to be human, how complicated and dense it is. Fun, humor, hardship, sexuality, ups, downs, to have all of that in the work. Which is why I chose color as subject, because color has many different aspects of feeling. Funny, sexy, quiet... one can think about color in many, many ways. The associations made through color seem endless. At the same time, I want the paintings to appear that they almost made themselves. I don't want to show struggle. That is where the music comes into it.

Stanley Whitney, *Left to Right*, is on view at Team Gallery from March 29 to April 28, 2012.

Liz Markus is an artist working in Brooklyn.