

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Open Secret

by **John Yau** on April 8, 2012



An installation view of Stanley Whitney's exhibition at Team Gallery (via teamgal.com)

Stanley Whitney is in his mid-sixties. By his own account, he struggled in the studio from the early 70s to the late 80s, “just trying to make work.” The issue was to make something that was his, rather than to make something that was the right or approved of thing to do. Although it is seldom discussed publicly, this is the dilemma facing every African-American artist. You must be a spokesperson who produces testimony that can be regarded as representative of Black culture — the “I” speaking for the “we.” (Even after the death of the author, it seems that there is at least one “we” that must be spoken for in this postmodern world.)



Stanley Whitney, "Insideout" (2012), oil on linen
96 x 96 inches (click to enlarge)

From the beginning Glenn Ligon (a conceptual artist who makes paintings about identity), did the right thing, while Stanley Whitney (an abstract painter focused on color) didn't. Whitney pushed back against the conventions governing what was regarded as an appropriate undertaking for an African-American artist. This isn't a value judgment, but an observation regarding dynamics. When it comes to art and race, the art world has made little progress toward embracing radically divergent points of view.

Whitney painted after the medium was declared dead. He elected to be an abstract artist. He wouldn't become a storyteller and he didn't align himself with any group or movement.

This is what Whitney said to me in **an interview** in the *Brooklyn Rail* (October 2008):

With African-Americans, race is always a big issue, and how the art answers the call to race. Everyone understands how to be a doctor or a lawyer — a social activist — to answer the call to race, but what does painting have to do with it? There is this need to see yourself, so you've got to pretend you don't see yourself; you're told you're an outsider, but you're not an outsider. You want images of yourself. You want to go to movies and museums and see yourself. And you're there, just like women are there. When you go to the Met, you're in the quilt section, not with the paintings. So that's a big thing. Being an abstract painter, what does that do? Where does that fit in? People have a hard time with that. Take MoMA, and how they have it all lined up — where does abstract painting or (Alma) Thomas fit in? They don't. Hopefully in the 21st century, things will get rewritten, and you'll see that work, or people will get interested in that work, which is really a secret.

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Stanley Whitney, "This Side of Blue" (2011), oil on linen 96 x 96 inches

In ***Left to Right***, his current exhibition at Team Gallery, Whitney shows three large paintings — they are all 96 x 96” — one to a wall. "This Side of Blue" (2011) is on the middle wall, facing the street, flanked by "Insideout" (2012) and "Left to Right" (2011).

For a number of years, Whitney has divided his paintings into four differently- sized, horizontal bands with the smallest band at the bottom. He fills these bands with between five and seven vertical rectangles of monochromatic color. Because he separates the wide horizontal bands with one or two narrow ones, each a single color, that run the width of the painting, the large bands resemble friezes made up of variously colored panels.

I have started to think of Whitney's geometric structure as his imaginative equivalent of a musical composition, residing somewhere between Alexander Scriabin and Igor Stravinsky, Eric Dolphy and Arnold Schoenberg. Structure and improvisation are inseparable. At the same time, his grid-like structures aren't rigid, but handmade. A color can pop out from the structure, rupturing the grid, which distinguishes his paintings from those of Mary Heilmann and Sean Scully.

Whitney begins the painting at the top left hand corner and works his way across and down. The choice of each succeeding color is comparable to call and response, where, as he said in the above-cited interview, the artist follows the color, wherever it takes him — "I follow my work wherever it goes — out the door, around the corner." Some of the rectangles consist of several colors layered atop one another.

We might start out by reading the paintings from left right, following the sequence of colors within a band, or by looking up and down, or all over, our attention leaping around the canvas. This is one of their strong points — they define different ways of being read (paid attention to) without becoming didactic.

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Stanley Whitney, "Left to Right" (2011), oil on linen 96 x 96 inches (click to enlarge)

Whitney's mastery of color is evident in "This Side of Blue." There are four horizontal bands containing five or six rectangles, twenty-three in all. Most of the rectangles along the left and right edges are significantly narrower than the ones in the middle of the row, which suggests that they have been cropped; that what we are looking at is taken from something larger and unknowable, since there is no underlying pattern governing the painting.

Approximately two-thirds of the twenty-three rectangles are blue or closely related — green, turquoise-blue and violet. Most of the rest of the rectangles are earth tones — dark brown and black. But Whitney interrupts this spectrum with one yellow umber rectangle in the bottom horizontal band and one earth red on the right edge in the third row.

At the same time, the four narrow bands work in counterpoint to both the horizontal rows and the individual rectangles. The third row across is pale yellow, for example. Located slightly below the middle of the painting, the yellow band calls attention to the large dark blue rectangle (one of the largest in the painting) and the slightly lighter blue rectangle below it. This tonal shift is echoed in the turquoise rectangle one unit over from the blue pairing.

The internal relationships in Whitney's paintings, all of which feel discovered, offer the viewer different entry points into the painting. The rectangles have specific identities (densities), determined by the color and the way it was applied. The logic is internal, rather than imposed. Like musical standards, the pleasure resides in returning to them again and again. The painting's complexity and intuitive intricacy slowly reveal themselves.

The motivation behind them is clear — "I want to paint every color in the world." Whitney's structuring of color achieves the condition of music — the state all art aspires to.

Stanley Whitney's [Left to Right](#)