

Books & the Arts.

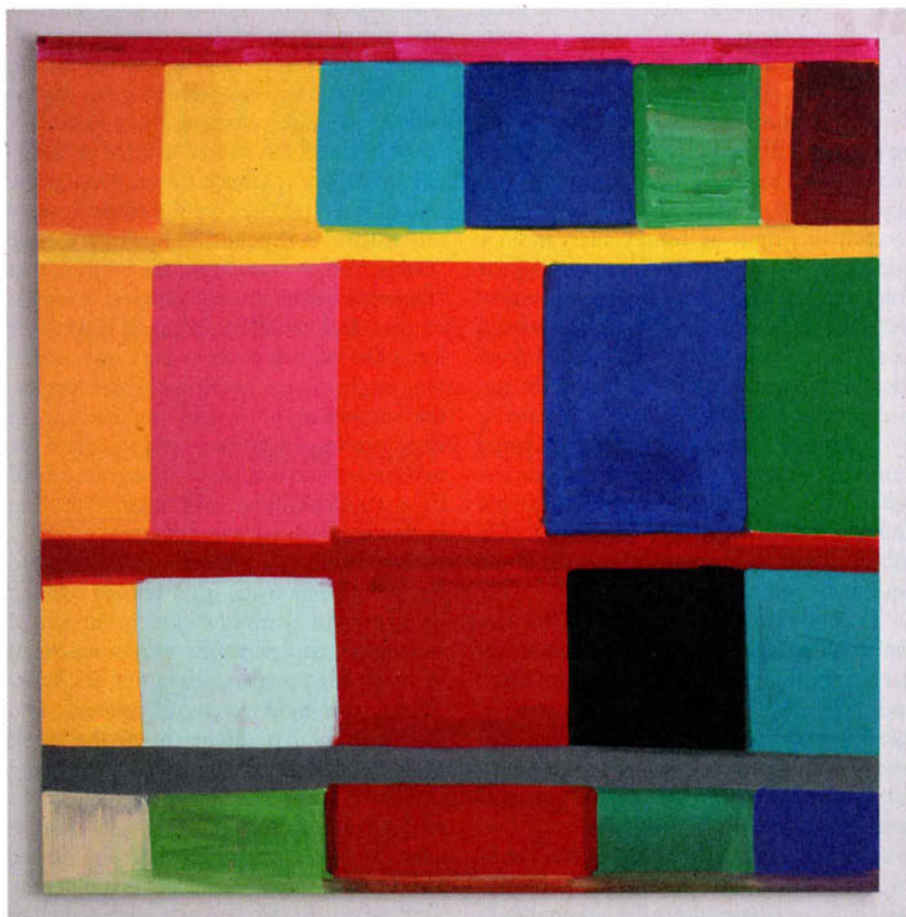
Empty and Full

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

Remember the old Leiber and Stoller number “Is That All There Is?” It was a hit for Peggy Lee in 1969 and has since been covered often; crate diggers may prefer the notorious 1980 version produced by August Darnell for no wave/mutant disco chanteuse Cristina. Well, that song of disappointment has been playing in the background of abstract art right from the beginning. What? A black square surrounded by white? Is that all? A bunch of colored brush marks? That’s it? A grid of faint pencil marks on a bare canvas, some ordinary bricks lined up on the floor, a square segment cut out and removed from a wall? Is that all there is? Actually, this pinched refrain was voiced in the art world long before abstraction or Peggy Lee. Henri Matisse once reported the perplexity of Gustave Moreau upon seeing his work; Moreau, then his teacher, exclaimed, “You are not going to simplify painting to that degree, reduce it to that! Painting will cease to exist.” Moreau was right. In the eyes of many, painting did eventually cease to exist. Once the process of reduction was taken far enough, there was little left of painting but the idea of it, and the next logical step was conceptual art.

But nature abhors a vacuum, and so into the void from which painting had been vacated rushed all the subject matter that abstraction had put at a distance. Art became referential again. For artists who continued to avail themselves of canvas and paint, colors and lines and matter, a direct appeal to the senses but without images, without a secure referent, “Is That All There Is?” was a charge hurled from both sides. Those scattered marks and patches of color continued to give the layman (and the layman who persists in the back of the mind of the practitioner) what the song called “the feeling that something was missing.” At the same time, the abstractionist heard the voices of a certain colleague, asking with an ironic tone: Why so timid? You can’t unburden your art any more than that? While the tyro cried out, “My kid could do that!” the virtuosi of the concept sneered at works in which the great historical task of deskillling had not been pursued with sufficient radicalism or rigor.

For a long time, in other words, the ab-



Left to Right (2011), by Stanley Whitney

stract painter had to negotiate the anxiety that he might be doing or showing too little; more recently he has also had to worry about doing too much. Yet between the two extremes there has always been a sweet spot where a little and a lot, austerity and sensuality, have coalesced. One painter who has found the sweet spot pretty consistently is Stanley Whitney. Although he is hardly a young artist—he was born in 1946—his work has come into focus only in the past ten or fifteen years. Last year Whitney was awarded the first Robert De Niro Sr. Prize for painting, endowed by the actor in memory of his father, a notable New York School painter. (Along with curators Robert Storr and Thelma Golden and patron Agnes Gund, I was a member of the jury that made the award.) In a recent interview Whitney reminisced about arriving in New York City in the late 1960s, when the Abstract Expressionists were still thriving but were not the only draw. There were the Pop artists,

Minimalists and color field painters, among others. “I watched all of it, but I wasn’t about to act on it. I was in the studio, struggling and struggling.... There was never any one thing I could say, ‘this is it.’ I was sort of in between everything.” Part of his difficulty in finding a method of working may have had to do with being African-American, having to face the question of “how the art answers the call to race.” Whitney seems to have realized that in abstraction, race would manifest itself the way most issues of identity do: indirectly and willy-nilly. There is a particular way of articulating color and rhythm in painting that might be the outcome of specifically black experience, but to the extent that’s true, it need not be insisted on; it just emerges. In any case, social and economic pressures have made it harder for younger artists to follow Whitney’s example and bide their time. But for him, persistence has paid off. By his own estimate, it wasn’t until 1994, when a visit

to Egypt convinced him that ancient architecture showed a way to combine structural simplicity with visual grandeur, that he found a way of working he was certain was the right one for himself—his “piece of the puzzle.”

W *l maçonait comme un romain,*” said Cézanne in admiration of Courbet. He built like a Roman—to last—and Whitney, inspired by the Egyptians (but also by Rome, a city he knows well), takes the idea of building a painting very seriously. Each painting—usually a square, as were the three big ones recently on display at Team Gallery in New York City—is constructed of rectangular color areas, loosely painted, laid one next to the other like blocks of stone; the horizontal line of each color block is separated from those above and below it (and from the top and, usually, the bottom edges of the canvas) by a continuous or broken line of colored “mortar.” Colors are placed next to one another, so that each speaks for itself as a single complex entity while also combining with others to form a synthesis that is the visual equivalent of musical chords.

Though these juxtaposed masses of color function like chords, they do not necessarily harmonize. There is dissonance, which keeps each color note standing separate instead of forming a blend in which the identity of each would be subsumed. Something of an exception is *This Side of Blue* (2011); as the title indicates, it is on the cool end of the spectrum, and is accordingly moodier or more guarded in feeling than the other paintings at Team. Yet one of the rectangles along the bottom row is a bright yellow that, almost single-handedly, manages to rouse all those blues (and some earth colors) into ebullience. Neither of the other two canvases, *Insideout* (2012) and *Left to Right* (2011), is dominated by a single hue; rather, one color after another seems to elbow its way to the fore in succession. I think this is the secret to the pungency and presence of these paintings. Although some colors are naturally more recessive while others project, in these paintings of Whitney’s all the colors seem to be coaxing one another to take the spotlight, even those expressed in the thin horizontal lines that at first appear simply to hold the others in place.

Whitney is above all a colorist, and his paintings are often compared to those of Josef Albers (whose work he finds, however, “too institutional,” meaning, I suppose, too didactic or theoretical—a perception I don’t share) or Mark Rothko. But Whitney also needed an “architecture” for his paintings that would allow his color to function as it

does, and the loosely repetitive structure he’s found so accommodating points toward another predecessor who, as far I know, is never mentioned by Whitney’s critics. The use of a square support has been the practice of a great many postwar painters—Albers, Ad Reinhardt and Robert Ryman are only the first to come to mind. It is the most neutral, unnatural and abstract of forms. And the use of a grid, strictly or loosely maintained, has been even more constant; again Reinhardt could be cited, but so too an artist as different from him as Chuck Close. Among the four or five most cited texts in contemporary art criticism is Rosalind Krauss’s 1978 essay “Grids,” which starts from the premise that “flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is anti-natural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature.” One might expect that with a square support the components of the grid would be squares also, forming a Cartesian grid in which the two symbolic structures of Modernist formal rigor would reinforce each other, as they do in Reinhardt’s black paintings.

But Whitney’s grids are irregular, and instead of being made from squares echoing the shape of the canvas, they are composed of rectangles cast against the canvas square. If Whitney has a predecessor in this, it’s Agnes Martin, that most ascetic of painters, who eschewed color or limited it to the palest possible inflection of whiteness. She worked always with this paradox: her faint inflections of the painting’s surface continually dissolve what they indicate; she re-marks the surface and disperses it in the same gesture. The play between square and rectangle was essential to this effect: “When I cover the square surface with rectangles, it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power,” she once observed. Much later she said, “The rectangle is pleasant, whereas the square is not,” which I take to mean that the rectangle, despite its rectilinearity, allows the artist to compose in accord with natural perception (we experience our visual field as roughly rectangular), which the square works against. Whitney’s paintings, too, avail themselves of this unexpected imbalance between square and rectangle, but instead of using it to dissolve the surface, as Martin does, he uses it to multiply the surface. It’s as if each of the colored rectangles within the painting was itself already a complete painting, and each in turn could become the focal point for one’s perception of the others. Martin’s paintings look from unity toward nothingness, while Whitney’s look from one toward multiplicity.

Whitney’s deliberate manner of coming to terms with how to paint is echoed in his

manner of making each painting. “I paint them,” he muses, “but then I hate them. I never get what I want. It takes me a long time to relax and see what I have, as opposed to what I wanted. It takes me a while to see it.” In a sense, allowing a lot of time for coming to terms with what one sees is essential. Art is not instantaneous. A painting sometimes gives the illusion that it can be taken in all at once, that it is simply there, present, in the instant. Perhaps, but that instant keeps unfolding. And just as the present tense is undone in art, so is the past. As Whitney says, “Painting reinvents time.... Today or tomorrow doesn’t exist in a painting. You look at Caravaggio, and it’s really contemporary. Time doesn’t exist. That’s the good thing about painting.”

But still, although Whitney’s are certifiably slow paintings, they also have an immediate impact. They’re not quiet or unassuming. It’s hard to imagine anyone walking by the ground floor space of Team Gallery without having to stop and stand in front of the window and wonder—or better yet, walk in to see what the fuss is all about. What do these foghorn blasts of rich, deep color mean to announce? That this is all there is—and that’s enough.

Another painter who has been consistently finding the needle’s eye where seemingly too little becomes enough is Jacqueline Humphries, who recently exhibited at Greene Naftali in Chelsea. Nearly a generation younger than Whitney—she was born in 1960—like him she has long been drawn to the square as a format for painting. But she’s not, in his sense, a colorist; she can use color with eloquence, but it is not the main concern. Whitney subsumes even touch to color: “Color for me is all about touch. Whether it’s thicker or thinner—how you touch the canvas is different.” The proof may lie in certain drawings I have seen in Whitney’s studio that use the same motif of stacked colors as in his paintings but, incredibly, with the color left out—its weight and character communicated solely by the gestural quality of black line. For Humphries, on the other hand, the relation between color and touch might be just the opposite: what her painting communicates is above all a haptic sensation of space—you don’t so much see into it as feel your way through it—to which a canny employment of color may contribute. And in the past few years color has become ever sparser in her work.

The paintings at Greene Naftali, like most of those that have occupied Humphries since about 2006, were dominated by the metallic sheen of silver paint, with a dense,

sludgy black—pitch black, you might say—as its main complement. Humphries's silver is a noncolor—one might almost say an anti-color—and it sends light bouncing around crazily in all directions, creating a sort of blur around the canvas that has approximately the same relation to the nebulous visual hum emitted by Agnes Martin's paintings as the chemically zippy drug-induced euphoria does to the putative clarity of serenity and insight in meditation. That comparison may sound weighted in favor of Martin, but I prefer Humphries; the impurity and nervous energy of her paintings seem truer to my own experience of things—which I understand may be simply to say that with Humphries I share similar existential limitations, ones that Martin, in her paintings, transcends. So be it. Maybe it's a generational tic, shared by those whose childhood was spent in the vicinity of the television set. (Humphries sometimes speaks of the screen as a visual metaphor in painting, "the presiding model of perception," but always with reference to cinema; to me, though, the experience seems closer to the static-y flicker of the cathode ray tube.)

In these paintings, there is a gestural energy that distantly recalls Abstract Expressionism, but the gesture may just as well be that of wiping away as of laying down paint. Making and unmaking, appearance and disappearance fuse. The distribution of marks across the surface can seem almost random, and yet at the edges of the paintings you are likely to find, threading in and out of their tangled skein, elegantly graphic decorative patterns. These remind us that the painting is a shape, not just a space. But what shape? As I mentioned before, Humphries has often preferred the square, like Whitney, and looking at these new paintings, I thought at first they were square too. After a little time I realized they are slightly off-square: at eight feet by seven and a half feet, they are just a few inches longer than high. I suspect that a 6.25 percent difference is about the smallest that can be readily perceived. Just like Whitney, and like Martin before him, Humphries seems to want to play square and rectangle against each other, to keep in tension power and lightness, pleasure and recalcitrance. But she's found a different way of sustaining the tension, not by populating the square with grids of rectangles but by finding the format where the perception of squareness and non-squareness flickers in and out. By marking the edges of the paintings, she calls attention to their shape as significant, while the nebulous contents of the pictorial field—lacking the order and legibility of the grid—offer few

clues to its inner structure and encourage the viewer to lose sight of place.

Looking at some of Humphries's recent paintings, you might be tempted to complain that there's nothing there, or anyway not enough. Or you might feel that there had been something there, but that the artist had lost faith in what she'd put down and wiped it off in preparation for another attempt that she abandoned. Yet these seemingly vacated canvases command the room. A lot of effacement may have gone into the making of these paintings, but the result is the opposite of self-effacing. As Humphries puts it, "There are ways of expressing fullness and emptiness other than with objects." Her paintings may seem objectless, but their emptiness conveys an almost overwhelming sense of fullness.

In recent years, more than a few wags have argued that painting might be palatable again if only it would adjust to a period of lowered expectations. Forget about the grand ambition and scale (and macho posturing) that supposedly characterized Abstract Expressionism. Painting should walk softly, stay humble, expose its vulnerability and keep a tentative look about it. I'm not so sure. Minor virtues are all very well, but they're still minor. Humphries and Whitney want their work to feel urgent, to stop you in your tracks. They aspire to grandeur—with a pictorial vocabulary that to some may seem painfully narrow. The tension between squareness and rectangularity: Is that all there is? Yes, and when a painter does so much with so little, it's called virtuosity. ■