

# STANLEY WHITNEY *Other Colors I Forget*

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Breaking boundaries is basic to our notion of creativity. Writing of Romanesque sculpture, art historian Meyer Schapiro sees individual invention in the medieval sculptor's rupture of architectural frames, in deviations from symmetry and in compositional "discoordination." Ambitious sculptors of this time responded to new economic activities, to an emerging popular culture, and to influences from Classical and Middle Eastern art. Similar terms could apply to the freehand geometry and vivid colors of Stanley Whitney's irregularly stacked rectangles, in paintings on view in *Other Colors I Forget* at Team Gallery on Grand Street. Open to references high and low, Whitney preserves from Abstract Expressionism an independent playing field on which to pursue his interest in painting.

Schapiro also wrote about Abstract Expressionism, which he viewed as an affirmation of the individual, of "inner freedom and invention" in the face of an increasingly corporate culture. But its transgressive energy, its "mastery of the formless and accidental," did not so much abolish boundaries as make them negotiable. Newman's zips, Rothko's carefully proportioned rectangles, or the endless revisions of de Kooning (who consulted with Schapiro about "*Woman I*" and finally added several inches to its right side before allowing it out of his studio), all address the architecture of the visual field. Whitney emerges from this context; if the Medieval sculptor works against the multiple frames of church architecture, Whitney confronts the unstructured expanse of Color Field painting, in which Clement Greenberg saw the legacy of Pollock's overall composition. Whitney's task was less to break boundaries than to establish his own: one flexible enough to reconcile the geometry of Mondrian with the colors of Indian street bazaars.



Stanley Whitney, "Nigerian Smile," 2012. Oil on linen, 72 × 72".  
Image courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery, New York.

The paintings at Team fall into Whitney's typical four-by-four format: squares, divided horizontally into four rows, with a row of four large rectangles just above the centerline. This dominant row lends verticality to the composition, while the four equal units ensure that no

rectangle can occupy the middle; everything is off-center, syncopated. The squares and rectangles don't just settle back into a mathematical matrix, but jostle against one another, and the thick boundaries between the rows become elements in their own right. Color, conventionally viewed as unstable and subjective, provides the animating impulse, particularly at the boundaries of the rectangles, where they merge or compete, and where seepage and overlapping reflect the work of the hand. The muscularity of Whitney's application distinguishes these works from the highly refined color paintings of Sanford Wurmfeld or Josef Albers, whose legacy of hard-edge abstraction the artist encountered at Yale, where boundaries were tended like the edges of suburban lawns.

In channeling the wake of Abstract Expressionism into his own painterly architecture, Whitney found support from teachers such as Philip Guston and Al Held. Both had broken with the movement to seek their own individual styles. Whitney credits Held's drawing class with helping him find a "space" for his colors—a modern version of the classical tradition in which drawing elevates color to a higher path. Whitney's drawings are built from clusters of marks that constitute stacked compartments like those in his paintings, gestures that evoke colors much like van Gogh's pen and ink notations convey the qualities of trees or wheat fields. Along with van Gogh, Whitney often cites the influences of Cézanne and Goya.

Whitney's gestural grids recall Chuck Close's abstract improvisations within the gridded squares of his portraits. Just as Close, another Yale graduate, resorted to the gridded photograph to break with the influence of de Kooning, Whitney's geometry can be seen as "ruling and possessing" (to use Cézanne's terms) his expressionistic tendencies, which, like Cézanne, he explored in early, dark paintings. If Close allows an expressive impulse to return in his improvisations (which resemble miniature, casual interpretations of Albers's concentric squares), Whitney unleashes more powerful rhythmic impulses in his large squares and rectangles, with their varied brushwork and their competitive self-assertion through call and response.

In a recent interview, Whitney expressed surprise at having achieved a "signature style," finding it improbable in our post-modern times. But there's nothing formulaic in his new work. Titles like "Nigerian Smile," "Bodyheat," and "Songbird" conjure verbal magic that affirms the potency of painting. "Nigerian Smile" even insinuates a surreptitious image, like one of Picasso's sly allusions to the body, along with its staggered diagonals of blue, orange, and green.

Along with jazz, Whitney alludes to West African drumming, and among its principles (as described by ethnomusicologist John Chernoff), is building new styles from simple modifications of existing patterns. The focus is never on individual virtuosity but on the lead drummer's ability to highlight other drums, to bring out the "depth" of the rhythm. In a similar way, the multiculturalism implicit in Whitney's improvisations aims to bring out multiple connections and to deepen the cultural resonance of modernism's colored geometry.