

ARTS | ARTS IN REVIEW | ART REVIEW

‘Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange’ Review

Stanley Whitney, a jazz aficionado, improvises in his grid-based paintings



‘Congo’ (2014), by Stanley Whitney. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JEANNE GREENBERG ROHATYN

By **PETER PLAGENS**

Aug. 11, 2015

New York

Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange

Studio Museum in Harlem

Through Oct. 25

The great German-born Abstract Expressionist Hans Hofmann famously said, “In nature, light creates the color. In the picture, color creates the light.” This idea is beautifully manifested in the work of Stanley Whitney (b. 1946), whose compact but

exhilarating survey exhibition—28 pictures on canvas and paper from 2008 to now—is

on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The show's title, "Dance the Orange," derives from the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke and is as joyously applicable to Mr. Whitney's paintings as are Hofmann's words. In spite of the fact that the artist employs just about every color under the sun, you come away from the show feeling as if you've been at a cotillion with glowing orange blocks dancing all around you.

The exhibition's eponymous painting from 2013 is a 4-foot-square oil-on-linen picture—a modest size for Mr. Whitney, whose paintings range up to 8 feet on a side. Four horizontal rows of rectangles—one of the middle ones packed with slightly vertical, brightly colored forms, the bottom row looking like a narrow peek into an elevator stopped between floors—nudge one another into a casual harmony. Five of the straight-edged shapes are one sort of orange or another, slightly cooled off on the picture's right-hand edge by a couple of blues and a very pale green. The total effect is of a blast furnace, mercifully tamped down by Mr. Whitney's trademark mixes of opacity and translucence, visible and sequestered brushstrokes, and his offhandedly delicious treatment of corners, where colors meet and bleed together, or, quickly rounded off, leave behind tiny triangles of exposed white canvas.

Grid-based paintings always look planned, but Mr. Whitney, a jazz aficionado, improvises. He starts his paintings in the upper-left-hand part of the canvas and ends up in the lower right. Although his pictures boast the deceptive "one-shot" appearance of Matisse's paint application, he expertly reworks his paintings until they appear cheerfully revision-free.

Fresh out of art school in Kansas City, Mo., in 1968, Mr. Whitney was persuaded by Philip Guston to give New York a try. He started slowly, pausing to earn an MFA at Yale. Afterward, proceeding from biomorphic acrylic stain paintings on unstretched canvas, through what look like loose balls of yarn arranged on rickety shelves, he arrived—after travels in Italy and Egypt—at the beta version (with its more open brushwork) of his current style, in the 1990s. Since then he's been both narrowing his approach (obliterating traditional figure-ground relationships) and allowing it to grow wider—in visual generosity, implied content, and sense of scale. In 2011, Mr. Whitney won the first Robert De Niro, Sr. Prize in painting (named for the painter-father and awarded by the actor-son).

African-American artists who pursue abstraction run a gantlet. On one side, those black artists and critics who are overtly political can scold an artist for ignoring the social plight of his brothers and sisters, and indulging in what they see as formalist exercises. Meanwhile, white observers can search obsessively for indications of racial content. Mr.

Whitney doesn't entirely disown the latter. "In the course of my path through the art world," he says in an interview in the exhibition's catalog, "I have brought up the idea of black color . . . I didn't use color like Kenneth Noland or even Frank Stella. I think that there is something about the [visual] music or the color that could be called African-American." Quilts from Gee's Bend, Ala., kente cloth, and the Pan-African flag come reasonably to a viewer's mind. Then there are Mr. Whitney's titles—"Peaches" (a song on a Nina Simone album), "James Brown Sacrifice to Apollo," and "My Tina Turner"—to seal the deal.

The idea of black color, however, doesn't skew the show toward message-sending. Instead, it gives Mr. Whitney's brand of abstract painting, which might be called Color Chunk instead of Color Field, a cultural edge that nicely disrupts the potential blandness of the implied universalism of grid-based pictures. As for his individual handiwork on the canvas, catalog essayist Robert Storr says, "These [uses of color and form] are the tricks of the trade of modern abstraction, but while every painter knows, or should know them, not every painter deploys them with equal finesse or authority."

Finesse and Authority could be Mr. Whitney's middle names. "Congo" (2014) boasts a brilliant left-to-right, top-row sequence of a textbook orange, two great greens (the first dark, with very visible brushstrokes, the second solid and as Kelly as Ireland itself), and an emphatic, stop-sign red. "Elephant Memory," also from 2014, contains a rectangle of dark maroon that I'd swear never existed before now. Josef Albers, a German-born artist who emigrated to America at about the same time as Hans Hofmann and taught the famous color course at Yale, demonstrated that with color, context is everything. Mr. Whitney understands that, absolutely.

The biggest paintings in the show are the best. The small gouaches on paper ostensibly offer an insight into how the larger works come about; they don't because there's a qualitative difference in impact between immersive pools of color (on the canvases) and relatively small bits of it on paper. Mr. Whitney requires large scale as much as he needs the nominal sameness of his grid format: to show us how what we might at first take as negligible differences of hue, edge and paint application are crucial to the overall poetry of the painting.

A moment when all the other viewers were gone from the main gallery (I saw the exhibition on a day when the museum was open only to tour groups and field trips), and I was alone with Mr. Whitney's large canvases, was one of the most pleasurable I've ever experienced in a museum—a time to ponder the paintings as well as look at them. "I didn't want my color to be decorative," the artist says in the catalog. "I wanted color to

have a real intellect.” His does. What we have here is a thinking person’s hedonism.

Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.