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ART & DESIGN

Review: Stanley Whitney's Paintings Reinvent the Grid

By **ROBERTA SMITH** JULY 16, 2015

Abstract painting moves in mysterious ways. Sometimes it leaps ahead and challenges us to keep up, as with Malevich's black square of 1915, Jackson Pollock's dripped skeins from the late 1940s, or Frank Stella's shaped canvases and metallic stripes of the early '60s. And sometimes abstract painting seems to stall, its devotees settling for cautiously repeating accepted conventions — monochrome, grids, stripes and so forth.

But certain artists stick with these conventions until they find themselves in them and show us something new. An example is Stanley Whitney, who, with a freehand geometry and a fierce and extensive range of color, found his way to a painting style all his own, one that neither stops history in its tracks nor repeats it, but has quietly and firmly expanded abstraction's possibilities of both form and meaning.

This much is demonstrated by two excellent complementary exhibitions that combine paintings and works on paper to their great benefit. "Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange," at the Studio Museum in Harlem, features efforts from the last seven years, when Mr. Whitney greatly heightened the power and clarity of his work. And Karma, a gallery and artists' book publisher in the East Village, has mounted a group of little-seen works from the 1990s that give some idea of the diligence that led to the pieces in Harlem, most exuberantly in a wall hung salon-style with scores of drawings in graphite or crayon and tiny oil studies. (For a

more detailed account of Mr. Whitney's creative path, a new Karma book reproduces 311 drawings and paintings, dating from 1978 to 2015 — and no text.)

He has energized abstraction for himself and others by using saturated color and the Modernist grid for their mutual reinvention. In so doing, he has devised an improvisatory, enriched Minimalism, whose hard edges, ruled lines and predetermined systems have been loosened and destabilized, whose colors are more random — all of which gives the viewer an immense amount to look at and mull over.

Mr. Whitney's system is flexible and simple: On square canvases, he arranges sturdy blocks of singing color into vibrant grids, without benefit of straight edge, reinforcing them with at least three horizontal bands. When these bands match the blocks, space is altered by the effect of banners hanging from ribbons. These grids are always irregular, and slivers of color often intrude from the edges, implying other blocks that might yet slide into view, creating a different arrangement.

All of these relationships are in play in every painting at the Studio Museum, but they occur with special complexity in "Dance the Orange," the 2013 work that gives the show its title. Five different oranges crowd an expansive block of yellow, reinforced by horizontal bands of orange that blend — or don't — with them. Their conflagration is balanced on the right by a stack of two blues and a black.

Like all of the work by this African-American artist, the painting encourages an epiphany: Every block of color is different, with its own shape and proportion, as well as its own hue, surface and relationship to the whole. This is a condition rich in visual, philosophical and political implications.

Mr. Whitney was born in Philadelphia in 1946 and grew up there. He moved to New York in 1968 after earning his B.F.A. at the Kansas City Art Institute, and he received an M.F.A. from Yale in 1972. As he suggests to Lowery Stokes Sims, a former director of the Studio Museum, in an

interview that is the catalog's most substantial text, his artistic development may have been somewhat prolonged by his blackness. He always knew he was a painter, but it took him until the late 1970s to feel entirely at ease with being an abstract one, and until the early '90s to hit his stride. He had to contend with the assumption that, as a black artist, he should tackle social issues head-on. Referring to his blackness and maleness and to "just being a human being," he tells Ms. Sims, "When you're facing a blank canvas, you need all these things to make it something." His totality as a person would be evident in his paintings if they were strong and truly his own.

Mr. Whitney's art has affinities throughout the history of 20th-century painting. His palette echoes that of other African-American artists, in particular the figurative artists Bob Thompson and Jacob Lawrence, both advocates of bright, opaque color, who rarely use white.

The virtual absence of white in Mr. Whitney's work creates a great visual heat and internal pressure — an alloverness that reflects his careful study of Pollock — but, of course, it also has symbolic overtones. It links Mr. Whitney's paintings to textiles that minimize white — Amish and Gee's Bend quilts and African kente cloth — and also to the unrelenting black, green and red of the Pan-African flag. It also reflects a society in which nonwhite skin tones are proliferating, and whiteness, both as a construct and a fact, is changing and shrinking.

Although "Dance the Orange" is a line from Rilke, the titles of Mr. Whitney's paintings sometimes touch on political attitudes or cultural identity: "Radical Openness" and "Unpronounceable Freedom" (at Karma); and, at the Studio Museum, "Congo" and "James Brown Sacrifice to Apollo." Also at the museum, "My Tina Turner" conjures a special, private understanding, and repossession, of a widely celebrated black artist. The exceptionally beautiful "My Name Is Peaches" is titled with a line from Nina Simone's "Four Women."

But Mr. Whitney has many connections to a more mainstream

Modernism. His intuitive, improvised color, for example, echoes Matisse's but from within a formal structure closer to Mondrian's. In the catalog interview, he admires Hans Hofmann's bright canvases (the best of which lack white, by the way) and Giorgio Morandi's narrow yet intuitive focus on still life. There are comparisons to be made with Josef Albers's concentric squares of color and also Mary Heilmann's freehand geometries.

You can see the primacy of color emerge in the Karma show. Here, the color blocks are more like irregular stones and covered with bright, contrasting scribbles that evoke graffiti and children's drawings. In the Studio Museum show, which was organized by Lauren Haynes, the associate curator, the blocks have filled out, closed off the background and gone solid. Scribble-free, they are opaque monochromes — smooth and delicate as skin, and matte — although the brush and underlying colors are sometimes visible. Undiluted, with no reflections, color is greatly empowered.

At a moment when looking at a static art object is often dismissed unnecessarily by advocates of performance, participatory or social-practice art for encouraging only "passive contemplation," Mr. Whitney's paintings are opulently interactive and engaging. Instead of "What you see is what you see," Mr. Stella's closed-off pronouncement about his own early abstractions, Mr. Whitney might propose, "What you see is where you start." To speed our journeys, each one different, his paintings provide a nearly inexhaustible cache of provisions.

Correction: July 21, 2015

An art review and schedule information on Friday about "Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange," at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and "Stanley Whitney," at the Karma gallery, misidentified the area of Manhattan where the gallery is situated. It is in the East Village, not the Lower East Side.

"Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange" runs through Oct. 25 at the Studio Museum in Harlem; 646-242-2142, studiomuseum.org. "Stanley Whitney" continues through Aug. 16 at Karma, East Village; 917-675-7508; karmakarma.org.

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