

# **The Power of Painting, the Brilliance of Color**

**By Trond Borgen**

First: a clear, warm shock of color, an unimpeded pleasure on entering the exhibition, overwhelms me. Then by and by other impressions: the details, the subtleties, the artist's eye for the totality - drawing not just on that which relates to enjoyment but also to analysis. This is a great exhibition for both eye and mind, for Stanley Whitney's canvases in Gallery Opdahl show a convincing exploration of unexpected possibilities of revitalizing painting at a time when we might think that we have already seen it all.

Whitney is an American artist (born in 1946) who in the last few years has gained ever greater recognition. What we see in Stavanger now is the result of his many years maturing as an artist - pure painting in the form of geometric abstraction. It includes sophisticated discussions of the placement of color in the picture, quite literally. In a way each painting can be seen as a forum for dialogue: Whitney begins by placing one color uppermost to the left and subsequently applies color after color in sequences of squares and rectangles, forming a structure that emerges along the way, each color influencing the next and the previous one, in an intimate color conversation, until a unity is achieved.

**Sound and Structure:** What we see then is a series of blocks of color organized in a grid, with multiple art historic references and echoes that range from Delauney to Mondrian. However, while Mondrian placed his color fields into a strict pattern of horizontal and vertical lines (neo-plasticism), Whitney allows the colors themselves to determine the pattern, rather than the other way round. Thus each color field finds its own value and place on the canvas, at the same time as it raises questions and provides answers in dialogue with its neighboring colors. Seemingly so simple, this actually demands considerable experience and a highly developed color sensitivity.

The color fields alternate between transparency and opacity, between thin, lightly dripping layers of paint and more heavily applied ones, between finely suggestive glazing and more forceful statements. The music of jazz resonates from deep within these pictures, chromatic sound. The totality gives each painting its own power, its own specific weight, not measurable in ounces and pounds, but in its particular aesthetic and color-theoretical measurement and value. Within each painting there is a range from the airy

and feathery to the inescapable force of gravity. It is the combination of these different elements that fascinates me. For this visual momentum is perfectly balanced, in the equal-sided canvas squares, in the variability of the color fields, and in the fine equilibrium created through the relationship of the colors.

**Pulse and Brilliance:** It is a kind of ABC of painting that Whitney has created here, by showing us basic means and effects, by telling us that they are not only essential but also sufficient to create good painting. The result is eventful, indeed rather dramatic, both within each work and in the exhibition as a whole. There is a lot happening here once the eye has adapted to exploring the sequences in the painting. The paintings pulsate, intensely and heartfelt, the colors glowing intimately, in a way that embraces me, standing there in the middle of the room.

It is as though I experience moments in the flow of eternity in these paintings. A continually pulsating, shifting, chromatic sensation engages me; it vibrates, not loudly, but softly, echoing my own heartbeat. I am here, in the midst of art, in the midst of life.

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