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Stanley Whitney by David Reed

A painter colleague, Fabian Marcaccio, uses a phrase to describe a certain kind of artist. He says that they are "long runners." Stanley Whitney is a long runner.

Stanley and I have been colleagues for over 40 years, and I closely follow his paintings. We are almost exact contemporaries, both born in 1946. We developed our approach to painting in the '70s, a time when attempts at innovative painting were under attack from all sides. Traditionalists wanted to go back to what painting had been. Others didn't believe that any kind of painting was possible. Minimalism was an influence on his early work and mine. Despite Donald Judd's and Dan Flavin's discoveries in color, minimalism was seen then as a rejection of color. (David Batchelor analyzes this situation in more detail in his book *Chromophobia*.) Color at the time seemed a false direction, superficial and superfluous to more important concerns. However, it turns out that color was the great opening for painting and other forms of art as well. Color within painting has its own history of meanings, and these meanings can be combined with the new artificially produced colors in our environment, "found color," and experiences of new technologies such as portable electronic screens. Fresh meanings can emerge from these combinations of old and new, meanings that are powerful but hard to articulate.

It takes a lot of experience and self-reflection to begin to understand color. Looking back, it is clear that color was the possibility for the "long runners," those willing to spend time and thought working on this problem. There are many references inside and outside art through Stanley Whitney's use of color, and yet it's always original.

Working on this interview, I realized that Stanley and I have never had our paintings together in an exhibition. I have missed out—I always learn about my work when I see it contextualized by that of my colleagues. How could this have happened in New York where we both live? But this will change this summer when each of us will have a painting in a group show curated by Raphael Rubinstein, *Reinventing Abstraction: New York Painting in the 1980s,* at Cheim & Read Gallery.

— DAVID REED

DAVID REED So Stanley, you have that wonderful Bob Thompson drawing up on the wall. I first saw his work in a show at the New School in '69—

STANLEY WHITNEY Yeah, '69. On my way over to the *Village Voice* to check out the listings, because I was looking for a place to live, I encountered this small show of Bob Thompson's work at the New School. I didn't know who he was and I didn't realize he was African American. Seeing his work, I was just blown away, I couldn't believe it—the color, the drawing. Here I was looking at Goya, here at Velázquez, and I thought, That's just what I've been thinking about.

DR It was a memorial exhibition.

SW Done fairly soon after he died. Before I moved to New York, when I was in high school and lived in Philadelphia, I used to come to New York on the weekends. I had decided to go to art school in the Midwest to beat the Vietnam War draft. Going to the Midwest was probably a good thing for me. It got me out of the confusion about the race stuff and the drug thing. I don't know if I would have survived if I had met Bob Thompson. What interests me about Bob's work is his use of color, which really came out of black American music, and his love of European painting. He developed a great combination of Western painting and color as sound stemming from music, especially the music of Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Ornette Coleman. Those were really, really tough times, and I was very confused about art and race, you know—how to really negotiate them.

DR There are very few painters exactly our age, and I think it's because of the draft. It was hard to get a deferment to go to art school in those years. I was at the New York Studio School while on a fellowship through Reed College, so I was safe.

SW How to beat the draft was always on top of your head. Finally, in '68,'69, I got out on a medical deferment because I had asthma as a kid. Late in the war, there were antiwar doctors, and I went to one and got a letter saying I still had asthma. At the draft physical here in New York, I went to the last guy at the table, handed him the letter, and thought, If he says I'm going to be in, I will kick this table over. But he said, "You're out."

DR I had a similar experience. I took the physical in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I had starved myself so I weighed about 90 pounds. When the doctors couldn't draw blood, I was separated out from the others. When we first arrived at the induction center, we filled out forms that asked if we had belonged to a long list of "subversive" organizations. I had been involved in a lot of antiwar and protest demonstrations and had tried to be a conscientious objector, so I was able to check off a lot of boxes including the NAACP and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Being a member of those organizations and my weight kept me out. Like you, I remember going to an officer at a desk and being handed a slip of paper that said I had the 1-Y deferment. The officer threw my forms in a trash can and said he was glad they didn't have to bother with investigating me.

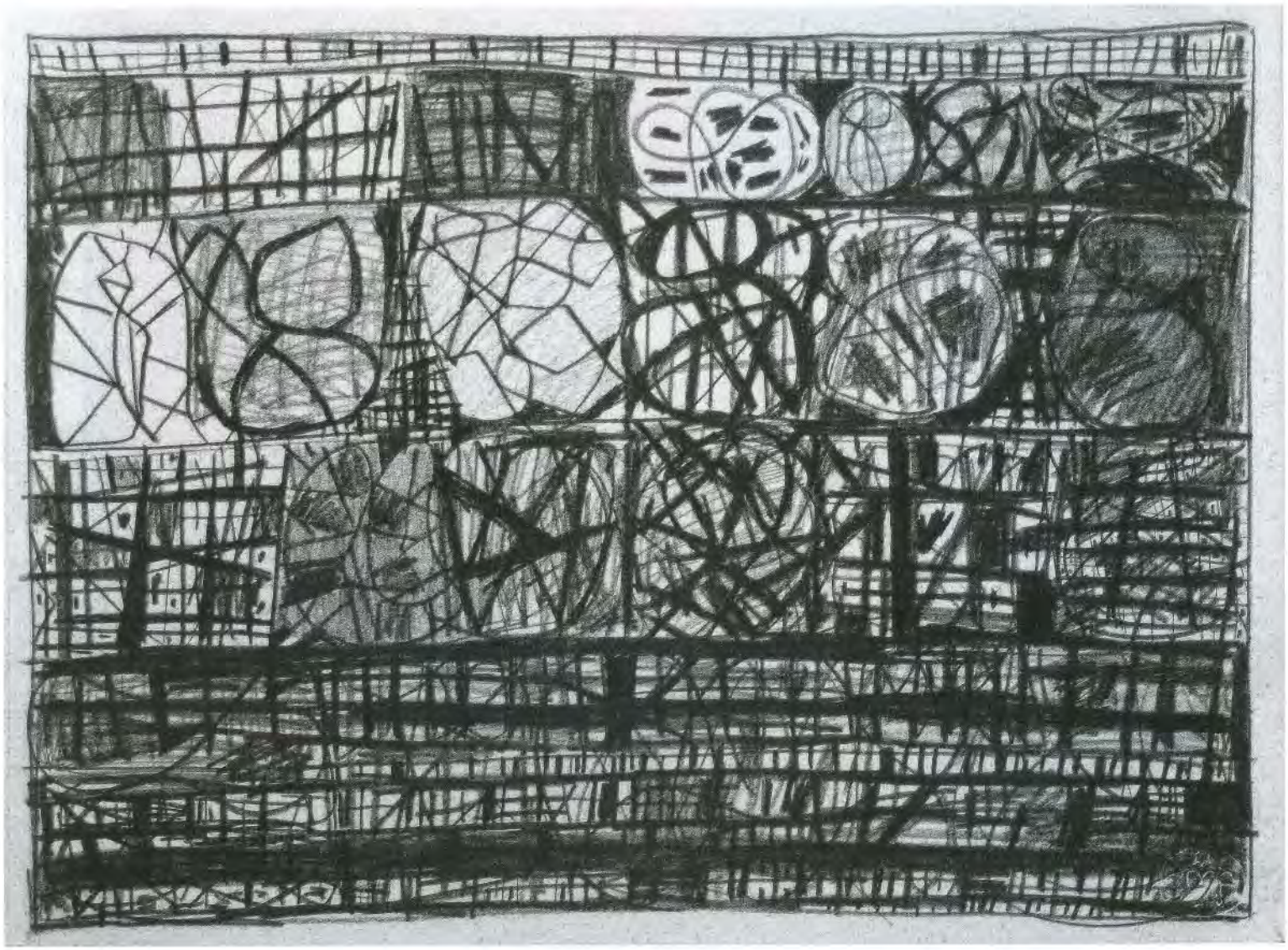
SW When I went to the draft physical, there was not a single white person in the place. I didn't wear any underwear on purpose. I walked up nude and they said, "Put your pants back on." And everyone laughed at me. There were guys in there with gunshot wounds and all kinds of things, and they were taking everybody. I was really worried. But luckily I had my letter from the doctor. I just wasn't going to go. It's funny that my son's first trip abroad with his high school was to Vietnam. I'm paying to send my son to Vietnam! But back to Albuquerque, were you painting there?

DR I was living near Abiquiú, New Mexico, on some land in an adobe house that I had bought from Georgia O'Keefe's adopted son. I was painting the landscape.

SW Are those the paintings from your catalog? Those are beautiful. The techno

Goya's Lantern, 2012, oil on linen, 72 × 72 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

Untitled, *1998, graphite lead on paper, 22 × 30 inches.*



When I first saw Cézanne, I thought, This is like Charlie Parker, only painting. It's like polyrhythm, a beat and a beat and a beat and a beat, like call and response.

quality, the looseness of the brush, it's just so much like your work now—the way you move the brush, the way you make that shape. There's a unique tactile quality to your work. For a long time, I got rid of all the markmaking in my work because I didn't want it to be abstract expressionism. Traveling around Europe by train, I saw graffiti all over and thought, I don't really want to go graffiti. That's why I got rid of the gesture of markmaking. Now I'm trying to rethink what that means. I'm getting more tactile with the painting.

DR For a long time my paintings have been affected by experiences of media: film, video, photography. I distrust traditional tactile surfaces in painting because they are so easily nostalgic. I want to create screens of light but now I find that such screens can incorporate more painterly qualities than I suspected. Painting can retaliate against media from the inside. Painterly surfaces keep appearing in different ways. I have to go with it.

SW I'm thinking similar thoughts about that. I don't force the work. The work doesn't follow me; I'm following the work. It has to be a slow mental and physical process. And that is where printmaking and drawing come in.

DR The prints are just in black and white?

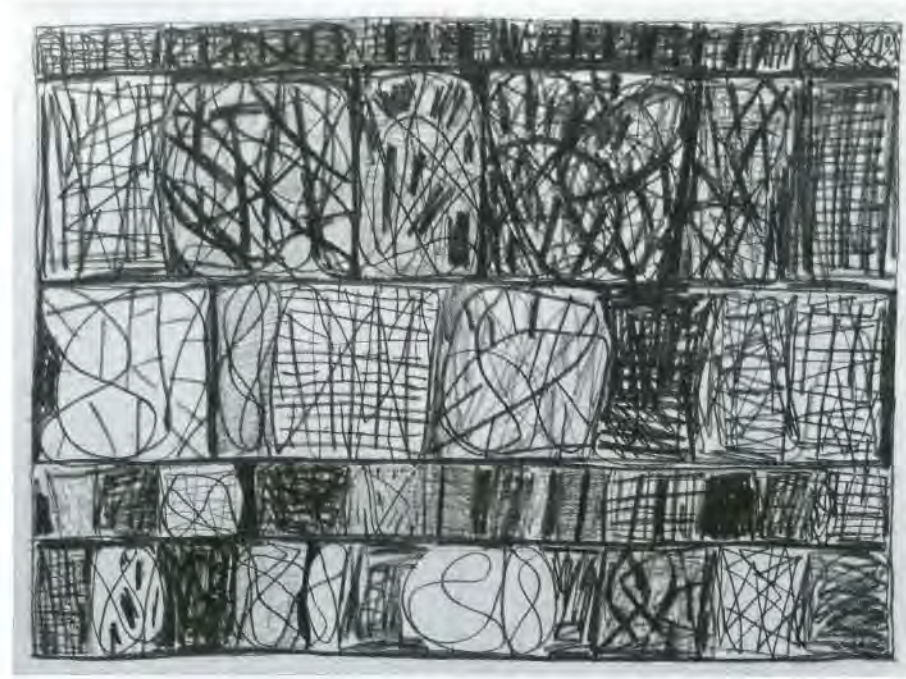
SW Yeah, I'm only rethinking the drawings, loosening up, not thinking about the paintings, and just seeing how that goes.

DR It's strange how our paths have crossed and missed during our years in New York. I wish they had crossed more often. When did you come here for good?

SW I came to New York in '68. I ended up living in Brooklyn, on Dean Street, because Dick Letham, who was my professor in Kansas City, was from Brooklyn and had bought a house. After graduating in '68, a bunch of us lived at his house. I didn't want to live in the Lower East Side. Even with Slugs being the place to go, it was just too rough for me.

DR Who were some of the others who came from the Art Institute in Kansas City?

SW Don Christensen had a loft on 94 Bowery. When I came here, Peter Young's work was everywhere—all those dot paintings. He was a real phenomenon. Larry Stafford had a loft, which Al Taylor later took over. Al and I came to town at the same time from Kansas City.



Untitled, 1998, graphite lead on paper, 22 × 30 inches.

DR I didn't know Al was also at the Art Institute.

SW Yes, I met Al at the Art Institute in '66. We went to the Whitney program when it was on Cherry Street; Donna Nelson was also there. And I was at the Studio School for a short time. Before Al moved, he had a loft on Canal Street above the 3 Roses, which I took after moving from Brooklyn.

DR We used to call the 3 Roses "The Bouquet." That was a tough bar. They tell me that Blinky Palermo hung out there.

SW It was a fun bar Friday night. It had a great jukebox, and all the workers were partying before they went home. I remember the sign very well. You'd walk home in the winter and see the 3 Roses light blinking and realize you were close to home.

DR There were no lights downtown in those days. One could walk all the way from the village and not see a single light.

SW Exactly. You could walk in the middle of Broadway and there would be nothing. Downtown was totally empty, totally dark.

DR How did it affect your painting to see the work by other artists in New York?

SW I was coming from made-up, figurative work where I'd paint self-portraits and things out of Goya or Velázquez. In Kansas City, all those paintings were right there at your doorstep, in the museum across the street. But I realized I wasn't a storyteller and there wasn't a story I wanted to tell anyway. The paintings got a little too psychological, and it became too complicated for me in terms of what story to tell. Race is a big issue, and I didn't know if I wanted to tell black stories or white stories. I didn't really want to bring all that into my studio. Then Dick Letham showed me a picture of a Morris Louis painting. I saw the pure color, and I thought, Oh, that's really something. I'm gonna go off and find some new heroes. I was trying to figure out how to move into the modern world. My work was changing so I dropped out of the Studio School. I just didn't think that the Studio School was part of the modern world.

DR It sure wasn't. I was at the Studio School a few years before you.

SW I didn't really want to hear stories

Nigerian Smile, 2012, oil on linen, 72 × 72 inches.

Songbird, 2012, oil on linen, 48 × 48 inches.

about the abstract expressionists, although now I love to hear them. And so when I came here, I tried to do the Max's Kansas City thing. Although it was hard to get into Max's in those days, at least for us.

DR I went a few times. I was scared to death of that place. I'd heard about the fights at the bar. People wouldn't talk to you if they didn't think you were important. I mostly sat alone.

SW No, they wouldn't talk to you. It was the type of bar where the Hells Angels would come in and start fights—pick on some guy with his girlfriend, beat him up. The artists who were friends with the owner, Mickey Ruskin, had their own table upstairs. Al Taylor and I were two young guys, not two young girls. They didn't really want us to come in. However, sometimes we did, and we would be there all night.

DR And you were just watching?

SW They wouldn't really let you participate. So you could watch artists argue; you know, in those days people still argued about art, whether it be Frank Stella or Andy Warhol or Dan Flavin. I knew the Greenberg people because of Dan Flavin, but I didn't fit into that crowd either. I didn't know where I fit in. I didn't meet a lot of black artists at that point in time. Al Loving, Gerald Jackson, and Peter Bradley I met a little later. Bradley was more connected to the Greenberg world, so I met a lot of other African American artists through him.

DR In 2006, Katy Siegel and I met with you and David Hammons while we were doing the research for our exhibition, *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*. We all sat and talked at Spring Natural restaurant. I hadn't realized until then that Greenberg and the critics and artists around him were more open toward African American artists, for a short time anyway. If I remember correctly, the way you put it was that the door opened in the late '60s and then closed by the mid-1970s.

SW It was the use of color that really brought it into focus and the fact that African American artists were more involved with music. The black jazz musicians were the ones who really opened the door. They weren't the black bourgeoisie. They were the artists. Miles Davis was "the person," he set the tone—what did Miles do, how did Miles dress? I would say that didn't change until Basquiat. As Gerald Jackson once told me, the jazz thing never really happened in a big way, say like the Rolling Stones or rock and roll. It never became a mainstay because it's such difficult music. Even for me. In high school, when I first heard Ornette's *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, it wasn't easy. I liked it, it wasn't bourgeois, it wasn't NAACP, it wasn't part of this boring conversation about race or integration, it was something totally different—a bigger part of the world. And that was where painters tried to take their painting. The scene around Greenberg was open to that kind of black underbelly of America.

DR Did you talk to Greenberg himself?

SW No, I never did. You know, if you were at a party and Greenberg was there with his people in the corner talking, when you went over, they would stop. They wouldn't talk to you. Maybe I was also shy. So I just kind of watched. I don't know if I was happy about it but that's what I could do. When you're young, you wonder, What is this art world and how do I fit in?

DR What kind of jazz interested you?

SW Well, there were all kinds of jazz. I used to go to Slugs, to the Village Gate or Vanguard to hear music. It was confusing since there was a lot of great music. I listened to John Coltrane, but I liked the Beatles, too. But jazz was deeply part of me. Music was always part of my life, before painting. I hung out with musicians but I realized I couldn't be a musician because I couldn't take the lifestyle. I couldn't run around all night, playing at clubs after hours. I wanted to go home to bed. In fact, I like painting best in the morning. Teaching worked out well for me. It gave me financial stability and the time to work. Looking back, the teaching career at Tyler was a good career. I had a lot of good students. I could have walked away a few years earlier but then I taught five years in Rome. I got to Europe, really, through teaching.

DR You have a good career in Europe. It seems to me that your work was appreciated there before it was here. In the '90s, I kept up with your paintings by seeing them at the art fairs in Cologne and Basel, especially at the booth of Galerie Christine König from Vienna.

SW I think New York is really Warhol's town; pop is just bigger here. In Europe, they have a sense of what abstraction is. They have a real sense of painting.

DR Yes, conceptual aspects of painting are more accepted there. I've also had more of a career in Europe. But I consider myself an American artist, so it's a conflicted situation.

SW They like the New York School in Europe and they have a sense of its history. I think I do New York paintings. I grew up being a real American painter.

DR I love that anyone can come to New York from anywhere and decide, for themselves, to be New Yorkers. In the same way you can decide to become part of the New York School, and then, through an appreciation and understanding of the visual culture here, be able to grow and hope to contribute new possibilities.

SW In those years, the infrastructure was very different. Artists moved into downtown warehouses, housing was cheap, people had two or three lofts, and you could find a job. I worked for a carpenter; I worked at the Strand Bookstore; I worked at Pearl Paint. If your rent was $150, you could make that in a week. Then, when SoHo became official, it became harder and harder. And that's when the teaching thing came in. I didn't even look; people offered me jobs, and I took them. In those days, they were looking for women and minorities to teach. That's how I got into Yale's graduate school. I always say, "A lot of black people went to jail, and I got to go to Yale." And because I went to Yale, I became visible.

DR Living was cheap, but it was tough to be a painter in the '70s in New York. It was assumed that painting was impossible.

SW Yeah, one of the last types of "young painting talent" exhibitions was *Ten Young Artists: Theodoron Awards* at the Guggenheim in 1971. After that, things kind of shut down. It felt like, well, we have enough to work with. We don't need much else. And for me, as an African American, it felt like there was a quota.

DR I was struck to hear you once say how much you learned from Donald Judd.

SW Well, the thing about Judd—when I first saw Barnett Newman's works, he was the hot painter in New York at

Studio view, 2013.

Just Like Ornette, 2010, oil on linen, 96 × 96 inches.

that time. I had no idea what to do with his paintings. It's not like looking at a Cézanne or a Velázquez or a Goya. You have a color and a line down the middle or the side. I liked it, but what do I do with it? Judd was able to take that idea from Newman and turn it into sculpture, as a way of abstract thinking. Judd's late work with color and structure opened the door for me. His work was everywhere, and its architectural, classical quality and its simplicity interested me. It's like going back to BC, you know, basic stuff.

DR To be provocative, I've sometimes told students, "No good modern painting has more than three or four colors." This isn't true, but I've found in my own painting, that as I add more colors, I get into trouble. I try to keep down the number of colors. You do just the opposite.

SW Well, I always want to have every color of the universe in the painting—if that's possible. When I was ten years old I went to a little art school in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, where I'm from. They had us do a self-portrait. I felt really weird—I was little, I was poor (in a very rich area), and I was the only black kid in the class. So I used every color on the palette. The teacher loved it, but my parents said, "What is that?" I never went back to the class. I had the color, but I wanted to be like everyone else.

DR You didn't go back because you felt your use of so many colors made you different from the other students? And your parents gave you a hard time about that?

SW Well, they had no idea about art; they didn't know where the art came from for me. You have to understand, my parents grew up not even being allowed to enter a museum because of their skin color. My older brother was a boy scout, so I thought that it was just too weird for me to go to art school. My first year in art school, I saw a Cézanne painting and I just fell in love with it. And that was it. I knew I was going to paint. In high school, I painted these really colorful paintings, but it took me a long time to figure out how to make color a subject matter.

DR What amazes me about your color is that your paintings are not decorative.

SW I agree, and that's one thing I had to work hard on. You have to put color in the right space, and that's where drawing comes in. The Greenberg people didn't draw. I didn't realize that until I went to

graduate school at Yale from 1970 to '72. I was in Al Held's drawing class, but we didn't really draw; we would talk all the time, and Al would tell stories. But when I got out of school, I would try and paint and the painting wasn't going anywhere. I realized that I had to go back to drawing. I started with these pen-and-ink drawings. I had the color in the paintings, so in the drawings I worked just in black and white. I wanted to put a mark down that I couldn't erase. I was also inspired by Van Gogh's pen-and-ink drawings but I didn't work from a landscape. I just worked on the space and on the structure. It was like working on the bare bones, the skeleton, not relying on color. That's when I realized that, for the color not to be decorative, it had to be in the right space. So I just worked on the space.

Then, when I was in Italy and Egypt in 1992, I understood that the last piece was density. Seeing the Colosseum and the Pantheon in Rome and then in Egypt, the pyramids and temples, I realized that I could stack the color together.

DR Your paintings are always special networks of connections between the colors that are next to each other and in vertical and horizontal sequences. To make this all the more complex, the relations between colors work in different ways when moving along horizontally or vertically. And on top of this, there's not one red, but five reds in the painting. So the reds in a painting have their own separate network of connections. A viewer can connect colors that are alike, or connect pairs of colors or colors along a vertical or horizontal band, or connect same-sized rectangles or rectangles related by transparency or by brush marks. You can look at each of your paintings in a million different ways.

SW Painting is like music. When I first saw Cézanne, I thought, This is like Charlie Parker, only painting. It's like polyrhythm, a beat and a beat and a beat and a beat, like call and response, you know—in the middle of the beat there's another beat. Cézanne was key and a big source for me. Going back and forth—the music, the color, the rhythm, the beat.

DR Your connection between Cézanne and jazz is really beautiful. I've spent hours looking at the late multicolor Judd sculptures, trying to figure out his system or decide if there even is a system. Your paintings have that same effect on me.

SW The only system I have really is top, middle, and bottom. Even if I wanted to make a red painting, I couldn't do it. I have to let the color take me wherever it takes me. Sometimes I paint little paintings, not like studies, but just to keep working. And sometimes I go, Oh, I can turn this into a big painting. But then I can't do it because I have to be totally open to wherever the painting takes me. The idea is that color cannot be controlled and that it has total freedom. One color can't overpower another color, you know. It's very democratic, very New York.

DR Because it's very hard to articulate what colors mean, color is a great opportunity for painting to give us a way to process our experiences in the world. We don't have the language to describe colors, much less their meanings. So color operates on a more unconscious level than other aspects of the world. All that meaning is there and will come out, even if we don't know how to say what it is.

SW If you go to, say, Senegal, or India, or South America—of course, there's a lot of color in these cultures traditionally. But even here in the States or in Europe, people are now much more open to color. There's lots of color in TV shows, in sports. The black culture that has been the underbelly of America is now right there, front and center—color is there. So, for me, it works out great. But I have to say, the reason I paint only a certain size is because some people are like, "Oh, *too* much color."

DR Both of our work comes out of '70s minimalism. In those days it was thought that you had to eliminate color to be considered a serious artist. Color was seen as decorative or emotional.

SW I think artists have tried to explore color but not in a real worldly sense. When I say that I mean that if you go to India, there are worlds and worlds of color—10,000 shades of orange on the street. I really want the hand to be a part of it. I want color to shift if I put it on thicker or thinner. I want the human touch.

DR The specificity of your colors often comes through transparency and layering. You couldn't get those colors in another way. Glazing or transparency is sometimes considered to be old-fashioned, when in fact, it's just the opposite. Transparency is the way most modern colors are created, both in terms of technology and material. Transparent colors are the new colors.

SW That's true. You know, I love to look at Courbet, or Velázquez, or Goya, it's like the red slash. I want to have some of those elements in my painting. I never really paint subject matter, I just like what the paint is doing. So for me to go look at, say, Velázquez is really important. I want those ideas about color, light, and touch—I just want all those aspects of painting.

DR You're chasing a particular kind of subject matter that only comes through the color.

SW If I look at Courbet's *Portrait of Jo* (*la belle Irlandaise*), I might be thinking about the way he painted that hair, the weight of the color. Or, in a Manet, I might look at what the white in the dress is doing. He changed the touch, and it's a cloud. Those are the things that interest me and that I'm trying to adopt. But it took me a long time to get those kinds of colors. Earlier, I painted marks in a gray field. I couldn't make a lot of color. I couldn't really control the space.

DR Sometimes I imagine what it would be like to go to another planet and be the first to see unexpected, unknown colors. Stanley, perhaps we can take that trip while still on this planet.