

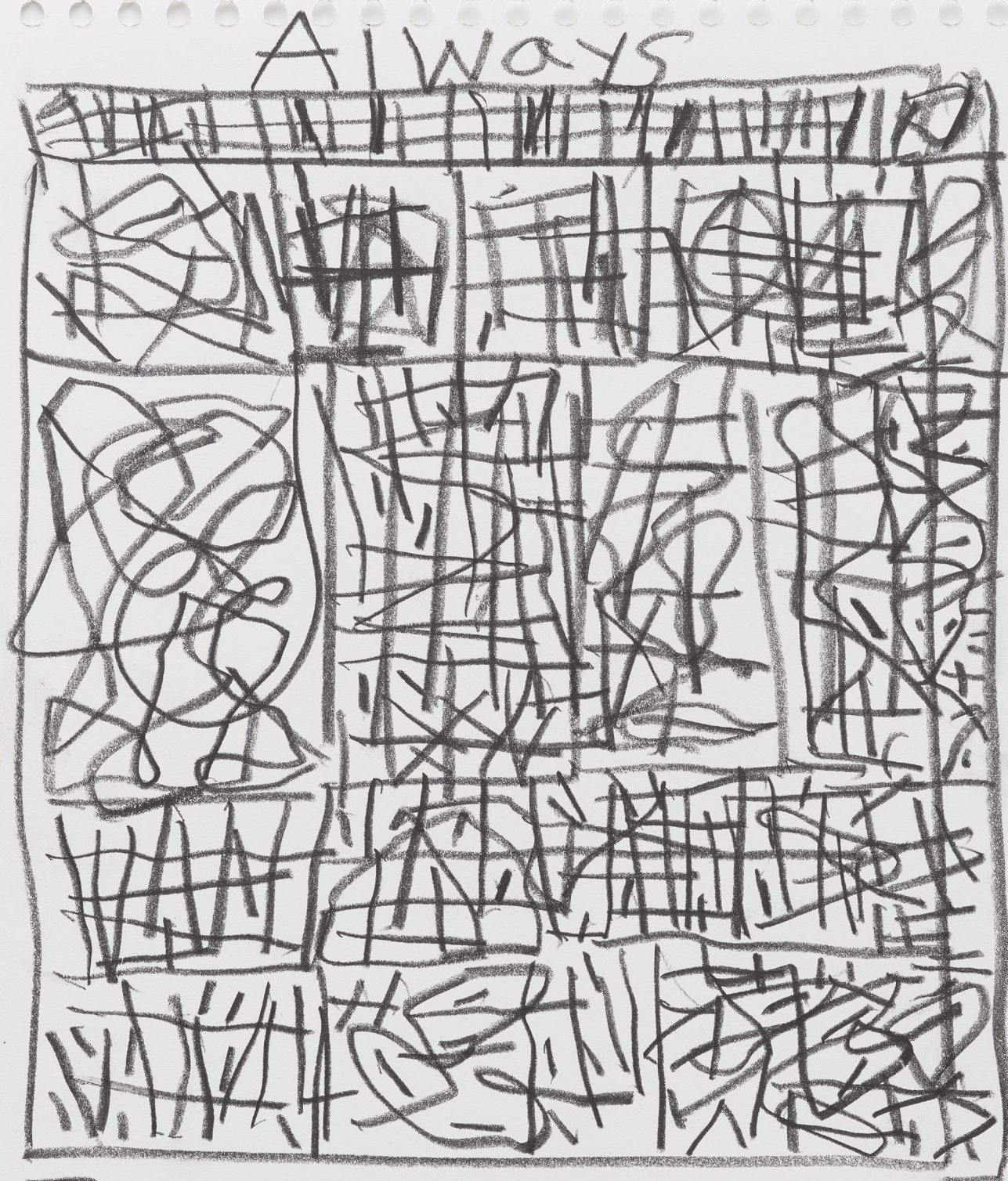
# No to Prison Life

## Stanley Whitney in conversation with William Whitney

I grew up around art. Literally. My dad's studio while I was growing up was located on the other side of one of my bedroom's walls. If he hammered a nail into the wall, I'd hear it. I'm probably the only person who has seen him actually paint in the studio, music blasting and all—usually due to a school holiday that wouldn't correlate with my mom's schedule or what not. Growing up around art, I took it for granted to an extent. It was all I was aware of, which inherently made me think that this was everyone's experience. I was used to being brought to gallery openings or waiting at the end of museum exhibitions for my parents to finish looking at the art. I remember being so excited when I was old enough to stay home and not attend the opening. Nowadays, I cherish the opportunity to work with artists, and see their artwork in person. I didn't anticipate interviewing my dad anytime soon. I've generally tried to create a separation between my parents' public figures as artists, and myself as an art writer. I'm an only child in a very tight knit close family, and I have a very good private relationship with both of my parents, that I generally prefer remains private. However, at the moment, it seems foolish to continue that separation, especially when my own experiences as a young Black man (technically, I'm bi-racial) echo the experiences of millions of other Americans. I know my father to be a very political person and artist, which many people are beginning to see now as well. I believe in the power of art to impact people positively both consciously as well as unconsciously. Art puts love into the world, and right now the world needs a lot of love. My goal in conducting this interview was to have an open and honest conversation with my dad about how the America he grew up in is different from the one that we both currently live in. My experiences tell me that a lot has changed, but in listening to him, I'm reminded that a lot has also stayed the same or gotten worse. We must strive to be better, for all that have come before us, and for all of those who will come after us. I hope this conversation, and the new works on paper that will follow, are able to evoke open and honest conversations with everyone they come into contact with.

—William Whitney





Running From the  
NYC Police 2020



**William Whitney:** Let's start by discussing your drawing practice. You're always drawing.

**Stanley Whitney:** Absolutely, I draw all the time. Drawing kind of keeps you young as a painter. Drawing keeps you dealing with a lot of possibilities. It keeps you fresh. I think every artist has to reinvent drawing. I liked Matisse's drawing and Van Gogh's drawing, because that's the kind of painter I am, and Van Gogh's drawings seemed to me – when I really realized it after graduating in the early '70s – was that they were as rich and colorful as the paintings. The idea of the line and the mark having a lot of power.

**WW:** What's always fascinated me about your drawings is the intensity and richness of the lines in your work given the absence of color.

**SW:** You look at those Matisse drawings of just the head with one line and they're just as powerful as the paintings. The power of lines. I'm always looking for the power of an expressive line in terms of drawing. If I make a black and white drawing, that's very colorful to me. And then in terms of writing things down, *Always Running from the Police* came out of that

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Biggie Smalls and 2Pac song, which I really like. A lot of times I'm listening to music and something sticks with me. I have music in my head all the time. If I'm riding a bike, I sing all the time. I'll be drawing and I'll think 'oh that sounds really good' or 'I like that' or 'this is really good and important'. The sketches like that [*No To Prison Life* and *Always Running from the Police*], now they're becoming really public. But they weren't always meant to be public. Originally they were meant for me, for reference, for fun things. When we did the sketchbook reproductions that Alex [Logsdail] suggested for the show at Lisson [Gallery], originally that sketchbook was not supposed to be public. It's something that I just do for myself. There's a lot of things I have in sketchbooks that I don't want people to see. But all these things, they're all things that feed me. I am a very political person, as an African-American you're forced to be political. Really, I don't know how you could not be, living in America. When I was a kid, I was always running from the police. I think I was stopped by the police from when I was 10 to up until maybe 24, 25, 26. In New York,

I was never stopped much except for once, a while ago in Chelsea. When I went to school in Kansas City, I was stopped every day. I didn't tell anyone because I thought it was normal. In Philadelphia, we got stopped all the time. I never went out without my ID, never. You always had to have your ID, otherwise you could go to jail. When I used to go Philadelphia as ten-year old, we'd get off the train and be stopped immediately.

**WW:** By the police?

**SW:** Yes. But because we were from the suburbs, from Bryn Mawr, which was a rich suburb on the Main Line, the cops kind of left us alone because we weren't from North Philly, we weren't directly from a ghetto situation, so they kind of left us alone because they weren't sure...maybe these are affluent black kids. They would stop us though; we'd walk a couple blocks and then another cop would stop us. It was just the way it was. In our little ghetto area of Bryn Mawr, if we left our area, we'd get stopped. "Where are you going? What are you doing here?"

I went to school in Columbus, Ohio and I would get stopped all the time, and I'd be downtown and cops would say "what're you doing here" and I'd say "I'm going to school" and they'd go "Okay." But again, I wasn't a local.

If I was a local, I'm sure they would have harassed me more.

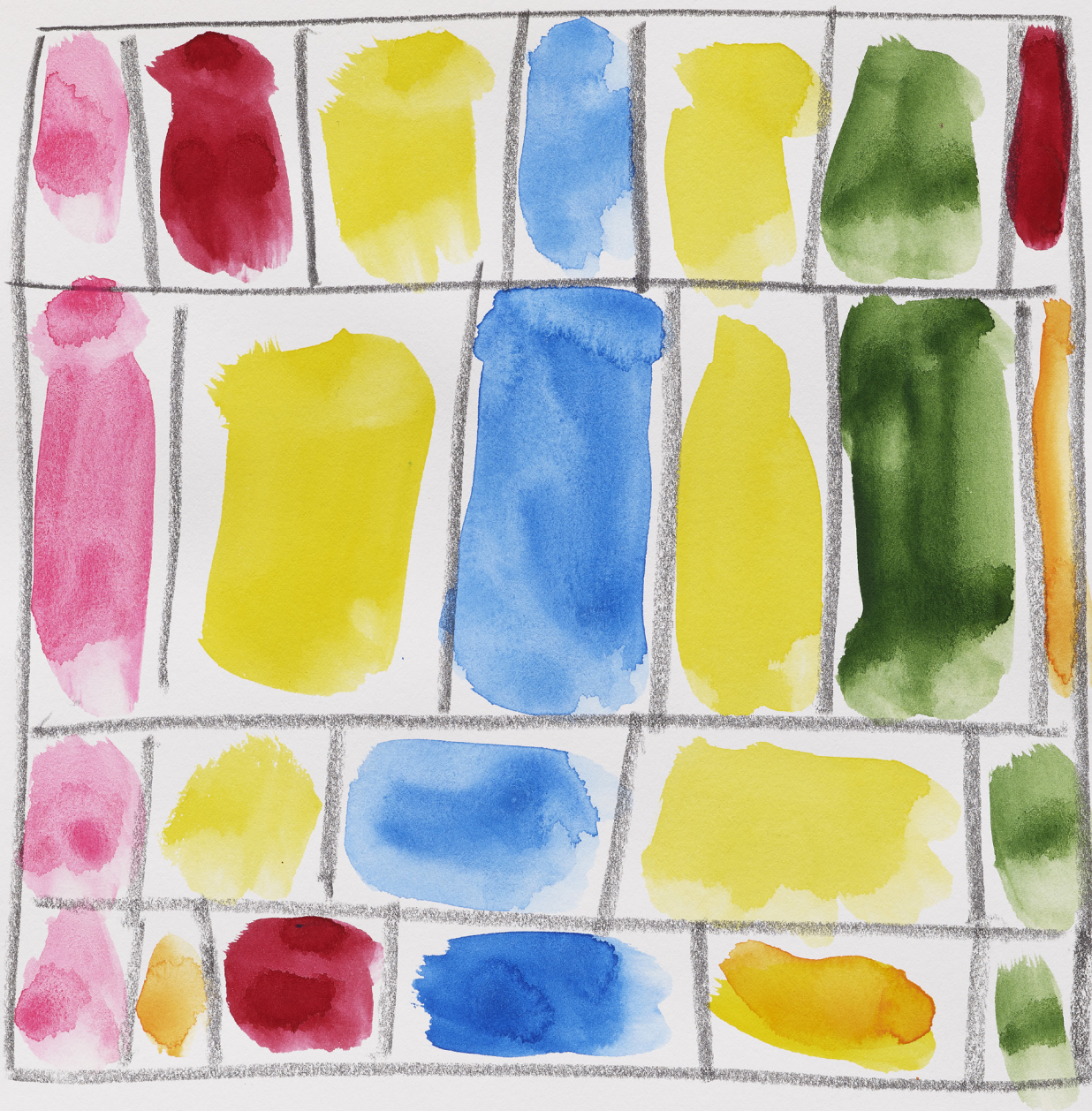
That was really common. Running from the police, when I was a kid, it was like a game. Don't let the police catch you, and in Bryn Mawr usually the local cops couldn't catch us, because we knew all the back alleys and all the backyards, we could jump over the fences and they couldn't do that. We'd be up on rooftops and fences and garages, hiding out. It was kind of a fun game. And in those days, it was before prison. They weren't shooting us, at least not there—North Philadelphia it was a bit different because there were gangs there but where I came up in the suburbs they weren't shooting us then. It was before prisons. My observation is that the prison industrial complex really comes after integration. Prisons really started when integration began, because they have an idea of how black they want the country to be. I always tell people, "people went to jail, and I got to go to Yale." That's the way I really see it.

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**WW:** Yeah, people's perceptions and experiences of the police are so different, depending on where they come from. A "good cop" in one neighborhood can be a really dangerous cop in another. I remember this moment in 9<sup>th</sup> grade when I ran straight home from the subway station. I'll never forget it, it must've been 1am or something, and I'd told you and mom that I'd be home by midnight. And I was so worried about being an hour late—my phone had died—I sprinted right off the train as soon as the doors opened. I felt as if I was running track. Then, when I finally got home, I was out of breath from

sprinting and you were up—I thought "oh, shit". You didn't get mad at me though, you just asked me why I was out of breath, and then when I told you, you told me never to run, especially at night, because people might assume that I'd stolen something. That was something that seems so obvious to me now, but at the time, I remember being totally shocked. First, that you weren't mad, and then second, that I could be putting myself in danger by running in my own neighborhood. Luckily, I got home safe but that's how a lot of these police brutality cases begin. It's that initial assumption of guilt — that you're doing something wrong, that starts the entire interaction.





*Untitled (10 to 20)*, 2018, Graphite and watercolor on paper, 35.6 x 27.9 cm; 14 x 11 in



Moving on, though, I wanted to ask about the title “No to Prison Life”, which you’ve used couple of times, first for a painting in Documenta and then again for a commission at the Kansas City Art Institute. How did you come up with that? Where did that come from?

**SW:** I read this book “Blood in the Water” by Heather Ann Thompson on the Attica Prison Uprising, which happened in the ‘70s. I remember Archie Shepp put out an album around the same time, called Attica Blues. So, everyone was very aware of Attica and I thought I had a sense of what Attica was. Then when I read this book, I realized that back in my early twenties, when I thought I’d been politically aware, the reality was we didn’t know anything that was going on. In the uprising, before the guards came in guns blaring and shot everyone in the prison yard, people were saying “I don’t care what happens, I got to see the night sky for the first time in twenty years.” You forget...prison life...what’s prison life? What kind of sounds do you get to hear? You’ll never hear a baby. You don’t hear too much female laughter. You don’t get to see the sky at night. For ten years or twenty years. Even five years...three years. So you think what is prison life? I eat oatmeal in the morning and I always joke with Marina [Adams] that this is prison food. But what kind of food do they get? She always says “this is good food you’d never get this in prison.” So, No to Prison Life. People don’t realize that in twenty years, you’re a different person.

**WW:** Totally. Even with COVID-19, everyone in New York being stuck in their apartments. You start to miss very mundane things fairly quickly.

**SW:** We’re human beings, we’re social animals. As much as I’m a hermit, I still have to have some kind of social engagement. So to lock someone up for twenty years...No to Prison Life. Most people don’t need to be in prison, people are there because they’re poor, and you can’t expect poor people to be shown all this material stuff and then be told “No, you can’t have it.” While you show it to them. You’re going to try to steal, you’re going to take. You want to have those Michael Jordan sneakers as a kid, you’re going to get them somehow. Why shouldn’t you have that stuff, everyone else has it. So No to Prison Life, it’s really very important that we get rid of prisons and think of a better way of healing and educating people. Most people in prison, if you educated them, they wouldn’t be there. If they weren’t so angry, they wouldn’t be there. If someone’s a mass murderer or an insane killer, then okay, I can see that, but most of the prison population is not that.

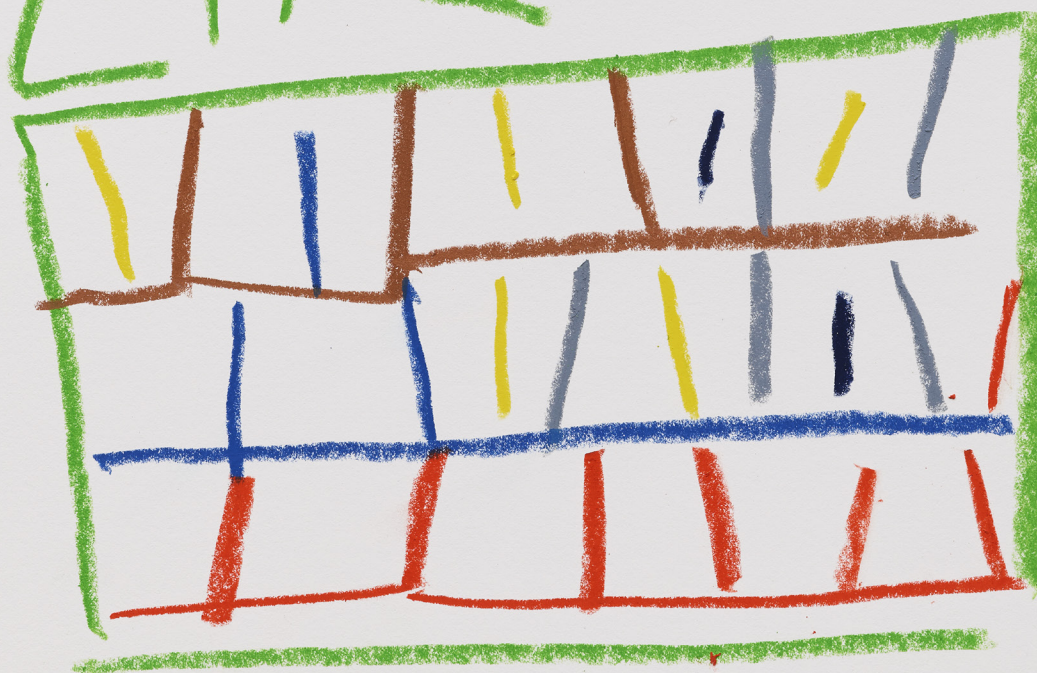
**WW:** There was a very positive reception to the drawing that you did in *New York Magazine* in relation to the ongoing protests and the murder of George Floyd. People seem very happy that you have a voice and are speaking out. What was your reaction to that?

**SW:** I was very surprised at that. You know when I make work I never

Barley Whitney

No To Prison

Life





know how good or effective it is. I never know. You're always busy when you make art, trying to get to something you haven't seen before. So if you haven't seen it before then you can't recognize it, being good or bad, so it's hard to recognize. That drawing I did, I mean I thought it was interesting but it's not for me to know so much, it's more for me to do. I don't do these things and know, "Oh, this is going to have a big effect.": I was surprised by it, that people related to it and liked it. I don't put too much on Instagram, or stuff like that, but every once in a while, I do. It's such a funny media, if I post something then everyone likes it, I don't know if they actually like it or if it's just because I put it out there. It's good to see that something like that can touch a lot of people. That's what's happening now and people have more black mentors—

**WW:** Do you think that's similar to what went on in the '60s? With the youth rising up.

**SW:** I think it's similar in some ways, but the '60s was much more about radical people, whereas this is more about diverse people. In the '60s, you had the Weathermen, who were these kids out of Columbia [University] who were going radical and blowing up buildings. I can't imagine anyone from Columbia now blowing up a building. Getting that radical. That was the Vietnam war, and everyone was dying in that war. So this is the beginning of something different. It's a bigger population of people who are concerned. What Trump did was allow people to really think about "how fascist do you want the country to be?" Everyone's affected by him on every level, so I think now people are reevaluating the country. The police killings, and Black Lives Matter, have been going on for a long time. Even N.W.A. with that song "Fuck the Police", now that song is not seen as such a dangerous song. The reaction to it at the time was "Oh that's dangerous, these are dangerous people." Public Enemy, they would come out with fake guns, and the cops were like "these kids are really dangerous." So, what's happening now is something totally new. It's young people claiming their rightful place in the world and taking charge. I think it's not just here; it's going to happen everywhere. In Iran, there are more young people than old people. All around the world.

**WW:** I think people are finally starting to believe that it is their world, there are a lot of folks with nothing to lose who want to make their voices heard.

**SW:** I mean it is their world! If they don't take charge, then there is no world. Older people for the most part, are reluctant to change and don't want to change. They have ten, maybe twenty years left, they don't really care. I think people are really realizing that. If I can have a little say in that, and do something to wake people up a bit — then that's great.

**WW:** I was thinking back to a story I've heard you tell, in the '60s when the Black Panthers were recruiting, and you were in the basement



painting. Now, you're using your drawings and public commissions to speak out on issues you have strong opinions on.

**SW:** In the '60s, I felt a need to paint that I couldn't articulate. I couldn't necessarily defend my position. Nowadays, I think you can be whatever kind of voice you want. People have all these ideas, Black people play basketball, Black people do this and that, even in art. Black people paint Black people, you can't paint White people. All these ideas of ownership. I own this, you own that. It's not true, the world's round. It's not really true. It's like illegal immigrants, people have always immigrated all over. They talk about "Things started in Africa and then people migrated to Europe." Well, then were they illegal immigrants when they got to Europe? People are always moving around, the world's always shifting. The position I took on in the '60s was a hard one for me to take on at that point, but I was always someone who could be alone. I was a loner, I felt that I could do it, even if I couldn't really defend the position back then. I always think I painted through the war, it's a good thing I did and now people can see it.

**WW:** That makes sense, you wouldn't have your current platform without that experience and perseverance.

**SW:** Right now, I think I have people's ear. People trust and believe in me. I can kind of do whatever I want, and people see it now. A lot of things

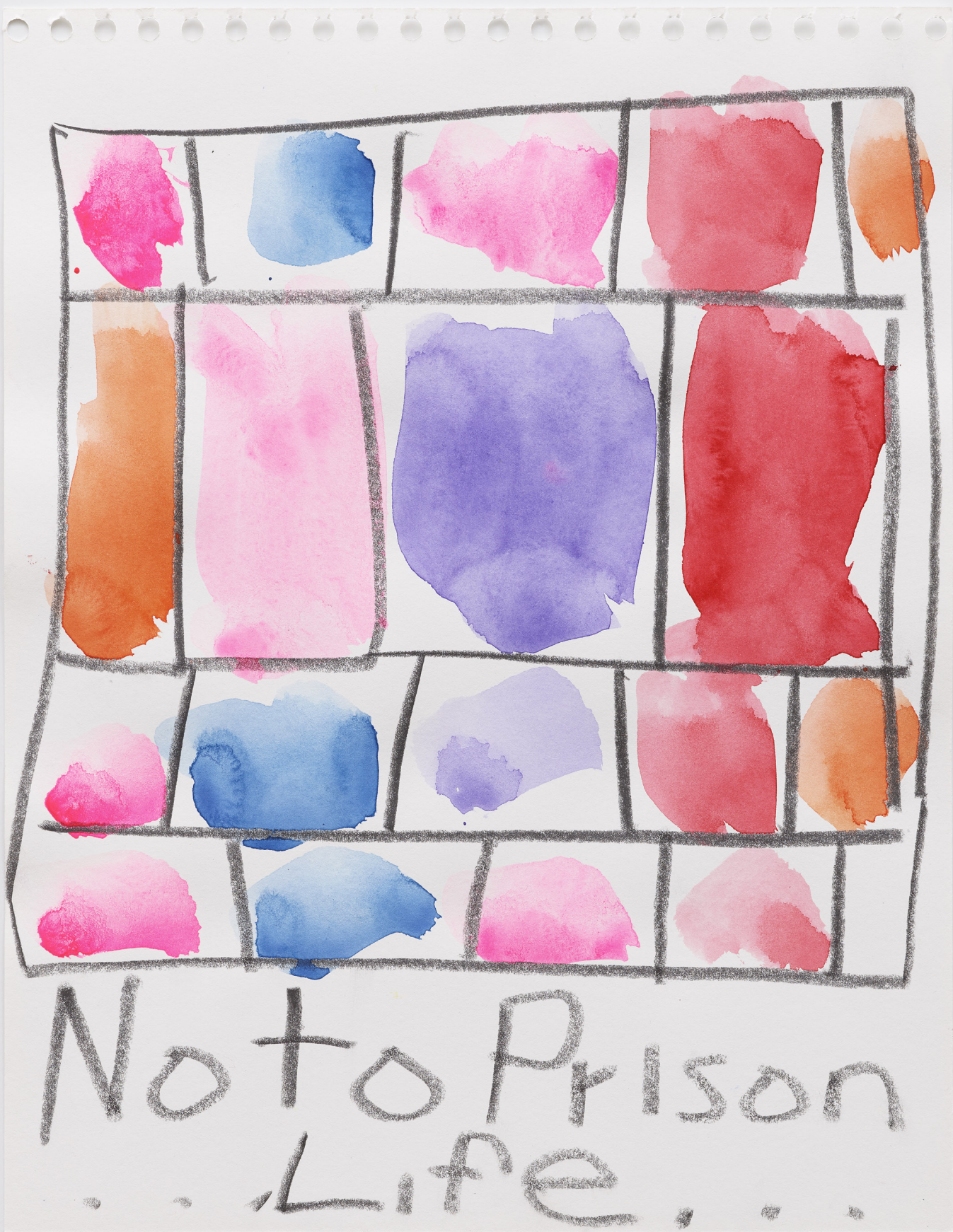
**“I was used to rough, life had always been rough for me. So that didn't get in my way. I felt I had something to say, and I wasn't going to let anything get in my way.”**

had to happen for me to be seen, because things just weren't in place. It isn't just that you become famous on your own, a lot of things have to be in place for people to see you. It's interesting because for me, I had to come through a lot to get here. But I was always used to rough, even going up and down the highway for 35 years, up and back, teaching at Tyler, most people who do that become too burnt out to do anything else. I had to keep that up and simultaneously keep up my painting practice. I was used to rough, life had always been rough for me. So that didn't get in my way. I felt I had something to say, and I wasn't going to let anything get in my way. Even when I was teaching, I would tell students "don't let anything get in your way." As a teacher, I would never get in someone's way. Everyone has to have their own voice and you can't really teach someone how to be an artist, you can just mentor them a bit, support them a little bit, encourage them, maybe point out a few things and then get out of their way. No laws. No love laws, people have all these love laws, I don't believe in love laws.

**WW:** How so?

**SW:** You can't love this, you can't love that, you can't love this person, you can't marry that person because they're this or that. I don't believe in love laws. That's it. Human beings just want to be loved. That's a big thing: love, beauty. Even in my work, I try to put in a lot of love and





*Untitled (No to Prison Life), 2018, Gouache and graphite on paper, 35.6 x 27.9 cm; 14 x 11 in*



beauty in the work. That's important, people seem to really relate to that, and what that is. I always think Matisse and his paintings in Nice with the Nazis down the street and he's painting these beautiful little paintings upstairs. And Picasso's *Guernica*, which is a very anti-war painting, which is so important—a great painting, and then you have these beautiful little Matisse that he painted in the midst of hell. They're both interesting statements about what's going on.

**WW:** Given all the police shootings right now, my mind immediately went to Goya, and his painting *Third of May*.

**SW:** Yeah, those three are sort of the obvious anti-war paintings because they show death, they show war. That's a great painting, I agree, I love that painting. But then there's something about the French...

**WW:** Painting beauty in the midst of destruction.

**SW:** I'm not necessarily saying one is better than the other, or anything like that, but I find that similar struggle in my own work, of where I am in regard to that. Even [Edvard] Munch's *The Scream*—can you make a painting or drawing that has the same impact as Munch. Can you do that in this age, something that has that kind of effect on people? I don't know. You never know though, even with this drawing, I had no idea that this drawing would have the impact that it has. It was just something one day that I chose to put out. When *New York Magazine* wrote to me, I was really shocked. I'd put it on Instagram figuring you know...it's just Instagram. It was just a little something. As a painter you really want to see that, that your work is capable of that. Yeah, I spent a lot of hours in the studio working so now finally I can do whatever I want on that. It's hard to be a painter, no matter who you are, because there's already lot of bad paintings out there and you don't want to add to that. So, it's really hard to be painter, but you know you're either a painter or not a painter. I was born a painter, which is a funny, weird thing to say, if that can really inspire anyone else that's great you know, to feel that they have a voice to say something—in any medium—that's great. That's the goal to really inspire and have people put something really beautiful and important out into the world, to keep the world turning.



William Whitney and Stanley Whitney at *Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange* at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 2015