

**Stanley
Whitney**

**Dance the
Orange**

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—Stanley Whitney

Conversation — Stanley Whitney and Lowery Stokes Sims

Lowery Stokes Sims: I don't think there's anything more complicated than the subject of black artists and abstract art. There is always this idea that it's not connected to the black experience.

Stanley Whitney: For me, becoming an abstract painter was something that happened over time. From the start I knew I was a painter and that I loved painting. But I liked different aspects of all kinds of painting: Cézanne for one reason, or Veronese for another. I leaned towards abstraction as I figured out what I wasn't interested in making. For example, I knew that I wasn't a storyteller or landscape painter. But I became interested in abstraction by the openness of it all. I saw endless possibilities.

It's funny, when I met Philip Guston (who got me to go to New York), he was going towards figuration as I was going towards abstraction. I think that abstraction allowed me to get involved with different cognitive aspects of painting. Even the system that I have now allows me to create paintings that are paintings inside of paintings.

I couldn't figure out what my subject matter was until I began to focus on color. I already knew that I could use color to carry my work. But then I realized that color was the subject in and of itself. That's when things sort of gelled. That was a few years after I finished graduate school in 1972. It was probably 1979 or 1980. But not color like Barnett Newman, for example. His work interested me but as a young artist, I didn't know what you could do with a line on a canvas or a big red field with a couple of lines down it. You can't live off of that.

LSS: Do you mean you can't "live off of it" in terms of making a living or in terms of...

SW: In terms of working in the studio. There wasn't anything I could take from Newman's approach to abstraction to make it mine.

Abstraction really opened up the possibility of getting a lot of things into the paintings, and I became this abstract painter. Even now, to be a signature abstract painter in the twenty-first century is a really odd thing, but as I see it, the colors are so endless that I can just keep going. Young people whom I come in contact with are surprised that I've been making this kind of painting for thirty years. Yeah, I guess I have been doing it for a while. But then you have to figure out: "How do you keep this thing alive?"

As long as I feel I'm painting strong individual paintings, and I'm bringing my life to the work and getting my life into the paintings, then I'm okay. It's been a long haul in terms of the different aspects of my life but I think when you face the canvas and you're painting, you have to bring everything to it. It's also been a long haul in terms of where the paintings come from, how they evolved. What comes out of my growing up? What comes out of my blackness, my maleness, just being a human being? When you're facing a blank canvas, you need all of these things to make it something. I realize that as opposed to other artists, I am really interested in working and reinventing what I do, staying in one spot and working on the work.

LSS: That's kind of a Zen approach—to a certain extent.

SW: I guess you could say that, but for me it's not so much Zen as a way to look at what I did in the past compared to what I'm doing now. I'm working on a book with Karma Books, and as I look at my work from the 1970s or '80s, I'm thinking about where I could have gone, where I didn't go or why I chose to go this way—the choices I've made in terms of what painting is to me. I've always wanted to go towards the inner. When I first met David Hammons he said to me, "These paintings are really quiet. How could something be so quiet and have so much to say?" And I get that. I'm going towards some quiet thoughts.

LSS: I don't know if I would necessarily describe your colors as quiet. An action or gesture in them might be subtle, indicated through brushstrokes or lines and divisions that are not quite straight, but you definitely use color to activate the surfaces.

This topic of color reminds me of a conversation I had with Alex Katz maybe twenty years ago. It was around the time that MoMA was showing Jacob Lawrence's reunited *Migration Series*, and at the same time, at the Metropolitan Museum, we were showing the Horace Pippin exhibition that Judith Stein had curated for the Pennsylvania Academy of the

Fine Arts in Philadelphia. And Alex said the most extraordinary thing to me: that he'd heard that back in the day people thought Jake painted with "black" colors. That threw me for a loop. It made me wonder if there was indeed a moment in time when people associated colors and the quality of colors with different kinds of races and genders much more strongly than we do now. I do remember, growing up in the 1950s and '60s that African Americans—particularly women—associated loud, bright colors with being lower class. The ideal was to stick with pastels and neutrals to fit into mainstream culture. Perhaps this idea is a way to segue into a dialogue about abstraction and culture.

SW: Well, in the course of my path through the art world, I have brought up the idea of black color and talked about that. I think there is something there between culture and color, and we all recognize this fact. I also grew up with this idea of playing down color. When I first started painting at ten years old, I went to a class and I painted portraits of ladies in every color they gave me. Everybody else painted in regular tones, and I thought at first, I've done it all wrong. But the local art school teacher loved it.

Years later when I was an undergraduate, I saw Cézanne's work. It was a big revelation, because I saw the way he used color in terms of music. I felt his color had great rhythm. I was thinking of Charlie Parker. It was then that I could see that what you bring to the paintings is your culture.

There is something about my work in terms of the rhythm it has—a kind of polyrhythm. I realized that when I first came to New York. I didn't use color like Kenneth Noland or even Frank Stella. I think there is something about the music or the color that could be called African American. As I said, we grew up associating color with sound. The question is how cultural references are mixed in or what they are mixed in with. Can you really put your finger on it to say why something is specifically from West Africa?

LSS: Are you talking about Cézanne's work in terms of his brushstrokes and the way that he created form?

SW: The way he patterns it. In Philadelphia, where I grew up, everybody talked about music, and music has its patterns. We all practiced our dance steps before we did our homework. Those kinds of things were always there. But then, when I went to art school, I got involved with what they said painting is or what art is. Then I became involved in learning the craft, and it took me a while to put together all the pieces of what that craft is, and then, what I'm bringing to that craft.

LSS: When exactly did you introduce the format that uses four horizontal bands to organize your compositions?

SW: Probably this happened over time. I'd say it was around 1990, when I really decided to make color more prominent than gesture in my drawing. When I came to New York, Color Field painting was prevalent. I could identify with it because of the color, but I was very critical of the artists doing it because I didn't think they were tough enough. Since it was clear these artists didn't draw at all, I went back and did a lot of black-and-white drawings.

LSS: So what is the relationship of drawing to the paintings? Is this about the hand, or gesture?

SW: For me, drawing is a way to understand where things are in space. I felt that I needed to work on space because I didn't want my color to be decorative. I wanted color to have a real intellect. When I got into graduate school, I knew what drawing was in a figurative sense, but I didn't know what drawing meant in terms of abstraction. The first thing I thought about was Van Gogh's drawings and just how rich they were. I thought, I'm going to do black-and-white drawings that are as rich as color, and yet not rely on color. I did these drawings that were more like landscapes, and I thought more in terms of space because I wanted everything really open. In my paintings, I wanted a lot of space as you see in Jackson Pollock's work and the depth of color of Mark Rothko.

I started to create works with color fields that eventually got more baroque as I painted forms that floated in the compositions. I really wanted to keep them very gestural,

so that they were more like mark making. I slowly realized I could make the space within the color. By 1993, when I went to Egypt, I had found the last piece of the puzzle for my work. I realized I could put forms, colors and marks together and still have a lot of air. The space was still there. This was important because I thought previously that if I put colors or forms next to each other that I would lose the space. Then I realized that the space is in the color, not around the color.

LSS: Couldn't color also suggest an exterior space?

SW: Well, color could suggest space, but I thought people generally used color against white to have that space. As my paintings became much more gestural, I realized I wanted to quiet them down. I didn't want to go graffiti. I wanted to get rid of some of the Abstract-Expressionist type of mark making.

LSS: So you were trying to reduce the movement, the gesture in that sense?

SW: Yes I tried to figure out another idea of what gesture is. I didn't want my gesture to be an Abstract-Expressionist gesture. By that time I was living in Rome. There I got more into an architectural kind of space, and was looking at Giorgio Morandi's paintings. He lived in Bologna, so I'd go there to see his work all the time. I liked how quiet they were. I thought about using more color and less Ab-Ex gesture. It's kind of like the work started to evolve that way. In fact, at one point, when the painting started getting more and more like solid colors I tried to stop it.

LSS: But aren't you introducing a lot of gesture just in the way that you allow the brushstrokes to be evident? I mean, in each of those squares you can actually see evidence of the strokes. They may be within the boundaries of the color area but it does give those areas a certain character.

SW: That's true. I'm going back now and rethinking what gesture is. The system I use allows me to go with any color, anytime I want. I paint a lot of color very quickly and directly now. But this is what you can do with oil painting, as opposed to acrylic, because with oil painting you get a lot more of the hand, a lot more of the touch. I wanted to bring all of those European notions into the painting. So now instead of having the gesture of a quick line, the gesture is in the paint itself, like laying the paint down—whether it's thick or thin. The color changes because of the touch.

LSS: Yes, and also as one area of painting flows into the other that effectively creates another color.

SW: Even within one color. Depending on how you mix and lay down the paint, sometimes it's thinner, thicker, or it's more dense. Sometimes you see the hand more, sometimes you don't see the hand at all. So there are all kinds of variations in terms of what color really is.

LSS: I read somewhere that you had an appreciation for the work of Hans Hofmann. His approach to space was based on the idea of establishing a visual "push/pull" spatially. In other words, you could activate the surface of the painting and suggest space through different saturations of color.

SW: I was just at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and I ran into Hofmann's work. I hadn't seen it in years. I used see a lot of Hoffman at the André Emmerich Gallery in the '70s and I think Hofmann is important in the sense that he opened a lot of doors for people. I don't really think about "push/pull" like that. I worry more that my work has good transitions and that there's a lot to look at and that you can get in and out of the spaces. In other words, if you fall in love with that blue, your eye can get out of that blue and move to the red or the pink. I think more about transitions that way.

Right now I'm looking at a lot of Paolo Veronese's painting and it's funny because when I look at his paintings, I think about weight. I think about transitions. I think about the color. I think about how well he draws. I think about how something sits, how something touches. Those kinds of things really interest me.

LSS: I guess that suggests there really might not be any difference between something we consider realist or figural, and something we consider abstract and non-objective. That what it's really about is how artists—whatever their stylistic interests—balance all of these elements: the formal ones with the narrative ones.

SW: Yes. I'm not a modernist in my approach to abstraction. Someone might ask why I like the work of Velázquez so much. He just painted all these kings and queens and princes. But I am interested in the way he painted, the way he touches the canvas. It's just magic, you know what I mean? I could even be interested in a so-called "bad" painting by Courbet. It may be a scene with a deer in a field, a really dumb subject. But still something about it interests me. I wonder why he would put a deer in a field? But there's also something about the way he paints, the scale, the size, that really talks to you. Subject matter is personal. What I look at is how the paint is set on the canvas, the shapes, the colors, the marks. I remember when I was in Volterra, Italy, visiting the Etruscan museum, I saw how they just had everything stacked up—all these funeral urns just stacked up, and I said, "You know, Stanley, you're going to stack the color and let the magic be in the color."

I really try to paint something that people can live with, that they can spend a lot of time looking at, living with...that's the idea. When you project a slide of a work up on the wall, it doesn't look like much. Where is the magic?

LSS: I think that the slide analogy is especially pertinent because so much painting today has been impacted by digital technology and processes. The 2015 New Museum Triennial has a lot of digital and virtual art. So I wonder if you feel we are losing a sense of texture and the interaction of materials with different kinds of elements because we are digitizing everything?

SW: I think that's true. It's very different now, and technology is something that people really are affected by. I think there's definitely a dialogue going on about that in the art world. There are a few young painters who have come to talk to me in my studio about my painting and what is painting today. I think there are young artists out there who are really involved with paint and the painter's way but are also engaged in a digital thing or image thing. In my own work, I could project a painting from a computer onto a big screen and the lights from the computer make the image look gorgeous. But there is something very important about seeing the real thing that you don't get digitally.

It's funny with young people now, how they don't mind looking at a movie on a cell phone. For me it's like, don't you want a big screen? My son doesn't watch TV—he watches his TV programs on his computer.

LSS: Now we have the new Apple Watch. You can do and see everything with it...

SW: I know but the scale is very different. That means our sense of what is public and what is private is very different now, too.

LSS: I wanted to go back to how you saw your work in the context of the 1960s and '70s when you were in school and emerging as an artist. It was clear in some of your statements that in the midst of the politics, the Black Panthers, civil rights, etc., the act of painting was where you felt most secure, where you felt you could actually do something.

SW: I talked about that a little bit in a conversation I had with Trenton Doyle Hancock at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. Those were hard times because I really wanted to paint, but I couldn't identify why I wanted to paint. I remember being in Kansas City and the Black Panthers would say, what are you doing, brother? But I felt compelled to paint. I felt like that was really my calling, to paint, but I couldn't say what that was or what the need for it was. In that same conversation with Trent, we talked a lot about painting in terms of mental health.

So I focused on the need for art: what art does to inspire and what art gives people. If you think about Matisse, he painted in Nice when the Nazis were there. Picasso painted *Guernica* (1937)—which I see when I go to Madrid—and that it is just such a great painting against war. We have to consider what these painters put out there for people and

remember that being a painter is just a calling anyway. That's why I tell young artists who come to see me and ask me what are the rules, I tell them there are none.

LSS: Getting back to the 1960s and '70s—at that time there was such a dichotomy between abstraction and figuration in the black community. The assumption was that if you were doing abstraction, you were copping out, doing mainstream art, and that you couldn't possibly be relevant or committed. So I wondered how you came out on that issue? I couldn't find that many black exhibitions on your resume.

SW: They probably didn't ask me. At that point I wasn't doing many shows. With all the stuff that was going on then, it was a difficult time to figure out where you were headed, or what you were doing, or what was happening. When I came to New York in the late 1960s, I saw there was a lot going on with black artists, Sam Gilliam, Al Loving, Howarda Pindell—all them were showing. But McArthur Binion, myself, James Little, kind of got lost in that. We were another generation. As for abstraction versus figuration, I think the black community felt a need for black images because they weren't getting them anywhere else. I think they wanted things on their walls that could be quickly identified as work by black artists. I don't know if that's all they needed, though. It's very complicated.

I guess one way I dealt with it can be seen in my painting *My Name Is Peaches*, which I painted recently. This painting is very large, 96-by-96-inch canvas. The colors are primarily orange, pinks, blues and greens. When I looked at the finished work, I saw a beautiful painting with a real toughness to it. The key element in this painting is the color and the kind of beauty it conveys, but I also wanted to indicate that toughness. The title refers to the Nina Simone song "Four Women." In the song, the last woman is Peaches. Almost every black community has a woman named Peaches, who is very sumptuous. So I wanted to suggest this real crazy mixture. In the book we are working on about my work, I have this old photo of Malcolm X, and I have an old photo of a self-portrait by Cézanne that I've been carrying around since the '70s. I am going to illustrate them side by side. I love that the photo I have of Malcolm X says, "I'm the man you think you are."

LSS: I guess in their own way they were revolutionary.

SW: Yeah, I want to bring all those kinds of things together in terms of indicating what painting is for me, because all of that is important.

LSS: How important is an audience and its reaction for you? It took you a long time to find one.

SW: Yeah, it did. It took a long time for people to have a sense of what I was doing, and a lot of things had to change. After a while you realize an audience is very, very important.

LSS: What do you think changed your situation? Was it starting to show your work in Europe?

SW: Yes, I think so. I also think Basquiat changed everything.

LSS: Really? How so?

SW: After Basquiat things shifted and changed for African-American painters in the art world—not that he knew he was doing that, but I think he did change things. Before him there was a wall—like the Berlin Wall—and when he got through, and how he came through, and the way he did it, with Warhol, all of that knocked down the race wall.

LSS: Do you think we're educating people in this country to really appreciate abstraction? We're so caught up in "reality" and all its permutations from the raw to the totally scripted. But I wonder if to really appreciate abstraction you need to have more of a conceptual framework.

SW: The thing about reading abstract art is that you have to be open, you have to bring a lot to it. You have to be willing to admit you don't know. But in fact what all painting does, whether it's abstraction or figuration, is stimulate questions. Who did it? Why did they do it? Where did it come from? What is this? You have to be really open to it. I try to be

objective with the colors, and that's the gateway into my work. Why they like it, the scale of it, the size of it, they probably don't get that right away. It's always the color.

I think young people are much more open to color and have some kind of identity with color because color is a bigger player in society now than it used to be. You see a lot more color on TV. You see a lot more color in fashion. That's because of new technology and globalization.

LSS: It was interesting reading the Geoffrey Jacques piece on your work. He suggested that there was a way to contextualize your work with quilting traditions.

SW: That's true, that's true. It's funny that the people who usually acquire my work are women, and they like it a lot more than men because the color. Women seem to be more comfortable with all of the colors. A lot of men have a harder time with the color, because you can't control color. That interests me a lot. I think about all of those kinds of things in terms of fabric and fashion and in terms of textiles. Even Matisse did a Romanian blouse. Matisse lived off the Romanian blouse.

LSS: When the Metropolitan Museum of Art did the Matisse show, it was revealed that his family had a textile business.

SW: And you see all of his paintings are influenced by textiles. That interests me in terms of where some of his ideas of color come from. To me color is all about being tactile, so definitely it's about textiles. I think about the Gee's Bend quilt show, and I feel like I'm from there, more there than I am with say Newman or Rothko. So when I see that work I'm like, "Yeah, that's it." The way that it's a little offbeat, polyrhythmic; the way that things move. Nothing's straight. Nothing's regular. Everything's a little crooked. And I think that's really what comes out of the music. It comes out of the beat, it comes out of how people walk, the way people wear their hat, just a little off. I think about all of those kinds of things and want them in the painting.