Stanley Whitney, Call-and-Response

by Alex Bacon

At the impetus of elder New York School artist Philip Guston, Stanley Whitney arrived in New York from Kansas City in the famously turbulent year of 1968. At this time he began his career with a carefully chosen, but firmly implemented set of decisions. Almost systematically Whitney declined the central tenants of many of the dominant currents in 1960s art. He held onto the medium of painting in the face of an almost moral, and certainly political, declaration of its critical obsolescence. Within painting he refused to privilege materials and process over an explicitly aesthetic end result. He also refused to sacrifice drawing for what this could supposedly unlock for color.

In this way Whitney forewent a number of possible interpretive fields for his work—those of Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Process Art, and even of Color Field painting. One can discover potential lenses for aspects of Whitney's work in each of these, yet his work also exceeds each to the degree of making it impossible to push any one connection too far. Whitney is interested in following through a particular set system to make his work, and a gridded one at that, but in doing so he always allows a painterly handling to shine through. He wants an intellectual edge for his work, but in order to do so he refuses to sacrifice the medium of painting, let alone the art object. He gives primacy to a direct experience of color, but also insists on shaping the density of this color with the structuring aid of drawing.

For reasons like these it took many years for Whitney's paintings to reach their formal and conceptual apex—lacking much of the direct friction and tension and discourse that typically pushes along a painterly practice—and for them to be recognized, as they now are, as central to conversations about the contemporary relevance, even flowering, of abstract painting. Far from an elder statesman tweaking a late modernist innovation, despite his age, Whitney's paintings must be placed alongside those of artists, often many years younger, as looking forward towards painting's future rather than remaining stuck in its past.

In terms of his rejections, first and foremost, Whitney has retained an interest in painting as a medium, which was damning enough in an environment characterized by the antipainterly statements of artists like Donald Judd and Joseph Kosuth.[1] But beyond this Whitney also refused to forgo the European art historical tradition, including lifelong heroes of his such as Courbet and Munch, despite being impressed by both crisp linearity of Frank Stella and effulgent luminosity of Morris Louis (albeit in reproduction) while still in school in the Midwest.

Understandably, in his early years in the city when he did intersect with the aesthetic discourses and communities, Whitney gravitated towards the Color Field painters that gathered around the influential critic Clement Greenberg.[2] This was due both to Whitney's predisposition towards color as the primary vehicle of his

paintings from the start, and to the comparatively more open, if tokenizing, situation regarding race in that circle. As a young African-American artist Whitney was allowed a space on the outskirts of the group given the lively color he was imagined to be able to tap into, as well as jazz music, which Greenberg admired.

However, Whitney did not feel entirely at home here either, not only socially, but also given the fact that he was also unwilling to toe the line of a primary tenant of the Greenbergian program: the supersession of drawing by color. In his narrative, drawing had been definitively banished by Pollock's drip technique, with the supremacy of direct, unmediated passages of color concretized in the expansive, stained surfaces of artists like Newman and Rothko. As Greenberg wrote in 1962, "by renouncing tactility, and detail in drawing, Newman and Rothko achieve what I find a more positive openness and color."[3] While for Whitney drawing was a necessary component because "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."[4]

At this time Whitney also tried his hand at another of the era's innovations: the noncompositional use of process as a way to produce a work of art in which the subject is the means by which the work was made, rather than the *a priori* decision-making and *a posteriori* compositional choices of the artist. This method was practiced across both three-dimensional work and painting by the likes of Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, David Diao, and Dan Christensen, who happened to be a friend of Whitney's, since he had attended art school with Dan's brother Don.

Whitney tired to make paintings with mops, brooms—all manner of devices. But this lacked the specificity of drawing that Whitney prized. For this reason, lacking the common artistic motivating factor of being in tension with one or another (or multiple) aesthetic discourses, Whitney developed in a way that might be characterized as both "slow" and independent, intersecting at moments, but largely remaining at the periphery of everything from Color Field to Minimalism. While art history, like the art market, often prizes a meteoric rise to fame, in a sense it is logical that Whitney would have arrived at the apex of his practice only in the early 1990s, a moment of marked pluralism (though not one particularly favorable to abstract painting), when he could apply the synthesis of his decades of time spent making and looking at art, both contemporary and historical. Further, that the specific catalysts of this concretization would be found in both contemporary and western as well as non-contemporary eras and non-Western geographic spaces: the density and heft of ancient Egyptian architecture, the chiaroscuro quality of light in Rome, the organic grids of the quilts of Gee's Bend, and the phenomenological spatiality of Cézanne's late paintings.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, several decades removed from the serial and focused practices we associate with the 1960s, Whitney developed a singular system for making his paintings, which he has retained since around 1994. At this time Whitney began to draw together the linear scrawls that for several years he

had been splaying across the picture plane. They became more ordered and, almost contrary to expectation, more powerful, formally speaking—coalescing balls of energy pulsating at points within the picture plane not unlike the clumps of looping skeins of paint that characterize the paintings Philip Guston was making at the time Whitney met him in the late 1960s.

Whitney found that these balls called for the balancing act of a linear armature, effectively amounting to an organic, homegrown grid. The next act, from a formal perspective, was for Whitney to realize that he didn't need the linear elements, that more uniform planes of color could serve his purposes even better. This is parallel to Brice Marden's development of the monochrome, wherein he built up linear marks until he arrived at a relatively even field in a single, yet shifting tone.[5] By dialing down the explicit distinctions in his work, Marden was able to evoke an entire coloristic experience, ones that were, in his practice, often tied to specific events and emotions. This is not unlike Whitney, who discovered within the individual panes of color in a given painting something similar to what Marden had seen in each of his (and of course Marden has often assembled his monochromes together into multicolored polyptychs). It is for this reason that curator Lauren Haynes has written: "Whitney's colors take on lives of their own. They evoke memory and nostalgia. This orange takes you back to your favorite childhood t-shirt; that blue reminds you of your grandmother's kitchen. Whitney's paintings remind us, on a universal scale, of the ability of color to trigger feelings and sensations."[6]

Important to Whitney's work is the element of sequencing, and a call-and-response from one block of color to another that is not only writerly, but also filmic—evoking the abstract color studies of Paul Sharits. In works like *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*, (1969) Sharits adds a coloristic, painterly dimension to the classic avant-garde film genre of the flicker film where sequences of monochrome colors interspersed with images of people and text unfold before the viewer, relying on memory and sequencing to evoke particular experiences and emotions. Whitney's filmstrip-like ordering of his panels of color invites a similar mode of viewing, in the process suspending the static element traditional to painting, allowing for a more active, temporal viewing experience. Sharits is perhaps closest to the logic of Whitney's recent (i.e., post-1999) paintings in his *Shutter Interface* (1975). This is an installation of four projectors that simultaneously screen four different, changing colors, inviting a consideration of color that—as in Whitney's paintings—is spatial, gridded, and temporal.

It must be noted that Whitney employs the grid, yet without making one think of it as such[7]. This makes sense given that Whitney's professed goal is to pack as much color as possible into a single painting, such that each square of his "grid" is crafted by the artist so as to function, if not totally autonomously, then as a painting of sorts of its own. The result is accumulative, a way for Whitney to add on color without mixing and adulterating it, meaning that he can be placed in the tradition of color

painting that descends from the Impressionists and the value they placed on emphatic, undiluted color.

Whitney has created a chromatic system that also, perhaps surprisingly given Whitney's graduate education at Yale, is not governed by the more empirically-oriented coloristic systems of Josef Albers, who dominated the color theory taught at the institution whose Department of Design he chaired from 1950 to 1958. Albers's system essentially descends from the purity of the divisionism of the post-impressionists, while Whitney's is a painterly one that layers and mixes within individual fields as well as adds elements such as drips, visible strokes, etc. that "distract" from pure opticality. We might say that Albers, as exemplified in his Homage to the Square paintings, aspires towards a kind of synthesis—colors interacting to produce a series of optical events that unfold within the viewer's perception. With Whitney this kind of syncretic looking is precisely what he withholds, insisting instead on the relative autonomy of each block of color. However, he also veers away from the example of another seeming analogue, and influential pedagogue, Hans Hoffmann. While in a Hoffmann painting individual colors are given agency to either leap forward, or recede into the background, Whitney holds his colors pretty much in the same shallow pictorial space, preferring for them to, at most, slide along with the viewer's gaze, as he or she peruses the surface, organized into rows and columns that we treat like a writerly construct, "reading" it left to right, top to bottom, much like Whitney painted them, the gridded order of the color sending our eyes into a perpetual motion, darting from block of color to block of color, slipping down this brushstroke, and alighting on that dripped passage.

Whitney felt for many years that he wanted a sense of lightness, of air in his paintings, and accordingly for a long time his paintings had a lot space between one mark and another. As he has said, "I didn't know at that point that the space was in the color. I kept thinking the space was around, and the color was all in the space."[8] Yet the incidental seriality of the stacking of bricks in Egyptian architecture and of urns in the Etruscan Museum in Volterra, Italy made Whitney realize that there were other ways of achieving a sense of pictorial space that also accommodated a feeling of density: "when I put the colors directly next to each other, I realized that I don't lose the air."[9] In his understanding of it, at this time landscape gave way to architecture as the primary analogue. In a way Whitney realized through these, non-artistic and non-modern, examples that seriality didn't have to be only repetitive and industrial in nature, that indeed a painting's power could be magnified by multiplying the internal elements, as long as they retained a certain consistency.

This gives an additional valence to Whitney's claim that he is interested in treating each square in his gridded arrangements as its own painting of sorts. Like the stacked Etruscan urns he saw in Italy, in each of his works it is as if Whitney stacks numerous monochrome paintings side-by-side. In such a way Whitney taps into a much older, pre-modern tradition of the grid, one based on the convenience and organicism of basic systems of order that make accessible accumulations of

materials, images, graphic elements, and objects. This is why we see grid-like structures in ancient Mesopotamian inscribed tablets and medieval manuscripts, for example, because of the ease by which such structures allow information to be arranged and presented. A similar impulse animated Whitney's development of a gridded logic, and we know that it is a means of convenience, both from the point of view of making as well as that of beholding, because of how, in Whitney's hands, the grid of a given painting follows no logic outside of that dictated by his coloristic impulses.

For this reason some works follow the classic formalist stricture of conforming to, and in doing so confirming and reinforcing in a self-referential manner, the literal dimensions of the canvas, though never with the rigid geometries of the man-made canvas itself.[10] Like much of the best art it is possible to reread and differently understand canonical art history through careful consideration of his example. Take Carl Andre's modular assemblages of squares of lead, copper, aluminum, etc. Whitney's canny ability to fuse structure and organicism through the grid can allow us to understand Andre's carpets of metal as not simply industrial, but as also organic in their expansive, floor-bound quality, spreading out horizontally—as Andre himself has discussed them—like a placid body of water as much, even more than, a simple accumulation of industrial detritus. For this reason it makes sense that Whitney himself has identified other sources for his grids, ones outside of the modernist canon. For example he has said of the quilts of Gee's Bend:

> I feel like I'm from there, more 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 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.[11]

Many times, however, Whitney's blocks of color exceed any deductive logic that might be imagined for them, and when the artist says one of his primary goals is to fit as much color as possible into a given work we believe him because we sense, even if we do not know this fact, the flurry of movement that activates his painterly activity. He needs the call and response back and forth and as such most paintings must be executed in a few, even a single, session to succeed. The bands in his paintings play an important supporting role, balancing and fleshing out the individual articulations of each panel of color, as Whitney frequently tells us, transitions are key. They can do so either as the long strips that run lengthwise across the painted field, and also on a more localized level as bars along the bottom of individual panes of color.

Beyond this, he also, in the act of painting, does not compartmentalize the labor of making each square, but rather works in a sequential manner, moving from square to square, row to row—left to right, top to bottom, not unlike one might write on a

sheet of paper. The resulting painting is structured but not systematic. Unlike Ad Reinhardt, say, who also reduced his paintings to a single, gridded format—and a square one to boot—towards the end of his career, Whitney has not pursued his parameters in a ruthlessly systematic fashion, but rather as a loose plan to inaugurate and structure a process of call-and-response, both in the making and in the beholding.

For this reason Whitney's paintings vary quite a lot. Though we can speak, in a general way, of tendencies in the work, they never hold absolutely true, and instead operate at best as a guideline for what we (and Whitney himself in starting work on a painting of a given format) might expect. The largest format Whitney currently works in, 96 x 96 inches, typically contains four rows of four, and more infrequently five (we find that already the math has become necessarily inexact), this is also true of the next size down, 72 x 72 inches. The following dimension, 60 x 60 inches, demonstrates perhaps the greatest diversity in the system—regularly alternating between three and four bands. While the size after that, 48 x 48 inches, is perhaps the most consistent, fixed at three bands with four color blocks each, and further broken up by four bands.

Closer inspection, of one work to another, evinces even further distinctions and nuances within the system. For example, to compare two works of the same dimension (72 x 72 inches in this case) in *Nightlife* the final bottom row is almost obliterated by the dripping line of yellow above it, however, in *Dreamtime* Whitney was able to give comparatively wider berth to a sequence of darker shades that balance the bright palette above. Similarly there is nothing hard-edged or cold about Whitney's very painterly handling of his canvases. His works can vary from the orderly but still organic pseudo-geometries of *Two Birds* or *Dreamtime* to the raucous divergences of *Deep Water* or *Indian Country*. Whitney's paintings can be said to be bodily because of the ways that the specificities and idiosyncrasies of his stance and physicality are writ large in the particularities of the paintings. Where Reinhardt went to great lengths to ensure that there was no visible brushwork in his paintings (which does not equal a lack of human touch), the fact that Whitney's lines often slant, down and to the right, is due to the arc of his right-handedness and the fact that he begins on the left and moves towards the right.

Similarly, Whitney's frequent revelations of brushwork and dripping paint, though always in ways that are calculated to emphasize the work's impact, rather than simply dressing it up with decorative flourishes, are additional ways for, as he puts it, the viewer to enter the painting. For Whitney's primary goal with these works is to provide a lot of material for the viewer to contemplate, he wants his paintings to be evaluated cognitively. He does so by constructing an open pictorial space that the viewer can enter optically and move around in. This way of working is also premised on Whitney's background in music, which provided his initial access to painting, when he saw Cézanne's *Portrait of Victor Chocquet* (1877) as a young undergraduate art student at the Columbus College of Art and Design, and had a musical response to it, seeing in it a kind of coloristic spatiality of rhythm.

Incidentally, this is not unlike Kandinsky, who gave up his law career in favor of painting through the related experiences he had with Monet's haystacks and Schoenberg's music. This has led critic Robert Storr to discuss Whitney's paintings in terms of synesthesia, or "a utopian correlation of the arts at the level of sympathetically resonating sensation and experience," which Storr sums up in the title of his essay as "the sounds he sees."[12]

Ever since Whitney has held onto music, much as his peer Mary Heilmann has, and especially the open-ended structures of Jazz (versus those of Pop, Post-Punk, and New Wave for Heilmann), as a model for what he wants his paintings to achieve coloristically. They are thus as indebted to John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman as they are to Cézanne and Munch. This musical play between structure and its undoing—point/counter-point—is a reason why he relies on both color and drawing in his paintings, and cannot sacrifice one for the other. This is true of the way that the color disrupts any clean reading of the paintings as gridded, ordered systems, as it slides and pops and locks across the surface of Whitney's canvases, as the artist describes it: "There's the grid, which should be very orderly, and then you put the color, and it throws the whole thing off."[13]

Whitney found that if the hand was quiet, and ordered then the color could be loud. In a way one could say that the activity of the hand, whether visible or not, is a means of access for the viewer. Indeed, in his studio Whitney establishes a continuity between his materials and a given painting by organizing the individual containers of color on his work table into a gridded arrangement that mimes, while not reproducing exactly, that of the painting he is working on.

Whitney's way of working is athletic, with works on paper functioning like a daily exercise regimen of sorts. Though works on paper are never simply tests, but rather, they are imaginative spaces for the artist to explore different ideas, or else to isolate and investigate aspects of his practice. For example, in his drawings he continues to explore the rectangular, horizontal formats that he has excised in a painting practice reliant on the neutrality of the square to prevent his paintings from taking on too many landscape associations. He also pushes forward the "energy ball" aesthetic that has been absent from his paintings for over a decade. There is also a significant body of work comprised of black and white gouache grids, in which it is as if Whitney has pared down his paintings to their essential structure. These should also be seen as part of his study of color. For one of Whitney's biggest influences, art historically speaking, are the black and white drawings of Van Gogh, which impressed Whitney because of how they managed to capture much of the painter's coloristic prowess without any recourse to coloristic skills in a conventional sense. In this way such an exercise struck Whitney as one that confirms an artist's capabilities with color, rather than simply his or her ability to lean on it as a crutch. This is true of Whitney's black and white grid gouaches, which demonstrate how the complexities of his paintings is based as much in their structural ordering as in the specific colors used, their execution, etc.

The last thing to be done to the paintings is the addition of the titles. Many of his works before the late 1990s were simply "Untitled" (as most of his works on paper still are), but at this time Whitney began to feel like titles were an important aspect of the works. They are always conceived after the painting is finished, when the artist has time to consider what they evoke for him. That these titles are then often musical references—for example, *Tango* and *Wild Thing*—speaks to the symphonic effects of their color programs, select works are more specific in the allusions they conjure, as in those with art historical monikers—such as *Munch Summer* and *Goya Red*. In all cases it is not that Whitney approached the making of a painting with a specific musical or artistic reference, but rather that the careful contemplation of his works reveals just how deeply embedded they are in his aesthetic repertoire, such that after the fact of making it becomes clear to Whitney how intuitive ways of working summon forth impressive moments from a lifelong aesthetic education.

That recent works have taken on titles with evocative, even political references shed additional light on the relationship of this work to the world. Paintings like *Radical Times* and *Deep Water* suggest not so much that art should be about, or comment directly upon current events, since it has little chance of swaying them; rather, we should think of the paintings, each both the same but also different than all the others, as attracting an ever cycling series of titles with various allusions—literary, musical, art historical, geographic, even political—taken as a whole, which is to say taken as Stanley Whitney's artistic practice, show how something as seemingly "simple" (but which is of course far from it) as a painting made up of blocks of color can evoke a wide range of both historical and timely, cultural and aesthetic issues. This reveals that the range of things we can consider, abstractly of course, in beholding these paintings can run the gamut, and thus holds out the possibility that we might reconsider, through them, however obliquely, the world around us as well.

Notes:

[1]. As exemplary we can consider Donald Judd's influential 1965 pithy claim that "a form can be used only in so many ways. The rectangular plane is given a life span." In Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965). Reprinted in Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959-1975* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 182. And also Joseph Kosuth's equally well-known 1969 analysis: "Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art…That's because the word 'art' is general and the word 'painting' is specific. Painting is a *kind* of art. If you make paintings you are already accepting (not questioning) the nature of art." Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy I," *Studio International* (October 1969). Reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Idea Art* (New York: Dutton, 1970), 79.

[2]. As Whitney explained to Alteronce Gumby:

> Before [I attended] Yale, I was mostly influenced by Clement Greenberg and the Color Field painters, because there was a black presence. I worked my way through that…At those parties there'd be a lot of jazz musicians…That was the scene where you felt like black culture was part of it. They thought black people were really hip, and they are, and so their parties were kind of like that…So, I hung out in that scene, and I was trying to make these acrylic Color Field paintings. But I had a lot of doubts about that work.

In Gumby, "Stanley Whitney," *BOMB* (April 21, 2015). <http://bombmagazine.org/article/0604420/stanley-whitney>.

[3]. Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International* (October 25, 1962). Reprinted in John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 130.

[4]. Stanley Whitney in Lowery Stokes Sims, "Conversation," *Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2015), 60.

[5]. Along these lines Whitney understands Marden's monochrome paintings as reliant on drawing for their success, telling Gumby "even when he was doing those really dense panel paintings, he was drawing a lot." In Gumby, "Stanley Whitney."

[6]. Lauren Haynes, "This Orange, That Blue," *Dance the Orange*, 28.

[7]. For example, Whitney tells Gumby, "I never think about the structure as a grid—though it is a grid, really." In Gumby, "Stanley Whitney."

[8]. Ibid.

[9]. Ibid.

[10]. We will recall that, realizing the power of such reflexive affirmation, Frank Stella repainted his black paintings in a more rigid, geometric fashion in time for the 1959 MoMA exhibition, *Sixteen Americans*, which launched his career.

[11]. Whitney in Sims, "Conversation," *Dance the Orange*, 64.

[12]. Robert Storr, "The Sound He Sees," 43.

[13]. Whitney in Gumby, "Stanley Whitney." This statement echoes one of Agnes Martin's: "My formats are square, but the grids never are absolutely square; they are rectangles, a little bit off the square, making a sort of contradiction, a

dissonance…When I cover the square surface with rectangles, it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power." Martin in Lucy Lippard, "Homage to the Square," *Art in America* (July/August 1967): 55. Both Martin and Whitney's paintings rely, in very different ways, on drawing as the vehicle for the dissonance between format and (abstract) content.