

Ute Diehl **Stacking up Blocks of Color: Stanley Whitney's Buoyant Geometry**

At the age of ten, the African-American painter Stanley Whitney was attending grade school in Bryn Mawr, a suburb of Philadelphia. "They had us do a self-portrait. I felt really weird – I was little, I was poor, 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?' They had no idea about art. You have to understand, my parents grew up not even being allowed to enter a museum because of their skin color."

In spite of all obstacles, art ultimately found its way to Stanley Whitney. And he came to realize that painting was what he wanted to do – to paint with as many colors as possible. Turning out one polychromatic painting after another throughout his school years, he went on to study at Columbus College of Art and Design, at the Kansas City Art Institute, and eventually at Yale, where he earned his master's degree. But he had yet to solve his main conundrum: how to liberate color from its subservience to form. Arriving in New York for the first time in 1968 as a 22-year-old, he found a painting scene preoccupied with so-called "color fields." Although this essentially was what he had been searching for – the autonomy of color – he still viewed it critically, "I wanted the color, but not the field!" He also did not care for the Puritanical attitude the Color Field Painters seemed to project. As a habitué of the city's effervescent jazz clubs, he craved to get a sense of "movement, music, and rhythm" out of a painting.

Stanley Whitney frequently emphasized the strong influence of his years in Rome, where he lived during the 1990s. Especially the masonry work of the Eternal City's ancient ruins, with its tufa stone, blocks of Travertine marble, and bricks, impressed him as structural elements perfectly fit-for-purpose that he could adopt for his own compositions. Ever since, he has painted nothing but perfectly square canvases containing rows of colored boxes separated by somewhat irregular horizontal lines, much as in a sample board. Whitney stacks the color blocks one atop the other, rather than filling a predefined structure with color. "I just start painting. I don't plan it out. Since I know what the form is, I can start anywhere." The artist also dispenses with preliminary color studies. He designates a specific color and then reacts to it. As soon as a color is on the canvas, the storytelling gets underway. And of course, the artist seeks to apply as many colors as possible.

The colors interact differently with each other, depending on whether the viewer takes them in vertically or horizontally. *Violet Times*, for instance, the painting on offer here, invites the viewer to focus on its five reddish tones and their network of relationships, to examine different color pairings or contrasts, or to try out innumerable other ways of seeing. The image is in constant flux. It will not stand still. The dark tones seem to come towards you, the bright ones recede, the warm reds and oranges press their way to the front, leaving the bluish hues behind them. The orange surface is twice as intense as the blue one, although both are the same size. Green and red, meanwhile, hold one another in check.

Though he may not like to hear it, Stanley Whitney is firmly anchored in the American tradition of color field painting. One of its formative figures was Josef Albers, a former master teacher at the Bauhaus School who emigrated in 1933 and spent the next 40 years teaching in the United States. It was around 1950 that Albers began working on the famous series of nested, quadratic color fields that he called *Homage to the Square*. In it, he worked through color and its endless variations within a predefined square pattern. Stanley Whitney confidently adopts the squares favored by the German theoretician of color, imbuing them with his own special rhythmic groove.



15 Stanley Whitney

Philadelphia 1946 – lives in New York and Parma

“Violet Times”. 2012

Oil on canvas. 152,5 × 152.5 cm (60 × 60 in.).

On the reverse with directional arrows, dated, titled, inscribed and signed with graphite: 2012 „Violet Times” TOP Stanley Whitney. [3309]

Provenance

Private Collection, Germany (acquired at Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin)

EUR 250,000–350,000

USD 269,000–376,000

Exhibition

Stanley Whitney – Yellow, Noon and Night. Berlin, Galerie Nordenhake, 2012

People say the color does this,
or the color does that. And I say
the color does what it does.

Stanley Whitney

