

***“Blue Meets Yellow”*, 2011. By Stanley Whitney  
Spotlight Paper by Stephen Elson, 2017**



**Artist’s Background:**

Whitney was born in the Bryn Mawr working class neighborhood of Philadelphia in 1946. He received his art education at Columbus College of the Art and Design, 1966, Kansas City Art Institute, BFA 1968 and his MFA from Yale University 1972. The decision to attend a midwest school was based partially economic as well as concern for the Vietnam draft. Whitney had asthma as a child and was able to obtain a medical deferment letter freeing him to pursue higher education (It was difficult to receive a deferment to go to art school at that time).

After arriving in Manhattan when rents were cheap and jobs were easily obtained, he worked various jobs including the Strand Bookstore, which was the artistic and intellectual meeting ground for up and coming artists and writers. Yale was seeking minority applicants to participate in teachers’ training and that afforded Whitney the opportunity to go to Yale. “A lot of black people went to jail and I got to go to Yale.” Because of his Yale MFA he says he became visible.

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Whitney stated that growing up in the 1950’s and 60’s the radio in his house was on “24/7”. Forays into New York City starting in high school exposed him to the jazz clubs of Greenwich Village. Music was always part of his life and jazz has remained a strong influence in Whitney’s work. In his early New York days Whitney hung out with musicians but realized he could not take the lifestyle of staying out late and never settling in one place. He always wanted to go home to bed and preferred to paint in the morning.

After receiving his MFA Whitney was able to teach, which gave him the financial stability and free time to pursue his painting. He accepted a teaching position at Tyler School of Art, Temple University and commuted from New York to Pennsylvania. He is currently Professor emeritus of painting and drawing at that school.

He met his future wife, the painter, Marina Adams in the early 1980’s. When in 1993 an opportunity to teach in Rome became available, they decided to leave New York for what turned into a five year stay. Traveling extensively, he was impressed by the structured orderliness of the architecture particularly the classic buildings of Rome and the Coliseum. After a trip to Egypt, seeing the temples and pyramids, he began to see color as building blocks and “realized he could stack the colors together...” to form the structure of his canvases. Italy’s lifestyle appealed to both and they’ve maintained a residence in Parma to this day where they spend their summers.

Whitney’s relationship with color started early. When he was ten he attended an art class and was the only African American child in the affluent Bryn Mawr setting. Whitney painted a self portrait using every color available on the palette. The teacher loved his work, but when he showed it to his parents they did not understand. In an interview with David Reed in Bomb Magazine, Whitney explained that his parents had no idea about art or where it came from for him. He did not want to stand out and be that different. He never went back to the art group. Fortunately he started taking art classes in high school. When he saw a

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Cezanne painting, *“Portrait of Victor Chocquet”*, he fell in love with the painting and the die was set – he knew he was going to be a painter. The Cezanne reminded him of the music of Charlie Parker; polyrhythmic, repeated beats, like call and response. Jazz remained a major influence and Whitney often named his paintings after musician or songs. Two examples would be: *“My name is Peaches”* from a Nina Simone 2015 recording and *“James Brown Sacrifice to Apollo”* 2008. Whitney was an avid reader and note taker occasionally using this source to name a painting. He explained his method of titling his paintings to curator Alison Hearst of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. “There are clues to who I am, what I read what I see, where I travel, which are parts of the painting. Paintings are to be lived with, pondered and wandered through, and the titles have that aspect to them, too.”

He started working with color in high school, but it was a long road before he was able to figure out how to make color the subject matter without it becoming decorative.

In 1968 Whitney attended the art program at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. One of his teachers, Philip Guston, befriended him and became his mentor. Guston, a noted Abstract expressionist, changed his focus and began emphasizing figurative drawing and painting. Whitney attempted to follow his mentors lead but realized he was no story teller and returned to the pursuit of work with color. When asked what his favorite color was Whitney responded “rainbow.” He was asked by Alteronce Gumby, “Do you ever feel like you run out of colors?” His response was, “no, never.” He further states color is “endless” and changes on how it is applied to the canvas.

In a recent interview for his current exhibit at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth “Focus: Whitney ” January 21 – April 3, 2017, Whitney again credited the influence of Jazz and how jazz continually inspires his canvases. “The way that it’s a little off beat, polyrhythmic; the way that things move. Nothing is straight. Nothing’s regular. Everything is a little crooked. And I think that’s really what

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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 those kinds of things and want them in the painting.”

**Technique and methodology:**

Interviewers often ask if he follows a ‘formula.’ His response is always “no”, but he does acknowledge he is comfortable with the loose grid pattern that dominates the structure of his canvases. His canvases are always square and can be as small as 12 inches. He has recently started doing linen canvases that are 96 x 96 inches which is the largest size he can fit in his studio. He views the small painting as standalone pieces and not studies for his larger canvases. The square is usually divided into four plains. The first consisting of an average of five to six color blocks separated with the next row by a bar of color. The second field is the largest of the grid and again separated by a bar of color. The third grid varies from same as the first to slightly smaller and the final grid is the smallest. In “Blue meets Yellow” the lines separating the grids run into and become part of the squares of color. He “free hands” the rows of colors - no pencil lines or taped boundaries. Some of the blocks of color are transparent while others are painted several times to achieve the desired density of color. Some lines are thickly layered to show the brushwork and others are diluted to increase the effect of transparency and allow the colors to drip.

Whitney describes his more recent work as “organizing blocks of colors into grids that fill the canvas.” His canvases have a strong relationship to music, which he continually references, particularly in the Afro American jazz tradition of Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman and Thelonious Monk to name a few of his favorites. Whitney describes his painting technique by starting at the top left in a call and response process where one color call forth another. The color dictates the structure not the other way around. Whitney often states he has no color theory and really does not know much about color, for him it is about the sense of space.

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In a June 2016 in **Culture Type Magazine** article he told V.L. Valentine, “I don’t have a theory about color...whatever the color does is fine. I don’t want to have control over the color.” “Call and response” is the phrase he often uses when describing his technique.

In January 2016 Whitney moved from his 1,000 square foot studio in Manhattan where he has painted for the last 40 years and relocated to a 2,500 square foot studio in Ridgewood New York. He states he can get “more space” in his paintings. Whitney’s wife, the artist Marina Adams, has her own studio and when asked if it is difficult to be married to a painter he states that they both have a love and dialogue with color but do have a different approach. Marina’s colors are softer and freer in form.

*“Blue meets Yellow”* was gifted to the Museum in 2015 by Stephen Simoni and John Sacchi in honor of Donna MacMillan, Chair of the PSAM Board of Trustees. This is a wonderful addition to the museum’s collection as it represents a currently working African American Abstract Expressionist artist. The third floor placement of this work accentuates the free flowing application of color in loosely defined space. By contrast the painting on the left by Morris Lewis, *“Number 2-00” 1962* consists of finely delineated ribbons of vertical color. Sarah Morris, *“1962 (Rings)” 2006* painting on the right is interlocking circles of color in a confined space.

In conclusion, I would like to agree with Whitney’s definition of himself as an artist and a New Yorker; “...My paintings are just the way New York is...There is order, but also no order. It’s like New York. Everything’s laid out very orderly, and then it’s just total madness...”

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**New York Studio**



**Whitney in New York Studio (Artist in the World, 2012)**



**Whitney color palette, New York Studio (Bomb Magazine, 2015)**