

Art in America

Stanley Whitney at Esso

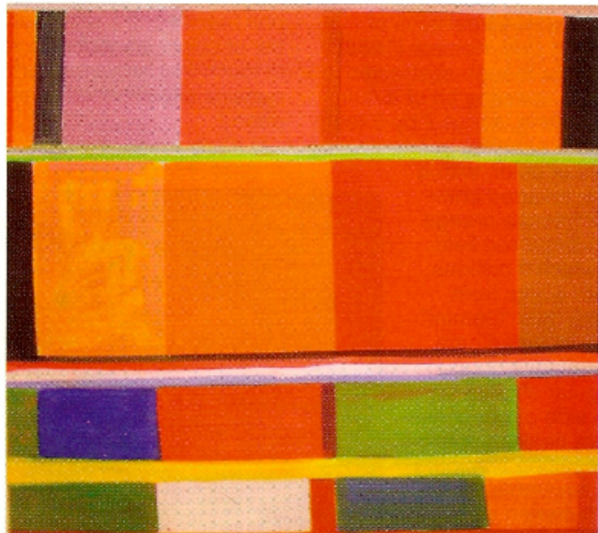
Each of Stanley Whitney's nine paintings on view at Esso, his first show at the gallery, tells a different story about color and its seeming ability to take on autonomous life, as distinct from the viewer as it is seductive to the gaze. Whitney has not altered his basic format for many years: adjacent blocks of variously brushed hues are arranged in horizontal rows separated by long, thin, horizontal stripes of other colors. In each instance, there are just four or five rows of these blocks, with the second row from the top always containing the biggest ones, giving the painting a sense of expansion at that parallel, like someone breathing in deeply, and the bottom rows containing the smallest ones, as if compressed by the weight above. It is a simple, no-frills formula, but the degree of hand-wrought variation is such that the formula supplies infinite fascination, like a friend whose many facets are revealed over the years.

Whitney has never been a fussy painter, but in these new works, all from 2005, he has taken a step toward simplification—I might say toward a kind of classicism. Where once many of the blocks were active and brushy, most are now quite flat and matte, one color deliberately placed over another to create a single block, with the undercolor revealed at the edges or in small fissures and understated brushwork. More active movement is contained within just a few blocks per painting, and expressiveness wrought

more exclusively by default alone, at the interstices where the blocks irregularly, feelingly, meet or overlap. An exception is *Red Highrise* (72 inches square), which was strategically hung alone in a back room; this single work is much more dramatically brushed and did well in a place with no distractions.

When I first saw the show, I was most excited about the bravura *Red Highrise*, but on returning, I grew more intrigued with other, more flatly painted works. Within the multicolored

rows, Whitney tends to concentrate together a few blocks of nearly identical value and only subtly varying hues—reds and reddish oranges, say, in *Queen of Hearts*, and yellows and light oranges in *High Yellow* (both 54 by 60 inches); the latter fairly basks in its own radiance. These areas might march along in a single row, or fall into two or three rows, like a spreading puddle of chroma. The dominant feeling of the work is here established, but as if internally generated rather than imposed. And where, as in the ultra-brushy pink block at the center of one jewel-like (12-inch-square) untitled piece, the artist



Stanley Whitney: *Queen of Hearts*, 2004, oil on linen, 54 by 60 inches; at Esso.

lets loose, it feels like a radical intrusion indeed in the steady unfolding of the whole.

Whitney's paintings are a slow read, yielding small surprises that are a delight to anyone who loves the medium. In the large work *The Underside of the Sky* (72 inches square), for example, a tricolor dividing strip consists of a bright, festive pink, white and blue quite out of keeping with the subdued tones of the surrounding blocks; a hazy window of pale blue, lightly brushed directly on the primed surface, opens a chink in a top corner. I'm especially fond of the artist's sparing use of a lone block of dull lavender, which makes occasional appearances, for example in *Queen of Hearts* and *High Yellow*. That patch feels stubbornly idiosyncratic, on a mission to complicate a palette already enriched by Whitney's stamp of serene relativity.

—Faye Hirsch