

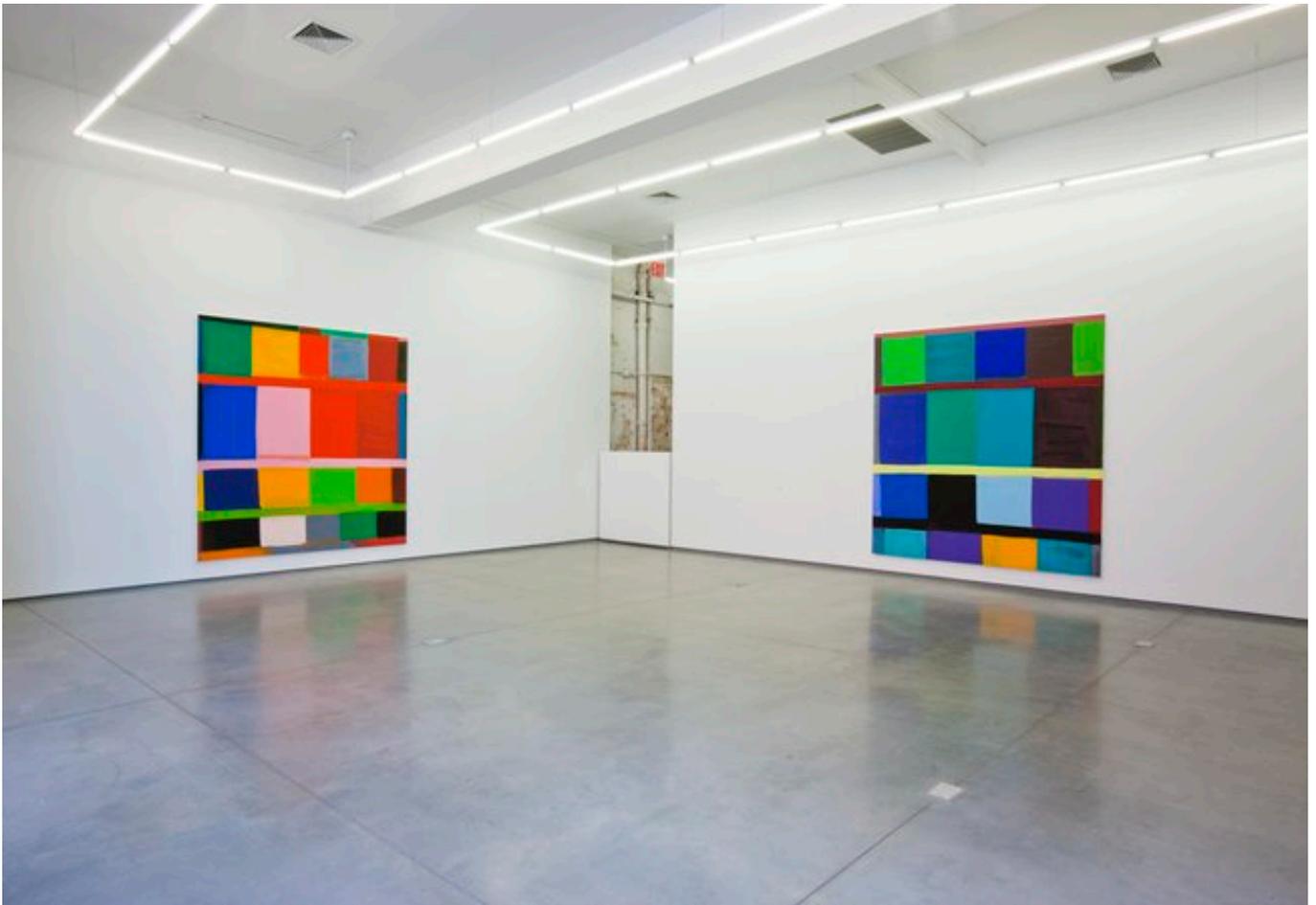
Artists to watch and notable trends and events in the market.

THE DRUTT REPORT: Artists to watch and notable trends and events in the market.

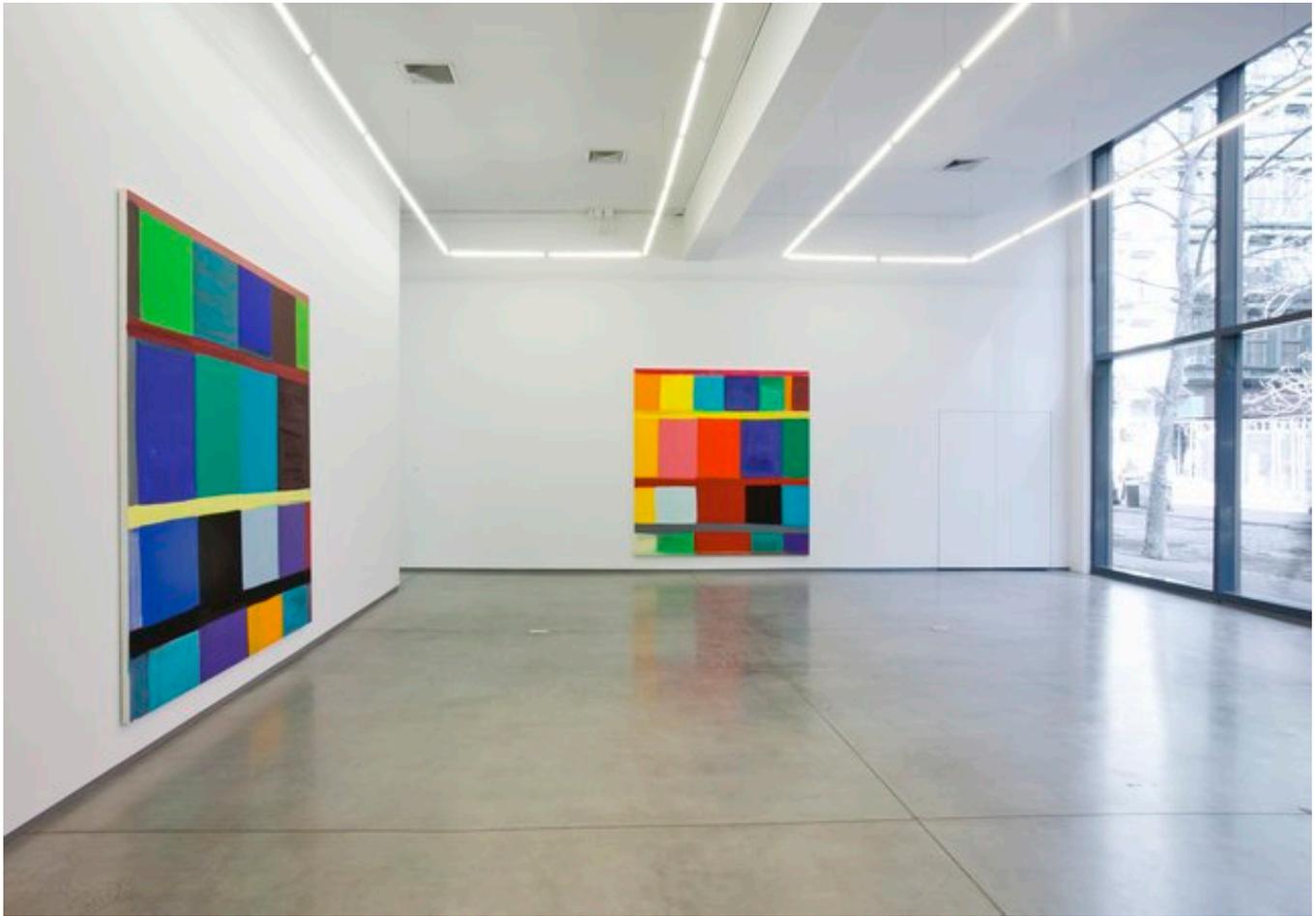
March 29, 2012, 9:03 pm

The Whitney Chapel

I was walking to an appointment in SoHo yesterday, without thinking about the route I was taking, and I ended up walking by [Team Gallery](#) on Wooster Street. What I saw through the window stopped me dead in my tracks. On view are three large paintings by [Stanley Whitney](#). They're not just eye-catching; they are mesmerizing. I met Whitney only recently, but I've known his work a bit longer, not well but well enough. Now I'm smitten. One of the things I've always liked about his practice is the persistence he applies to his idea of stacking color. It's a familiar commitment to endurance in compositional strategy for artists working in reductive vocabularies from the dawn of the 20th century right through Minimalism and Postmodernism. But Whitney's art doesn't come across as doctrinaire or hierarchical, as one would rightly expect of abstraction. Rather, these paintings celebrate the lyricism of painting, the joy of color and harmonic composition. They are rhythmic, melodic, and intense. I'm not implying that they are absent a cerebral dimension; but they are the opposite of the more scientific approach to painting that he has been compared to in the past, like Albers and Reinhardt.



For instance, much has been written about their imperfection, because his grids bend and his forms are not strictly rectilinear. This implies a flaw or failure to meet our expectations. Whitney's art reminds me more of ancient architecture, based on principles of geometry and balance but made by hand so that the settling in of form has the undeniable character of having been hand-built. It turns out that his approach to density and stacking form was born in an epiphany he had during a visit to Egypt in the mid-90s while looking at tombs and pyramids. He says, "I realized I could stack all the colors together and not move the air." It's a brilliant turn of phrase, referring to his former practice of painting a lot of color into a color field. I think "moving the air" is what happens when forms hang in a loosely structured painterly space. Whitney's epiphany was to delimit the amount of breathing room by packing things together like bricks in a building. In so doing, he denies the monotony of embedding quadrilaterals into quadrilaterals, of creating patterns that are formulaic and cold, and sideswiping the subtlety associated with the abstraction he has been likened to in favor of a bold parade of color and painterly surfaces.



The show opens this evening, so I urge you to go and see for yourself. The trinity of the installation has a chapel-like authority, but more of the Rothko variety than of the Sistine. The paintings have breathing room and autonomy, absent any extraneous distractions, for they are so seductive that they draw you in and keep you there. As I said at the beginning, I was stopped dead in my tracks, and I stood looking through the glass for a long time because the doors were locked. He also makes paintings on a smaller scale, which if you are limited by space, might be the best place to start with acquiring his work. And I am recommending that those seriously interested in painting, and not just abstraction, take a long hard look at Whitney. His pieces won't be as easy to obtain later as they are now—meaning only that I think his work is undervalued relative to his accomplishments, stature, and quality. Moreover, the show at Team is a watershed that promises a great leap forward.

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