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Rue Isidore Verheyden 2

1050 Brussels, Belgium

+32 (0)2 512 92 95

info@albertbaronian.com

www.albertbaronian.com

Press Release

Stanley Whitney

In the early 1990s, Pennsylvania-born painter Stanley Whitney came to the Mediterranean, where his experience of the ancient architecture, particularly in Egypt and in Italy, inspired him to settle some compositional questions. Here, in the hefty stonework, he found the archaic substance, and somehow also a prefiguration of the modern grid, to match his deep yet direct sense of pigment. He set to work on canvases of various sizes, always square, always keeping in mind that “the space is in the color.”

There is space here for the scribe and the bricklayer. The painter is in solidarity with them both, moving from top left to bottom right of each canvas, laying down big blocks of eloquent color. Like Gustave Courbet in his *L'Atelier du peintre: Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* (1854–55), completed precisely one century before the first documenta, Whitney strives for a place for painting that invokes a motley crew and involves an ever broader public. This age-old, solitary, concentrated practice can absorb the full complexity of lived experience. Whitney, born in 1946, achieves this in his studio without recourse to allegorical figures and genre-bending compositions, though these he has surely imbibed. Moving past avant-garde methods of opposition and refusal, he calmly persists, insists, keeps his own rhythm. Thus, his self-appointed task is both simpler and potentially more radical: to pack as much color as possible into each painting.

What could this mean? If his color has an intellect, the work is not solely for the rational mind to decipher. It is rather a question of lyrics. Whitney's titles tell of an epic historical consciousness and an evolving philosophy of feeling. They string words together that roll off the tongue but never leave the conscience. Some of the ones I cannot forget include *James Brown Sacrifice to Apollo* (2008), *The Last of the Bohemians* (2008), *Elephant Memory* (2014), and *Radical Times* (2016). But the image that goes with each of them mysteriously changes when I return to look. Each work is animate and, inside it, each color has a personality: an individual made up of a multitude, attracting others. Where there's an intellect there is a body. Another work recalls an apposite line twice repeated in Robert Hunter's translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which eventually became the name of a 2015

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survey exhibition of Whitney's work at the Studio Museum in Harlem: *Dance the Orange*.

—Monika Szewczyk