

STANLEY WHITNEY and LORRAINE O'GRADY

by Phillip Griffith

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Two shows on view at the Studio Museum of Harlem dramatize the resistance of art to fixity and stability, through the abstract paintings in *Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange* and what might today be termed the “socially-engaged” photographs in *Lorraine O’Grady: Art Is....* These paintings and photographs draw the viewer into visual spaces of shifting compositional elements, furtively moving the eye from one corner of the painting to the other, or from one photograph to the next. Poet and cultural critic Fred Moten gives the term “fugitivity” to this kind of movement in art by black poets, musicians, and artists—that is, the kind of movement that creates a third, unauthorized space of meaning in the work.

Whitney’s canvases are composed of rows of vibrant (and vibrating) color squares separated by horizontal bands of color. Because Whitney invariably paints from the top left of the canvas to the bottom right, row by row, the paintings have a feeling of inevitability. Despite this, he lets color beckon color as he moves through the square panels, and so, each painting also surprises. Some color squares are smooth and opaque; some are translucent, or show underpainting, drips, and scratches. In one of the largest paintings, named *My Name is Peaches* (2015) after a lyric from Nina Simone, an orange square at the center of the canvas reveals, in its warm opacity, little trace of Whitney’s brush. But the blue squares in this painting reveal more: the length and patterning of Whitney’s brushwork, a bit of white canvas beneath the light blue square in the top left corner. The irregularity of such a regularized compositional practice gives special meaning—Moten’s “fugitivity”—to the feeling of improvisational movement the color squares evince when taken as an ensemble.



Lorraine O’Grady, *Art Is...* (*Cop Framed*), 1983/2009. Chromogenic color print 16 × 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2015 Lorraine O’Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Whitney's practice finds its own third space between the influences of Minimalism and of Abstract Expressionism. The grid is present, but as a compositional constraint more than as a rigid form—or, to put it differently, as a gridded field or a blank page of sheet music, on which the colors slide in rows, in different tones and shades. Whitney's system of painting is more subjective than that associated with the Minimalist grid, or Donald Judd's compositions and sculpture, and even more improvisational than a grid such as Mondrian's jazz-inflected *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942 – 43). An untitled series of small, black-and-white gouache paintings underscores the irregularity of Whitney's geometry. In these paintings, divested of their colors, the grid becomes apparent, but so, too, do its moments of collapse as squares fall in on themselves to become triangles.

Whitney gives particular attention to his titles, drawing his paintings closer to poetry. The title of the show, *Stanley Whitney: Dance the Orange*, explicitly refers to a line by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke that invokes the color orange (and Whitney borrows the line for the title of a smaller canvas in the exhibit's side gallery, too). The color orange holds a privileged place in the history of encounters between poetry and painting. Frank O'Hara wrote *Why I Am Not a Painter* about why he was not painting an orange canvas, and Paul Éluard's Surrealist masterpiece, *The Earth is Blue Like an Orange*, makes the world quiver with chromatic possibility with one tantalizing, synesthetic simile. Whitney's exhibit stakes out its own shifting ground in this history.

The surface of *Dance the Orange* is largely orange, but composed of a patchwork of different hues. From the right side of the frame creeps a column of cooler squares, a deep blue accompanied above by a gray and lighter blue square. Like the grid, the surface and the frame of the painting are unstable, as well. While threatening the dance of orange, the blues also throw it into relief. Even the color orange, which takes on a monolithic power in this show each time it recurs on a canvas, never returns as the same hue. And the color squares seem to slide, inexorably, in and out of the frame of the canvas before our eyes.



Stanley Whitney, *Untitled*, 2014. Black gouache on Fabriano paper, 11 × 15 inches. Courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, inc., New York.

In a recent conversation with painter David Reed in *Bomb*, Whitney compares his painting to music;¹ Moten writes similarly of his prosody. In an interview at the end of the 2010 collection *B. Jenkins*, the poet discusses “fugitivity.” He declares, “I want to write poems that recognizably inhabit, but in some kind of underground or fugitive way, the space between the laws of music and the laws of meaning.”² Moten's intellectual investments lie partly in exploring the “middle passages” that black art takes through the 20th century's avant-garde history. Like meaning in Moten's poetry, Whitney's grid trembles between the “laws of music and the laws of meaning.” And, not surprisingly, like Whitney's paintings, Moten's recent poems in the 2014 National Book Award-nominated *The Feel Trio* capture jazz-like improvisation, packed into regimented squares of justified prose blocks.

Lorraine O'Grady's conceptual and performance-based art practice eschews Whitney's painterly abstraction, but still, fugitive moments recur in her photographs of 1983's *Art Is...* performance, on view in the downstairs galleries of the museum. Documenting the participation of O'Grady and a troupe of dancers in the 1983 African-American day parade along Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard in Harlem, the selection of photographs includes forty images from *Art Is...*, taken by bystanders and later collected by O'Grady.

For the parade, O'Grady outfitted a parade float with a large golden picture frame and banner reading "Art Is...," and tasked dancers with carrying wooden frames to allow bystanders and participants to "frame" scenes of the parade. O'Grady's images turn the geometry of the rectangular frame into puns: the frames carried by the performers frame moments of experience as art works but also turn the power of the police patrolling the event against the officers. In such images as *Art Is... (Cop Framed)*, the police are "framed," if not for a crime than at least as subject to the power of the performance. In *Art Is... (Cop Eyeing Young Man)* whatever suspicion the officer may harbor for the young black man he "eyes" returns to him, caught as he is in the corner of a frame by one of the dancers. Given the current reality of the deaths of so many black and brown men, women, and children at the hands of the police, this image might read ominously, but this is as ominous as the images in this series get.



Stanley Whitney, *My Name is Peaches*, 2015. Oil on linen, 96 × 96 inches. Courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, inc., New York.

In others, the tone is joyful and reflexive, as in *Art Is... (Girl Pointing)* in which a young woman points exuberantly out of her frame and at the photographer. Other images, such as *Art Is... (Cross Street)*, recall the progression of Whitney's squares across his canvases as the large rectangular frame on the parade float captures images within the frame of the photographic image.

The frames holding O'Grady's photographs, the frame of the photographic image itself, and the frames paraded by O'Grady's dancers create a shifting geometry in this exhibit that echoes the movement in Whitney's paintings upstairs. O'Grady's images pun on "fugitivity" in their topsy-turvy depiction of the police but also highlight the fleeting nature of fugitive moments of art and experience. Like O'Grady's carnivalesque intervention, Whitney's colors resist compositional constraint to challenge fixed geometry with the subjective life of color.
