

CEREAL

In this volume, we explore the theme of **process**. We converse with **Faye and Erica Toogood**, discuss garden design with **Luciano Giubbilei**, and perfumery with **Lyn Harris**. We visit the studios of **Stanley Whitney** and **Elliott Smedley**, and travel to the mountains of **Bhutan** and the hills of **Rwanda**.

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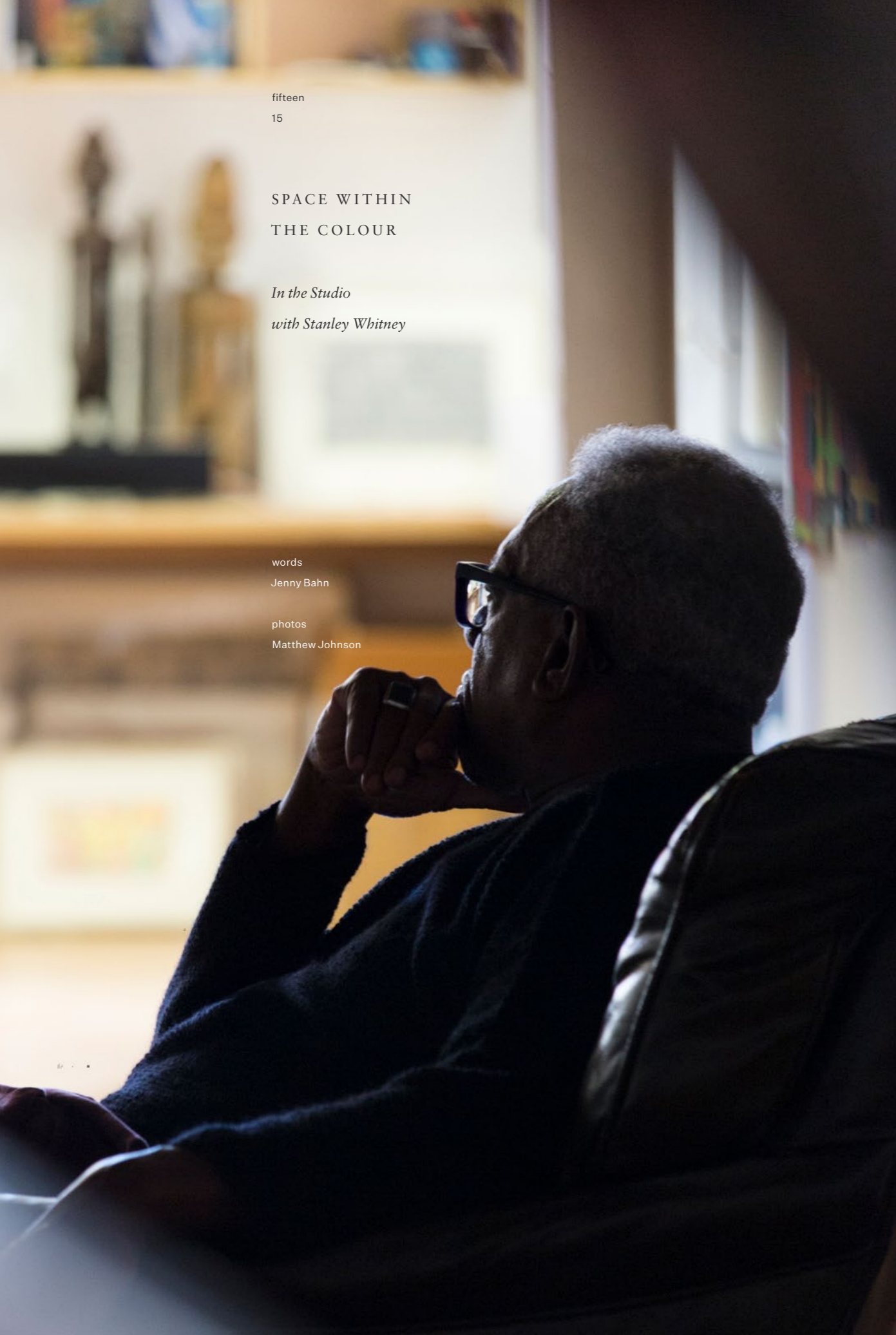
SPACE WITHIN
THE COLOUR

In the Studio

with Stanley Whitney

words
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Stanley Whitney, the 73 year old abstract artist, reaches for the handle of the bathroom door. “What you would do,” he begins, “is practise with the door, because it can swing.” He is showing us how to dance — the jitterbug, to be precise. With one hand on the knob, he briefly transforms, his feet, hips, and knees moving to accommodate an invisible and opposing form. “You see what I mean?” he asks. The door creaks loudly, an agreeable enough partner.

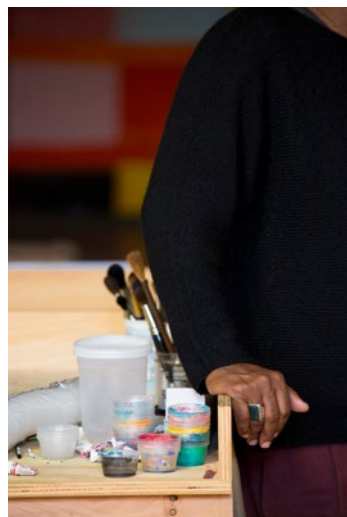
This impromptu performance — a practised navigation of space, with its unique rules and rhythms — is not dissimilar to the work for which Whitney has become so well known. In his pieces, richly hued blocks of colour operate within the parameters of an irregular grid. Rectangular chunks of pigment butt up against one another, jostling for autonomy. The edges are imperfect. On occasion, paint bleeds. The canvasses radiate a magnetic discord.

Whitney’s current style is the result of a decades-long process of elimination. From his time as an undergraduate student at Kansas City Art Institute, to well after he earned his MFA from Yale, Whitney knew a few things for certain: he wasn’t a landscape painter and he wasn’t a storyteller. “I had no idea what my subject matter was,” he admits, “but no matter what I did, I could always make the work better with colour.” Still, he felt no kinship with the Colour Field painters, whose work was, in his opinion, “weak in terms of drawing, and weak in terms of space.” In 1968, he moved to New York City, where he was exposed to the likes of Robert Rauschenberg and the Pop Art scene. That wasn’t for him either. “There was a lot of ‘I don’t want to paint this, I don’t want to paint that. I’m not this, I’m not that.’ That’s a difficult phase to be in,” Whitney says, “because you’re trying to find your voice.”

In the late 1980s, Whitney began to get a sense of who he was as an artist. The sparks of what would become his defining aesthetic were lit during a time when Whitney often found himself driving across the country. “I thought a lot about space,” he says. “Landscape space and sky space. I wanted to put things down on the canvas immediately — just put the colour down.” But the concept wasn’t yet fully formed, so Whitney kept ruminating. In the early 1990s, he travelled to Rome and then Egypt, where, inspired by the architecture, he had a revelation. “I kept thinking that if I put the colours side by side, I would lose all the air. I didn’t realise the space was in the colour,” he says. “Once I figured that out, I could make paintings that were much looser. There was space to get around.”



“What you would do is practise with the door, because it can swing,” says Stanley Whitney.



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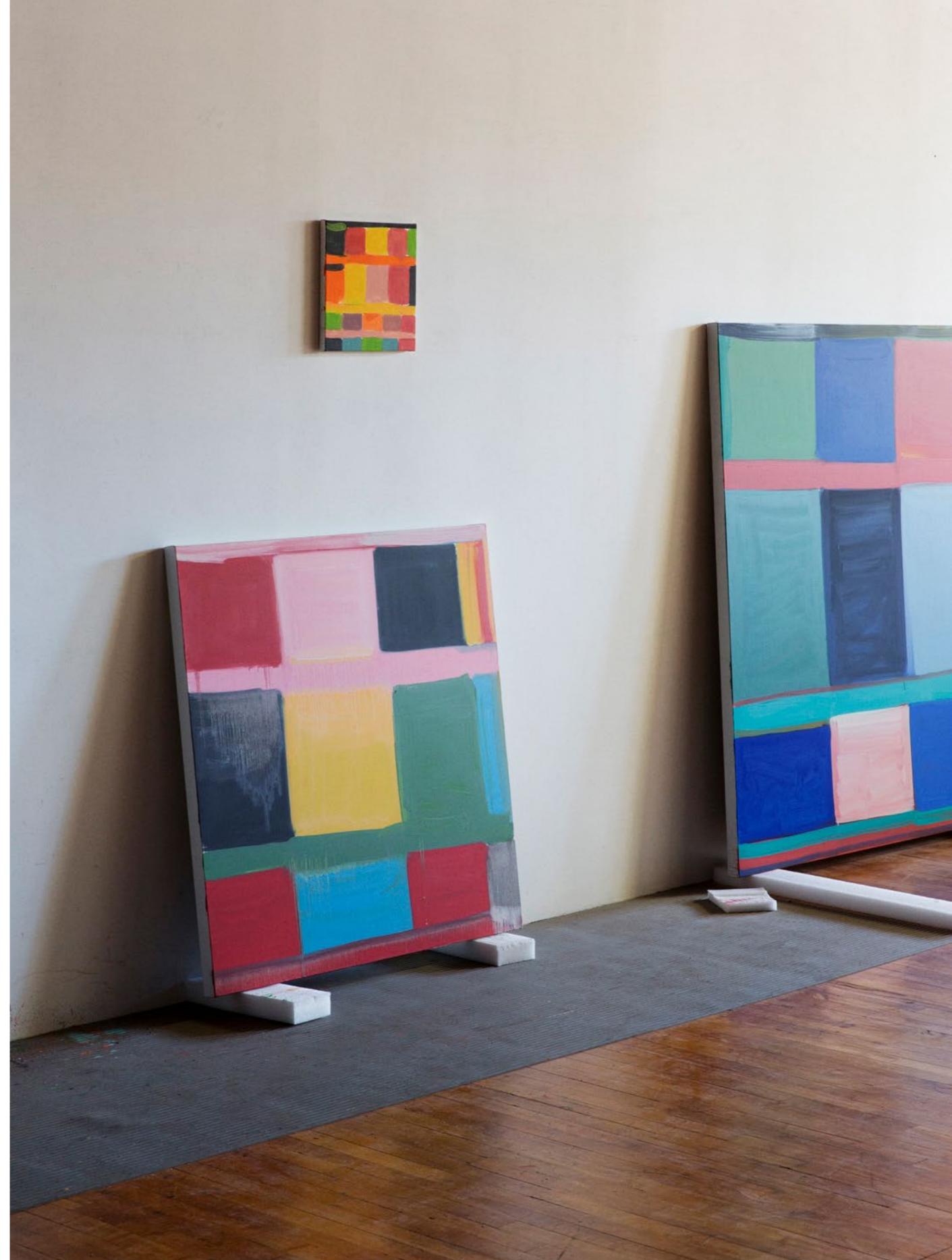
Whitney typically gets up in the morning at around 7.30 a.m., after which, he has a light breakfast — usually oatmeal but sometimes a salad. He takes a car to Ridgewood, Queens, where his studio is, and he works from 10 till two. There are painting days, and there are drawing days. On painting days, he asks his studio manager to come in late so he can be alone. "No one's ever seen me paint," Whitney says. "It's just a whole thing. I don't even know what I really do when I paint." Whitney does admit, however, that according to his wife, artist Marina Adams, he makes a lot of noise when he works. "I'm loud. That's all I'll say," Whitney divulges, before erupting with a burst of mirthful laughter.

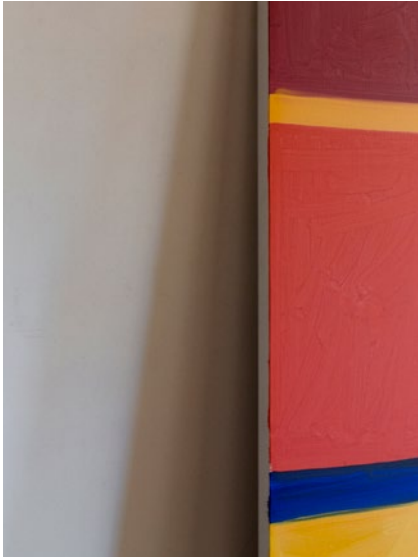
The exact shape of the day's work is determined by a rhythm beyond Whitney's control. "Sometimes I come in here and I can get into it right away. I'm just on. It flows out of me." Other times, it's less easy — this is something Whitney has learned to not see as a negative. "Early on, you realise there are no 'bad days'. You might have a day where everything's really off and you can't get anything done. But those are the good days, because those are the days you're trying to raise your level, trying to get to another place. The paintings that are your 'failures' — the ones you really struggle with — are sometimes your best paintings, because you've used up all your tricks, you've tried everything."

Integral to Whitney's practice are his drawings. They are smaller, squirlier works on paper, often less dense than the paintings they will eventually inspire. Around the studio, an army of coloured pencils lays strewn about, awaiting its deployment to one of his many cardboard-fronted notebooks filled with sketches and phrases such as 'Doing Time' and 'In memory of My Neighbour.' The drawings help work out the space on a smaller scale, and, with the space defined, Whitney can confidently get straight to the colour once he moves onto the canvas.

The choice of colours that end up in a Stanley Whitney piece can be attributed to a kind of alchemy. When asked how he does it, the artist offers only one word: 'magic'. "It's like call and response," he adds. "Once you put something down on the canvas, you have a relationship. It's like getting dressed, you know what I mean? This works. That works. It's just how things feel." In fact, Whitney feels he has to approach his works with no premeditated idea of a colour scheme. "If I think about my paintings like, 'Oh, I'm going to do a painting with pink, white, grey, and blue,' then I get locked in. That means I can't let other things in or out. I need to be at a point where I don't have any thoughts," he explains. "No ideas. I don't want any ideas."

Whitney's studio is dim but joyful. Large, finished canvases sit stacked against one another on the floor, awaiting shipment. A series of a dozen, smaller works hang side by side on a wall. Beneath them sit published books and paper drawings. Everywhere the eye travels, it meets a grid. The familiarity of the form, however, never makes the next piece any less enthralling. Nor, for Whitney, does it make it easier to create. "You're always on thin ice," he tells me. "It's always a difficult process. And you don't want it to become less difficult. It's always about risky business. You want to stay there."





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