Stories Project. ACC 54
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

The artist Stanley Whitney was born in Philadelphia in 1946 and studied at the Columbus College of Art and Design and the Kansas City Art Institute before moving to New York City in 1968. He graduated with an MFA from Yale School of Art, Yale University, New Haven, in 1972, but found himself at odds with the politically and theoretically oriented contemporary scene of the 1970s and 1980s, confronting the expectation that an African American artist should contend directly with themes of racial and cultural identity. Whitney was more interested in honing an abstract visual language, his early works incorporating patches of color surrounded by areas of empty space. At this stage in his career he was also focused on the power of gesture and immersed in the daily practice of drawing. Although Whitney has been deeply invested in chromatic experimentation throughout his career, he consolidated his distinctive approach during a period spent living and working in Rome in the 1990s, shifting his compositions from untethered amorphous forms to the denser stacked arrangements that characterize his mature style.

Transcription of phone interview with Stanley Whitney conducted by David White, Senior Curatorial Advisor, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on March 24, 2024. Reviewed and edited by the speakers March 2025.

David White [DW]: I'm here with Stanley Whitney, and I'm David White from the Rauschenberg Foundation. If you could begin by just telling a little bit about yourself.

Stanley Whitney [SW]: I'm Stanley Whitney. I was born in Philadelphia in 1946, and I came to New York in 1968.

DW: And you went to school where?

SW: I went to school in Columbus, Ohio, at a place called the Columbus College of Art and Design. And then the Kansas City Art Institute, where I graduated in painting in 1968. From '70 to '72, I went to Yale University for my master's degree in painting.

DW: Ah. Great. And do you recall when you first became aware of Bob [Robert] Rauschenberg?

SW: Well, I was always aware of him because Bob went to school in Kansas City, so I knew about him because of that. I first saw his work in the Carnegie International. [Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, *Six Painters and the Object*, Jan. 17–Feb. 23, 1964.]

DW: How great.

SW: I remember it was a painting with clocks in it. I had just gotten to art school and I had no idea about anything. I went to art school to be a designer, an illustrator, to make some money. I was just trying to beat the draft and going to this place I found on the back of a magazine. So I remember I saw his work and [James] Rosenquist's work—I remember that really clearly—and I didn't know what it was. I mean, it didn't really influence me because I couldn't figure out what it was.

Robert Rauschenberg
Migration, 1959
Combine: oil, paper, printed paper, printed reproductions, photographs, fabric and wood on canvas
50 x 40 in. (127 x 101.6 cm)
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York
Anonymous gift through the American Federation of Arts, Museum Donor Program
RRF 59.004

DW: Fascinating. In addition to *Migration* which you saw, there are a number of ones with clocks in them, including his *First Time Painting* (1961) and *Second Time Painting* (1961). But do you recall when you first met Bob?

Robert Rauschenberg
First Time Painting, 1961
Combine: oil, paper, fabric, sailcloth, plastic exhaust cap, alarm clock, sheet metal, adhesive tape, metal springs, wire, and string on canvas
76 3/4 x 51 1/4 x 8 7/8 in. (194.9 x 130.2 x 22.5 cm)
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Sammlung Marx
RRF 61.005

Robert Rauschenberg
Second Time Painting, 1961
Combine: oil, fabric and metal on canvas, with alarm clock and string
65 7/8 x 42 x 2 1/4 in. (167.3 x 106.7 x 5.7 cm)
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA.
Gevirtz-Mnuchin Purchase Fund
RRF 61.006

SW: I first met Bob in person probably in the early seventies, and that was through Al Taylor. Al Taylor was a good friend of mine; we came to New York together from Kansas City Art Institute and had a loft on Canal Street and Bowery. Al and I delivered art. We had to pick something up at Rauschenberg's at Lafayette Street [Rauschenberg's New York home and studio], and Al met Debbie [Skorupa – later

Debbie Taylor] and it was like love at first sight. So then because of that, we'd always go by the house.

DW: Because Debbie was living at Lafayette Street; she worked for Rauschenberg.

SW: Debbie was living at the house. And that's how I got involved with Rauschenberg. Because I was painting, I probably would've liked to have been more involved with someone like Jasper Johns. But because of Al and Debbie I got involved with Rauschenberg, which was really fantastic.

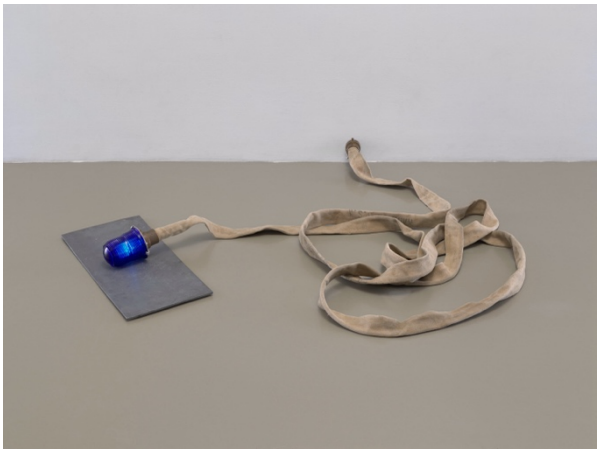
DW: That's nice. And so then I read in the *Gagosian Quarterly*, one of the interviews ["The Space is in the Color: Stanley Whitney," April 10, 2020], that you were with Bob on the street when he came across the hose, that was –

SW: Oh yeah. Yeah.

DW: Please tell me that story.

SW: It's funny because we were walking . . . Bob always had an entourage. So we were walking, I think Sachika [Hisachika Takahashi; Tokyo-born artist and Rauschenberg's former studio assistant], Al, and a few other people were there. We were right on the corner of either Green or Wooster and Houston, and there was a big pile of junk there, and there was this fire hose there. We kept going to the house and then Bob said to Sachika, "Go back and get that fire hose you saw."

And then the next time I saw it, it was this great piece of art. The hose was across the floor and it must have had an extension cord in it. He had taken a blue glass light fixture and attached it to it, and he laid it on a piece of metal. . . and it was just gorgeous. I was so shocked because I remembered thinking it was just junk on the street.



Robert Rauschenberg
The Proof of Darkness (Kabal American Zephyr), 1981
Fire hose, lead plate, and electric airport runway light
dimensions variable (dimensions variable)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
RRF 81.055

I heard that Bob would always – in the early days – give himself two blocks. He'd walk for two blocks, and that was his limit for finding stuff to make art. It was incredible.

DW: That piece is called *Proof of Darkness* (1981). And the blue light is an airport runway light.

SW: The great thing about the house was that you would see a lot of great pieces that maybe wouldn't make it into a show. You know what I mean?

DW: Sure.

SW: Because he always had a lot of shows with Leo [Castelli] and you would see a lot of pieces that never made it into the show that were just fabulous.

Robert Rauschenberg in the chapel at 381 Lafayette Street, N.Y. 1967. Works pictured: *Short Circuit* (1955), *Johanson's Painting* (1961), and *Blue Eagle* (1961). Photo: William S. Wilson

DW: Well, he was so prolific that there were always more made than there was room for at the Castelli Gallery.

SW: Exactly. Exactly.

DW: And are you at all aware of Bob's connection with jazz or music?

SW: Not so much. When I knew him, he was living in Captiva [Florida; Rauschenberg moved his primary home and residence to Florida in 1970, but kept the 381 Lafayette Street property as his New York-base]. He'd come up. I never knew why he was in Florida. In those days, I had no idea.

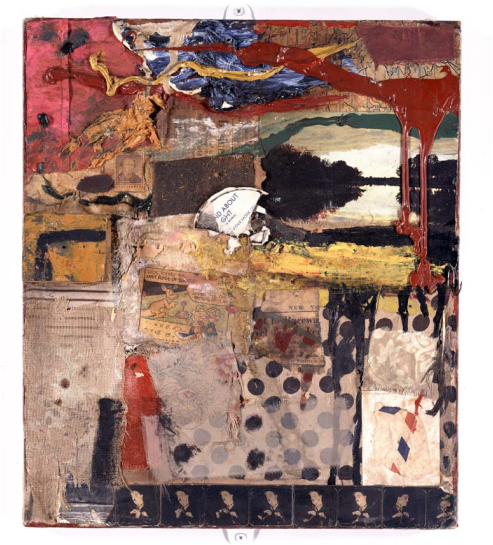
DW: Well, since he was born in Port Arthur, Texas, that's also on the Gulf of Mexico.

SW: Oh, that's right.

DW: So he really connected with that area. And at one point he felt that too many of his friends were having too much trouble, and he for some reason, felt that he was responsible in some way. I don't know why he came up with that notion. So he decided he wanted to get out of the city. I think that was basically the reason.

SW: Yeah. What was the question you're asking?

DW: Well, I was asking about the connection with music because there's an early Combine called *Monk* (1955), and it has to do with Thelonious Monk, and a little fragment of the record is in the Combine. The TV was always on but Rauschenberg wasn't listening to music so much. When you were having that conversation for the most recent *Quarterly* where the man who you were speaking with talks about all the artists who were influenced by jazz, and how they either put the names of the artists or the names of their work in their artwork, or listen to it . . . And so I thought Bob did have that connection.



Robert Rauschenberg
Monk, 1955
Combine: oil, newsprint, fabric, printed reproductions, postage stamp, phonograph record fragment, and wood on canvas
14 x 12 in. (35.6 x 30.5 cm)
Gundlach Collection, Los Angeles
RRF 55.011

SW: No, I didn't talk to him about that. I mean, there'd always be a lot of people around the table. I was like a fly on the wall. I was very young; I had no idea really of how the art world worked. It was just great to be sitting around with this great artist who was just so amazing, so brilliant. I always said he was the smartest person I've ever met. I always felt like Bob and David Hammons, both people who never read a book, were probably the smartest people I've ever met.

DW: Isn't that –

SW: You know what I mean? The smartest people I've ever met. And Bob just was amazing that way. He was so clear, and he was so generous. I was living on the corner of Cooper Square, and I used to park my car there by Cooper Union, and I got all these parking tickets. I was like, I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't afford this. And Bob just paid them.

DW: Oh, isn't it . . . Great story.

SW: Yeah, he just paid it. Then when I got really sick in the eighties and had allergies – I was really, really sick, and through Change [Inc.], Bob took care of me. I was in the hospital in Harlem and got to see a doctor. [Rauschenberg established the nonprofit organization Change, Inc. in 1970 that provided small sums of money to artists for such non-art emergency expenses as rent and medical costs.] I had no

doctor, and Bob paid for everything. I mean, I never got a bill, never did anything. He just did it. And it wasn't something he talked about or something he ever brought up.

DW: And I've heard these stories numerous times from other people. He was supportive of people's art.

SW: Yeah, he just did it. Yeah, he was just really generous that way. And it wasn't like he ever expected anything from you or brought it up to you or anything like that.

DW: So in one sense, the next question was, in what way was he influential in your art making? But I think you've already said that – just his imaginative way of thinking of things.

SW: Yeah. It wasn't about my painting, it was being around him. I was very confused about where I fit in. I knew the [Clement] Greenberg people because of Dan Christensen in Kansas City. I didn't fit into that group. And I didn't think I fit in with what was happening at Castelli's and that group. But to be around Bob and just being around an artist like that, I mean, I was always impressed by him as an artist. He lived a bohemian life. He had a whole building, but he went down to his bedroom there with a mattress on the floor. Now I don't know if kids could ever imagine there'd be someone like that with a mattress on the floor.

Or there'd be a check sitting on the table, and I would think, "my God, there's a check here for $20,000 on the table" and it meant nothing. Or people would say, "Bob, the limo's here." And Bob would say, "Oh, they can wait." And I'd be, "The limo can wait?!" I learned to love him in terms of how he dealt with money and art and life.

DW: And what was important, yeah.

SW: And what was important was the art. It wasn't really the money. So like I said, for me, it was really just watching and observing that at the house. I was like a fly on the wall. You could be there for the openings and stuff like that. The phone would ring and they'd say, "It's Ted Kennedy." And Bob would say, "No." Things like that. And you would go, wow. Wow.

DW: And he seemed to be accepting of things that happened like when the cat walked across a painting and then there were footprints. "Oh, great, now that's part of the painting."

Robert Rauschenberg's dog Laika with incomplete work *Gulch* (1965) in his Broadway studio, N.Y. 1965. Work pictured in background is *Trophy IV (For John Cage)* (1961). Photo: Attributed to Ugo Mulas

SW: Yeah, exactly. I think Al Taylor really learned a lot from Bob that way. Al was always like that too. He'd take the dog out and the dog would piss, and he saw it as a drawing. I think we all learned that from Bob. It was a real education.

DW: There was something in one of the *Quarterlies*, and I'll just read what you wrote, which – I found it so similar to Bob in one way, where you said, in regards to art making, "There aren't any bad days. A bad day is a good day because you're trying to get to another level, you're trying to get to something else" [*Gagosian Quarterly*, "Stanley Whitney: Vibrations of the Day," Spring 2024] And that made me think of – Bob had said at one point, "Stop remembering something that you are sure of every day to make space for the new mistakes." I mean, he always had a little humorous answer. His remark is so like yours.

SW: Well, I think I really learned that from Bob, how loose he was, how open he was, where art was, where the intellect was, where the play was. The intellect was part of the play. It was quite amazing. I never saw him in the studio, I never went down to Captiva, but I always was amazed at what he was as an artist. I saw the art a lot when it came back from India and saw how beautiful things could be, how elegant things could be, and how raw things could be all at the same time. [In 1975,

Rauschenberg traveled to Ahmedabad, in the Indian state of Gujarat, home to a textile center founded by Mohandas K. Gandhi, who was of Gujarati descent. Rauschenberg worked for a month at an ashram, creating the *Bones* and *Unions* series under the auspices of Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles.] He was just incredible, a brilliant artist.

Robert Rauschenberg
Little Joe (Bones), 1975
Handmade paper, bamboo, and fabric
24 x 28 1/2 x 3 1/2 in. (61 x 72.4 x 8.9 cm)
From an edition of 34, published by Gemini G.E.L, Los Angeles
RRF 75.E003

DW: He seemed to be open to every kind of influence and suggestion.

SW: Yes. He was so open and just took in so much in the studio. He was really, really incredible.

DW: I wonder if you'd ever heard the term that Nan Rosenthal from The Metropolitan Museum talked about, "the syncopated grid," which – she was describing Bob's use of imagery or whatever, how there was this grid-like thing.

SW: Yeah, yeah.

DW: And of course, that made me think of your work in a way and I just didn't know if you had ever heard that expression?

SW: I never heard that. But I can see that in terms of his work, how he laid it out. And I lay it out that way too, because I can get to the colors very easily because the grids

are simple. But I got that someplace else. I never thought about that, David. Interesting.

DW: I love what you had to say about color too, that, "For me, it really is a color conversation." I just love that expression.

SW: It was hard for me to figure out where the color was. It's funny, in those days, you saw a lot of Ileana [Sonnabend]. She came over more than Leo, I think.

DW: Oh, interesting.

SW: Although there was one time a party at the house, and all the artists were there. I think [Andy] Warhol was never there and Johns, of course, was never there. But everyone else from Castelli was there. And Leo came up the steps, and he came into the room and there was a big, long table with a lot of food, and everyone got up and clapped. [Roy] Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Bob, they all got up and clapped when Leo came into the room. It was really great watching all that. I mean, I had no way of approaching Leo. I don't know if people even knew I was an artist. But it was a great education in terms of that era, because Leo, that gallery was the gallery.

DW: And Leo's focus was really on the artists. Whatever the artist wanted to do, that's what got done.

SW: Yeah, exactly.

DW: And he would support it in any way.

SW: Exactly. It wasn't about the money. The eighties changed everything. Before that, it was really about the art.

DW: Well, that really covers the things that I wanted to ask you about. So I very much appreciate your having taken the time to speak with me.

SW: Oh, sure.

DW: And as I said before, if something comes to mind when you think—"Oh, I wish I'd mentioned such and such . . ."

SW: No, that's it. I mean, he was never about fame and fortune. He had fame and fortune, but he could walk around the streets and people wouldn't even know who he was. Even if I walk around, people know who I am because of the internet and all that stuff, and I'm so shocked.

DW: Yeah, things have changed enormously that way.

SW: Things have changed. Yeah.

DW: Many thanks for this Stanley.