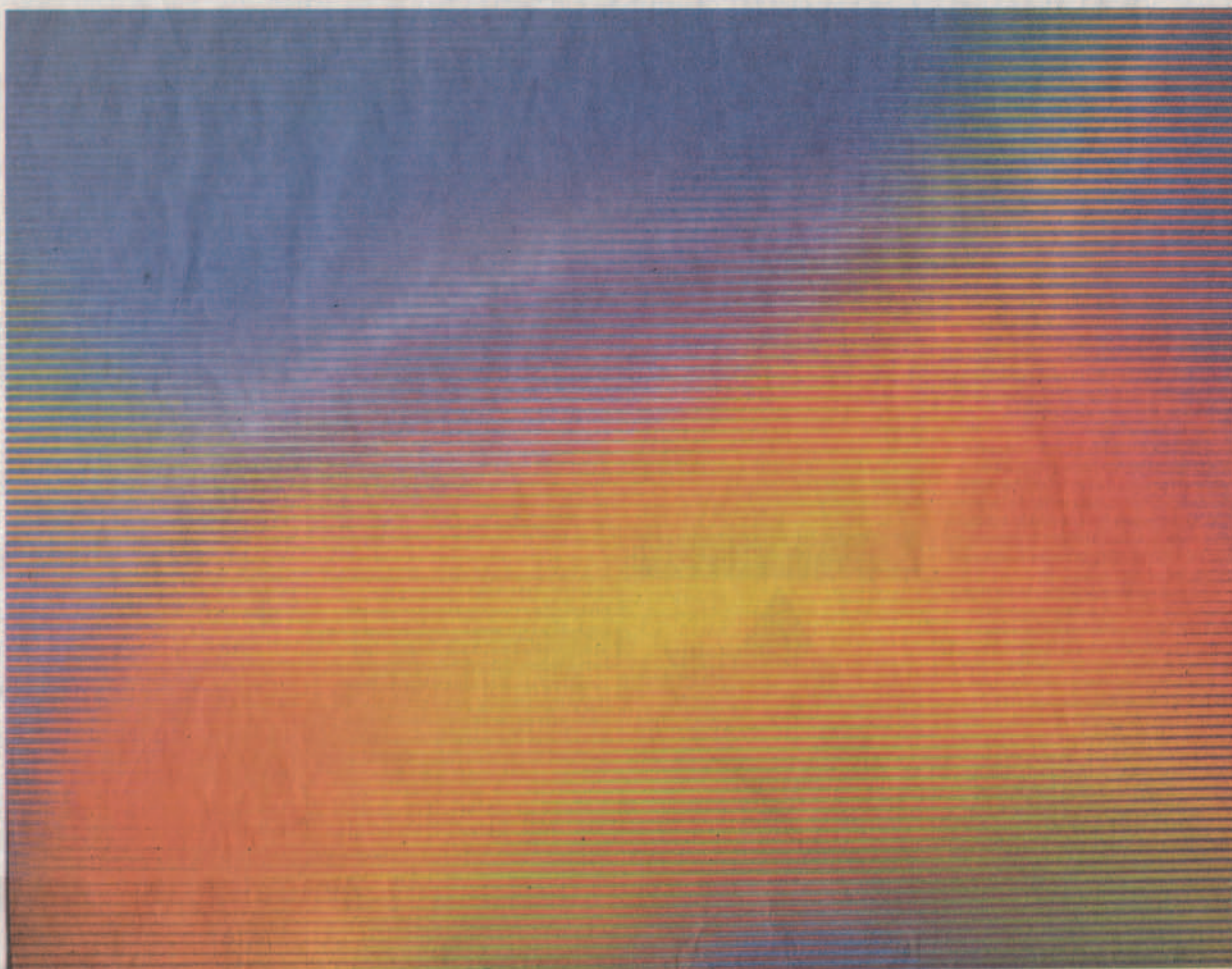


Obituaries

David Whitaker



Whitaker (above) in his studio, and (left) his painting *Eclipse*; each work was created with the precision of a mathematical diagram

Photographs: Rebecca Hossack Gallery

Painter who produced a hallucinatory range of optical effects with just seven colours

The work of David "Whit" Whitaker, who has died of pneumonia aged 68, is instantly recognisable. Using straight lines, simple shapes and a palette of just seven colours – two yellows, cadmium red, magenta, viridian and two blues – he explored a seemingly unlimited range of optical effects.

The resulting oils and watercolour paintings shimmer with colour and combinations of colour. The effect is almost hallucinatory, forcing the viewer to walk backwards and forwards, or side to side, to try and make sense of what he is seeing. Over the course of Whitaker's career, this near obsessive, single-minded pursuit amounted to an

astonishing technical achievement.

Whitaker was born in Blackpool. His flair was obvious from childhood, and at 13 he was a student at Blackpool and the Fylde school of art. He stayed for six years until, out of financial necessity, he moved in the late 1950s to London, to work in graphic design, a career which did not suit him. So he resigned and took a job as a milkman; the early start left him the rest of the day to paint.

From 1962 to 1966 Whitaker was a mature student at the Royal Academy Schools, gaining a distinction in painting. He also moved from his earlier landscape paintings – frequently of the north Yorkshire moors and dales – into abstract art. Later, he began to win awards, including, in 1973, on Bridget Riley's recommendation, the Mark Rothko memorial prize, which enabled him to travel in the US.

Whitaker had also held the first of many one-man exhibitions. Among the venues for these were Kingston upon Thames Museum and Art Gallery, the Serpentine Gallery in London and the Galerie Poll in West Berlin. With a family to support, in 1984 he joined Wimble-

don School of Art's painting department, retiring as a senior lecturer in 2001. He was a generous and supportive teacher, committed to his students and, exceptionally, successful in balancing his own work with his teaching. Indeed, the time with students gave him opportunities to conduct colour workshops and projects close to his heart.

Whitaker's art draws upon Byzantine painting, Leonardo, Goethe, Ruskin, Cézanne and the American abstract painter Kenneth Noland, as well as the colour theorists Michel Eugène Chevreul and Johannes Itten. He created each work with the precision of a mathematical diagram, stencilling each layer between the strips of tape so that he could be said to be almost painting blindly, never totally confident of what the outcome would be. He admitted that sometimes he was almost sick with nerves when he peeled off the tapes to discover whether he was going to be pleased or disappointed with a painting. In the worst event, he would scrape the canvas down and begin again.

Despite this apparently cerebral approach, Whitaker claimed his true

inspiration came from the "world of images that comes from inside us" and the events of his own life. "Although I am deeply concerned with subliminal experience," he wrote, "I avoid the tragic and concentrate on more uplifting themes. Where do my themes come from? Waterfalls; shafts of light in cathedrals and forests; memories of Egypt; coastlines; the wind in the trees; rainbows; sunrises and sunsets; cloud formations; America."

During his career Whitaker held some 30 one-man shows, with venues ranging from Imperial College, London (1974), and the Ruskin School of Drawing, Oxford (1983), to the Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne (1992), the Art Store Gallery, Oakland, California (1993), and Gallery Focus, New Malden, Surrey (1997 and 1999). He also had exhibitions in Amiens, in France, in 1977 and 1998. Group exhibitions took in the Redfern and Hayward galleries, the Barbican, the Groucho Club, the Royal Academy summer show, as well as galleries in Germany, Sweden and Iceland.

In 1989 he was elected to the London Group and served on its committee –

despite a lack of interest in organisation – preferring to subvert its meetings into debates between abstract and figurative art and modernism and postmodernism. He was also elected to the Colour Group (Great Britain) in 1996, and to the Royal Watercolour Society in 2001. This, in turn, led to his work being taken up by the Rebecca Hossack Gallery. Public collections holding his work include the Arts Council, York City Art Gallery, Leicester education authority, the universities of Salford and Picardy, and the National Gallery of Iceland.

Whitaker had considerable energy and was a marathon runner who had played cricket in the Lancashire League. Warm and generous in his appreciation of others, he was a good-humoured and private man, content to spend endless hours in solitude, putting colour on to canvas or paper.

He is survived by his wife Frankie (Frances Wood), whom he married in 1959, and their three sons.

Simon Fenwick

David Whitaker, artist and teacher, born June 8 1938; died March 15 2007