

1852

SATURDAY 20 MARCH

'Uncle Tom's Cabin' published

Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in book form, having been serialised in an abolitionist periodical. It became the best-selling novel of the 19th century

DAVID WHITAKER

Abstract artist of technical daring

David Whitaker was a painter who over the course of his career extended the range and resonance of Abstract Art. During the late 1960s, immediately after he left the Royal Academy Schools and while Bridget Riley was establishing a reputation through her exploration of the optical effects of line in her black-and-white works, he was investigating the optical effects of colour in paintings of extraordinary technical accomplishment and daring.

In Whitaker's paintings the colour of each of the vertical (or, more rarely, horizontal) bands that covered the canvas would imperceptibly shift and change over the course of its length. The resulting image appeared to pulse with light. Shapes would float free from the geometric mesh. Cool colours, that the viewer might expect to recede, would spring suddenly forward.

The ambition and the control of these strikingly beautiful effects were things that he continued to develop. He even managed to achieve his minutely graduated effects in watercolour.

David Whitaker was born in Blackpool in 1939. After showing an early aptitude for painting, he was enrolled, at the age of 13, as a junior student at Blackpool Art School. Obligated to leave there after six years of study after his father became incapacitated by multiple sclerosis, he found work in London as a graphic designer.

Having married early, and with two (later, three) children to support, he was nevertheless determined to become a painter: He abandoned magazine design and took a job as a milkman, so that he could have time to paint in the afternoons. In 1962 he was accepted as a mature student at the Royal Academy Schools, where – after a further four years of study – he was awarded a Distinction in Painting.

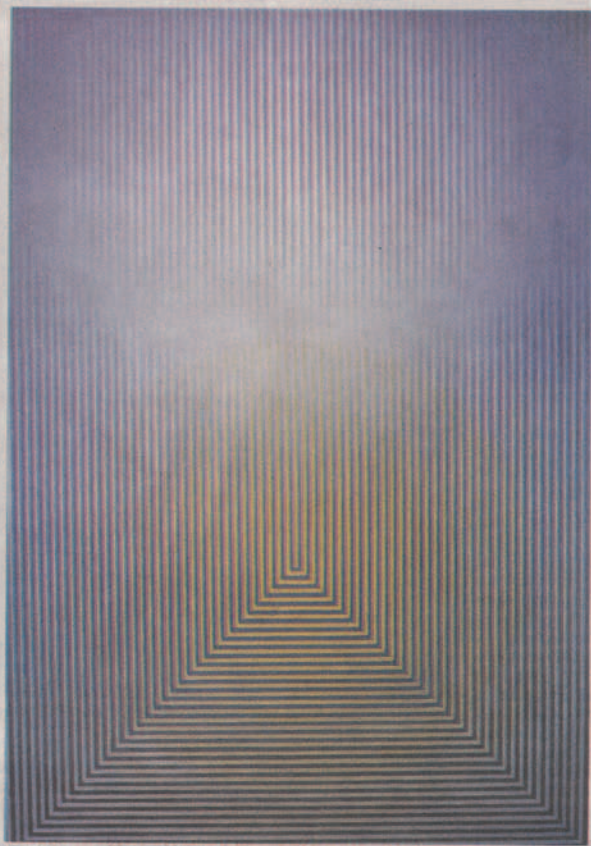
During his time at the RA, he worked – as an experiment – on alternate days, on the same canvas with his fellow student, David Inshaw. At that stage Inshaw was an abstract painter and Whitaker a figurative one. By the end of the experiment, their roles had reversed.

Whitaker's interest in Op Art began on his leaving the RA, and his work enjoyed early success. He had been awarded a Young Contemporaries Prize in 1964, he exhibited at the Kingston Art Gallery and was included in several Arts Council touring shows. In 1970 he became one of the first British artists to have a solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London. In 1973 – on the recommendation of Bridget Riley – he received the Mark Rothko Memorial Award, spending several fruitful months working in America.

On holiday in Egypt in the late 1970s he was dazzled by the grave-paintings in the Valley of the Kings, consummate works of art that were created in the expectation that they would never be seen by human eyes. Something of that austere self-denying idealism infected his own attitude to his practice over the next two decades.

The demands of family life drew him more and more into teaching. From 1984 to 2001 he was a dedicated and much-loved tutor at Wimbledon School of Art. He continued with his own painting, but exhibited only occasionally, and not with commercial galleries. He had one-person shows in public galleries in France (Amiens) and America (Oakland), as well as at the Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne, and at the Newcastle Polytechnic gallery.

He was elected a member of the London Group in 1989 and a Fellow of the Royal Watercolour Society in 2004. In 1996 he became one of the first abstract painters to win a prize at the Hunting Art Prizes, and achieved the same distinction when he won a prize at the Singer Fried-



'The Moon and Pyramid', oil on canvas by Whitaker, 2004 REBECCA HOSSACK GALLERY

lander National Watercolour competition in 2001. These were only a few of the many awards that his work received.

Whitaker's work excited the interest of commercial galleries. And with the coming of the new millennium Whitaker began exhibiting regularly again in London. The dynamism, beauty and technical accomplishment of his painting – when seen by a wider public – won many admirers. Although institutional support was slow to catch up, his work is in the collections of the Arts Council of Great Britain, York City

Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Iceland.

A man of great gentleness and charm, he brought a scrupulous care to everything he undertook. He was a considerable athlete. A long-time member of the Kingston Stragglers, he ran marathons until almost the last year of his life.

Rebecca Hossack

David Whitaker, artist: born Blackpool 8 June 1939; married 1959 Frances Wood (three sons); died Kingston upon Thames, Surrey 15 March 2007.