

Published 31/07/2013

David Whitaker Retrospective Part II: Waters of the Nile

Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London

1 July – 31 August 2013

Second Retrospective at Rebecca Hossack Gallery

by KATE TIERNAN

David Whitaker (1938 – 2007) was one of the first artists to have a solo show at the Serpentine Gallery when it opened in 1970. His work was also included in the Hayward Gallery's British Painting 74, and he had more than 30 solo shows during his career. He won many awards and accolades. In 1973, on the recommendation of Bridget Riley, he won the Mark Rothko Memorial Award, he was one of the first abstract painters to win a Hunting Art Prize, and became a Fellow of the Royal Watercolour Society in 2004. Although highly acclaimed and collected privately, his work is represented in surprisingly few national collections.

Whitaker, who was born in Blackpool, studied initially at Blackpool School of Art, later becoming a mature student at the Royal Academy, where he gained a distinction. Here, his work was predominantly figurative until a pivotal collaboration with fellow student David Inshaw shifted his practice towards abstraction, in particular Op Art – examining the potential within painting to manipulate the viewer's perspective, playing with optical illusion. Always passionate about a career as a painter, he turned his back on the natural world he had previously depicted, venturing instead into the world within. He had a forensic approach and intellect for investigating the optical potential in colour.

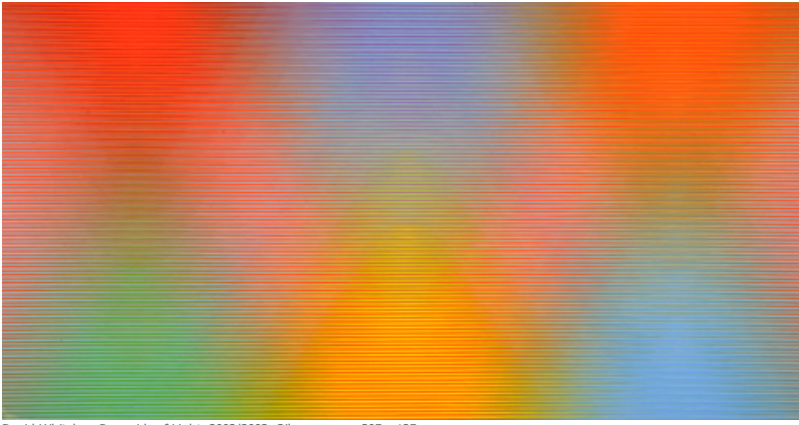
This is the second retrospective of Whitaker's work at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery and includes paintings from across his life, from the 1960s to work produced shortly before his death. Early in his career, he worked as milkman which allowed him time to paint, but the job did not support his growing family so he left to become a graphic designer. In the 1980s, he worked at Wimbledon School of Art becoming a senior lecturer until he retired in 2002.

"Collecting" atmospheric conditions and natural phenomenon that he had witnessed was integral when conceiving a work. Whitaker described this as a highly conceptual process, with the hope of capturing optimism. Fascinated by a real and multiple perspective, the influence of both Pablo Picasso and Peter Lanyon are evident in Whitaker's output: conceptual cubism – conceiving works with pauses to consider the act of painting, the delineation of the horizontal and vertical line. The only sculpture in the show is a wooden tower reaching for the ceiling, reminiscent of a skyscraper, and painted in lollypop pastels. The delicately assembled structure is striped, revealing what looks like stairwells or escalators encircling it.

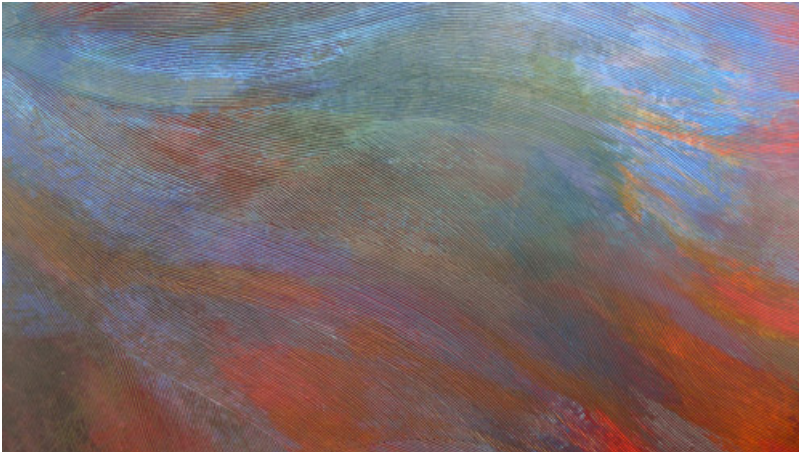
Each mark carries intentionality, gestures to demarcate and sometimes devour the surface underneath as Gerhard Richter did, dragging colour across the whole canvas. Music has a history of influencing artists and, as Richter listened to John Cage, Whitaker listened to Beethoven while composing to echo the orchestra's rich depth and beauty: a concerto of colour. Whitaker's inspiration was ignited by shafts of light in cathedrals, waterfalls, forests, memories of Egypt, coastlines, rainbows, sunrises, sunsets, cloud formation, metamorphosis and hypnotic motion.

The paintings appear to pulse with light, radiating a symphony of colours that are joyfully uplifting, dazzling the eyes and comforting the soul. Whitaker was a master at creating emotive depth and meaning with colour, inspired by Leonardo, Goethe and Ruskin. As one stands between *Pyramids of Light* (2002/2003), *Blue Pacific* (1975) and *In Search of Moby Dick No. 3, Fata Morgana in Search of Moby Dick* (1976), the gallery has a striking similarity to Dan Flavin and James Turrell's light installations at the recent Light Show at the Hayward Gallery.

Whitaker was a prolific painter of awe-inspiring accuracy and dedication to craft and skill, a sculptor of intricate and complex geometry. The colour of each band that covers the canvas can imperceptibly shift, unlike the aggressive disorientation experienced when looking at Bridget Riley's work. These carry ease, drawing you into his world; its reassuring calm gentleness flows like a good conversation. The colour palette is reminiscent of Peter Doig's later works, such as *Pelican* (2004), and *Claude Monet's Water Lilies* (1916). The warm summer breeze coming in through the window as I stand in front of *Blue to Yellow on Pink* (1976) it evokes a sense that I am there at the rippling water's edge.



David Whitaker. Pyramids of Light, 2002/2003. Oil on canvas, 305 x 125 cm.



David Whitaker. Blue Flame, 1981. Oil on canvas, 244 x 229 cm.



David Whitaker. Blue Pacific, 1975. Oil on canvas, 210 x 243 cm.