

Wallace Whitney

ROWLAND CONTEMPORARY

Wallace Whitney is alive to the curious allure of gestural abstraction, to the drama and theatricality made possible by painting with a wide and overloaded brush in thick three- or four-foot strokes that can seem impetuous, risky, sudden, bold, unconsciously derived, and—when they work—pictorially inevitable. That model has persisted for some sixty years, the sense of a painting as an intense sequence of real-time decisions—the ultimate fate of the canvas always in doubt, the painter someone functioning under great tension, who, like a jazz musician, must trust that his familiarity with his instrument will summon form out of what could otherwise descend into chaos. At first such expressionism was tied, fairly securely, to a sense of angst-driven brinkmanship, to some primal and existential cathartic assertion of self, to a mythos of art as a matter of life and death—but those histrionics seem foreign to Whitney. Instead, he offers the intricacies of aggressive gestural abstraction in a less egocentric manner, as if these paintings are conundrums that he created to solve and that become spaces more pictorial than psychological.

Not all Abstract Expressionist paintings, of course, are dark and brooding; some betray a more lyrical approach (works by Joan Mitchell and, in certain of his phases, de Kooning come to mind). Through chromatic richness and luscious tactility such paintings convey not the exorcising of personal demons but something effusive and celebratory. Whitney's work follows in this perhaps lighter tradition. The seven paintings shown in this exhibition appear to move toward chromatic equipoise. As Whitney works through them, it seems, he focuses their internal conversation, pushing each to succeed on its own pictorial terms, narrowing its range of color. Each stroke seems to



Wallace Whitney,
Air, 2008, oil on
canvas, 60 x 48".

have set the stage for the next, and the resultant paintings read as chains of activity, a process of searching for that which must follow. The brown and tan strokes of *Natchez*, 2008, for example, seem to slash and flail about in a loose grid, burying—but not completely—earlier moments when blue and orange and burgundy dominated the composition. These paintings are almost sedimentary, visibly bearing within them their vestiges, their layers of history.

The more rhythmic and curvy large red brushstrokes that seem to have abruptly brought *New Scroll*, 2008, to completion nearly efface the brown and pink and blue marks beneath them. But while the brassy and more overt gestures Whitney makes dominate the canvases—this is certainly an aesthetic of parry and thrust—there are quieter moments within them as well: drips and globs of paint that leaven the drama. Whitney orchestrates pigment into a kind of harmony, his compositions always seeming resolved, as if they have been brought back from the edge of dissonance into something more contemplative. Even a few of the more predictable aspects of his artmaking—that the largest canvases have the largest brushstrokes, for example, and that Whitney somewhat slavishly respects the canvases' edges, reinforcing their vertical or horizontal articulation, as if he is painting on pre-stretched canvas—seem part of his endeavor to practice gestural

abstraction while turning away from the solipsistic drama that, throughout its history, has defined it.

—James Yood