

Habitat: Wallace Whitney



Wallace Whitney photographed in his Bronx studio on December 1.

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Habitat is a weekly series that visits with artists in their workspaces.

This week's studio: Wallace Whitney; Bronx, New York. “Whether it’s good or not, you have to be completely open to what you’re doing in the moment,” Wallace Whitney said while peering at an unfinished painting from his rocking chair. Whitney, 46, is an abstract painter originally from Massachusetts and has been living and working in the Bronx for the past five years. His studio is in a former synagogue near Bronx Park that was a Dominican dancehall at one point. When Whitney moved in, he also found a karaoke machine and lots of beer caps. He said, “People still knock on my door and say, ‘Hey, we’re having a birthday party, can we rent the space out?’”

Whitney typically works on about four to six paintings at a time. “If I have a show coming up,” he said, “I’ll try to start six or seven paintings, assuming I’ll get two to three done, and the ones I don’t finish will be part of the next batch.” He compared his working process to that of a train or a caterpillar. “I always try to keep something half finished and something moving towards some sort of state of done,” he said. “Otherwise, it’s a pretty scary feeling when you start from scratch. It’s a little like going to the gym after not going for six years or something. You lose it way faster than you get it in terms of being able to do this.”

Among other things, Whitney referred to painting as an editing process. “You can’t just fix a little corner, you have to fix the whole painting,” he said. “Are you willing to risk some part that you really love for the greater good of the painting?” A major part of the process is actually not painting. “There are lots of periods of letting things dry and just looking,” he said. “I’m an energetic painter, which can overwhelm things, so a lot of the process is just resisting. I’m trying to get myself to understand that and show restraint, which is a different kind of challenge.”

Whitney does not have an assistant and prefers to build and prime his own canvases. He said that he usually goes straight to the canvas with his ideas, and that sketching things out first never seems to help. Sitting behind us was an unfinished work that he began in June and considered sending to NADA Miami Beach. “I’m not convinced it will ever be finished,” he said. “It never got to the point where I felt like it was ready to leave the studio.” Many of his paintings suffer a similar fate. “I throw away a lot of canvases,” he said. “Sometimes it gets to the point where certain paintings are dead in the water and it’s an act of mercy to rip them off the stretcher and throw them away.” He tosses the canvas, keeps the stretcher, and starts anew.

Whitney’s work is currently on view at the booth of Canada gallery (which he co-founded) at NADA Miami Beach, and in March 2016 he will have a solo show at Galerie Bernard Ceysson in Luxembourg. Below, Whitney