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Close to history

Alabama-born artist who boarded a bus to New York in 1960 makes a triumphant return to the South

By [Catherine Fox](#)

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Jack Whitten was standing outside his Tribeca loft when the first plane hit the tower.

"The noise was so loud, you could feel your skin moving," the artist recalls. "The first thing I saw was a chandelier of broken glass in the sky. Then the people jumping.

"Three thousand people were murdered in my neighborhood. ... I made a vow to do this painting."

He gestures toward the monumental "9.11.01," the centerpiece of his new one-man show at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center.

"It took me two years to do it, and that's all I did," he says. "It's all mine, down to the stretchers. I wanted to keep the emotional force of that day."

Whitten, it seems, has always been close to history. In 1957, the Alabama native, a freshman at Tuskegee Institute, went to Montgomery to hear a rising civil rights leader speak during a famous bus boycott and shake his hand. It was an electric moment.

"When King opened his mouth, he was like a biblical prophet," he says. "You gave yourself over to him."

Though inspired to participate, he discovered that he didn't have the temperament for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s strategy of nonviolence. In fact, the ugliness of the skirmishes in which he participated drove him from the South.

In 1960, he boarded a bus to New York City, enrolled at Cooper Union, moved to the Lower East Side and fell into another historic moment.

"It was one of the few places with a mixed art scene," he recalls, "and my first experience one-on-one with white people."

His new neighborhood was teeming with creative ferment. He rubbed shoulders with the old masters — Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline — and shared ideas with the poets, writers and artists, black and white, who were defining the next generation. Passions revolved around the Vietnam War, civil rights and

painting.

Staying the course

Like many of his peers, Whitten was eager to move out of the Abstract Expressionist orbit. He traded his paintbrush for less conventional instruments — his Afro comb, for one, and tools of his own invention.

He made casts of found objects with acrylic paint and embedded them in his canvases. He mixed paint with different materials, poured it on a tray to dry and cut it into little blocks to make mosaics.

The 1960s and '70s were his heyday. Prestigious galleries represented him. He had a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974. During the 1980s, however, the art world developed other interests. Though not forgotten, he was not in the thick of things as before.

Some artists would have adapted; Whitten stayed his course.

"I still had a belief in painting," he says. "It was a dead reckoning. You realize your conviction was enough to sustain you."

Stuart Horodner, a former student, recognized him as an important artist who had fallen through the cracks. Horodner, now the Contemporary's gallery director, showed him in a gallery he ran in New York between 1992 and 1998.

Horodner's move to Atlanta in 2005 brought Whitten to mind again, especially the memorial paintings of friends and heroes he had made intermittently throughout his career.

"They came out of his Southern roots," Horodner explains, "not only the narrative tradition, but also the idea of testifying in the church of his youth."

"It's a Southern sensibility, only abstract. Almost all of the paintings in the show are of people he has known — James Baldwin, Bobby Short, Romare Bearden. What he knows and feels about them comes through the materials and forms."

Like the ash, bone and blood Whitten embedded in his Sept. 11 painting.

A 'sweet' development

The timing for the Contemporary exhibit is just right. History has a way of circling back, and Whitten is enjoying a wave of interest in his work, both in the United States and abroad.

Trim and vital at 69 — perhaps thanks to diving and spearfishing in Greece every summer — he is ready to move forward with his reinvigorated career. His revival should be furthered even more by his upcoming talk at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The Atlanta show is special, though. It's his first solo exhibit in the South. That it includes a painting recently acquired by the Birmingham Museum of Art is the icing on the cake.

"I couldn't even visit the museum as a child," he says. "This is pretty sweet."

Jack Whitten

> Born: 1939 in Bessemer, Ala., son of a coal miner and a seamstress.

> Pre-art career: Organized civil rights demonstrations in Baton Rouge, La., in 1959; left South for New

York in 1960.

> Education: BFA, Cooper Union, New York, 1964.

> Art career: Solo show in 1974 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; works in permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art and Studio Museum in Harlem.

> Also showing: Through May 25 in "Something to Look Forward to: Abstract Art by 22 Distinguished Americans of African Descent," Morris Museum of Art, Augusta. 706-724-7501; themorris.org.

EXHIBIT

"Jack Whitten: Memorial Paintings"


> Through June 14. \$5; \$3, seniors and students; free to members, children under 12 and on Thursdays. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; until 8 p.m. Thursdays. The Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, 535 Means St. N.W., Atlanta. 404-688-1970; www.thecontemporary.org.

> Artist talk: 7 p.m. May 15, Hill Auditorium, High Museum of Art, 1280 Peachtree St., Atlanta. \$5.

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