



EXHIBITS

by JOY HAKANSON COLBY



HAROLD ROBINSON / The Detroit News

Artist Jack Whitten displays his abstract works at the G.R. N'Namdi Gallery.

Jack Whitten: "To mean anything, abstraction has to have a base in reality," says New York artist Jack Whitten, who is responsible for the striking paintings called *Urban Abstractions* on exhibit at the G.R. N'Namdi Gallery in Birmingham.

Reality, according to Whitten, begins with such things as plastic meat trays or electronic circuit boards, chocolate molds or a lamb's jawbone, electrical cables or architectural moldings and just about anything else that interests him when he walks the city streets.

Just as the scenario begins to sound familiar, Whitten gives it a fresh twist. Instead of incorporating the actual objects into his paintings, the artist makes plaster molds and casts the materials in acrylic paint. Then he lifts the thin castings onto his canvas, fixing them in place with more acrylic.

This process gives Whitten his slice of reality. It also gives him a rather lyrical transformation of the material.

You can still see the texture of a metal grid or read the words on a sign. But when cast in paint, these

become part of the picture surface, taking on new meanings and associations. The different elements flow together into one painting, inviting the eye to explore.

From a distance, Whitten's paintings have the look of tapestries with a rich interweaving of color and texture. Up close, they are packed with details that keep the viewer's attention.

The Alabama-born Whitten, who has lived in New York since 1959, teaches at the Cooper Union and School of the Visual Arts. He spends three months each year in Greece, carving wood sculptures.

The show will run through June 3 at the N'Namdi Gallery, 161 Townsend, Birmingham. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday.