

JACK WHITTEN

The clarity with which Jack Whitten writes about his art, and the affirmation of who he is, single him out as a person of unusual perception and creative sensibilities. This exhibition, an introspective look into the art of Americans and Brazilians of African descent, seems to have been designed to allow him to have an all but final say about what the entire exhibition is about. In a conversation with Henry Geldzahler in 1983, Whitten addressed the subject of identity in a most eloquent manner, and placed himself and his art at the core of the creative process by answering the mystery of application of form as it takes place from the person to the object. His statement is concise and to the point. It begins with an explanation of how carving in wood strengthened his paintings. Whitten created many of his paintings with large comb-like sculptural forms that take the place of conventional brushes, and one is surprised to learn that these handsomely carved implements of art are functional just as many forms of African sculpture are.



Fig. 32 Jack Whitten
Black Monolith: Homage to James Baldwin, 1988

It is in the context of sculpture that Africa is revealed to Whitten, and the sculpture of Africa has added measurably to his understanding of modern art. Whitten notes:

It was the best way for me to learn. I was reading books on African sculpture that weren't telling me a thing. Not until I began physically analyzing them did I realize that there is a grid at work in African sculpture, a network of interlocking planes that predates Cezanne and Cubism by centuries. It's the innate structure of vision and I think it's the basis of

what I'm doing now. I see that grid as the essential element of visual perception. It all begins with African sculpture, the DNA of perception. Now, that's not going to be so obvious to the guy on the street, but I can't deal with him. I have to go with what extends my own feeling, for myself. If others want to pick up on it, great; if they don't, fine. Vision is not an unconscious element at all. I see it as a God-given innate sensibility. It's mine.

Among twentieth-century artists, Cezanne is my master. When we talk about "Modernist principles," we have to go back to him. I think he's the grandfather. The kind of seeing embodied in African sculpture was natural for Cezanne, and in Cezanne it reads as something basically humanistic, something that he opened up to everybody.

When the question of being a Black artist comes up, I always say we have to go to the word "sensibility." It's cultural. When I'm in France, I notice the way the French behave, anywhere—sitting in a cafe, perhaps. That's sensibility. If I'm in London, all I have to do is look at the way people dress, the way they talk, the food they eat—that's sensibility. Or if I'm down in my village in Crete, with the native peasants, with the crude earthiness of life there, that's also sensibility. So it's inevitable that my being Black is going to come out. It has to be expressed in the work.

It's this reinvention that I think each person has to do for himself. How does what you see apply to you, your own distinct sensibility. Sir Herbert Read often spoke of sensibility on one side of the coin, and plasticity on the other. You're not going to have one without the other. And I think he's correct. You're kidding yourself if you think you can deal solely with plasticity; it's the blend of the two that takes you to that higher place."

Early in January, 1988, Whitten wrote to tell of the joyous news of new discoveries in his work:

Nineteen eighty-seven was an intense and productive year in the studio. My experimentations with acrylic paint continue to offer surprises and the joy of discovery. Acrylic is the most versatile medium for experimentation . . . acrylic keeps me mobile. Its speed of drying and toughness of surface film allows me to work large-scale with the possibility of rolling for storage. . . I increasingly find that my survival as a painter depends upon my being flexible, mobile, willing to take risks, and upon just plain old Southern perseverance (plate 17).

The death of loved ones, people whom I've respected and admired, has resulted in my executing several memorial paintings. These are meant as dedications to their memory: the painter Norman

Lewis, the poet Bob Kaufman, the painter Joseph Beuys, the fashion designer Willi Smith, the painter Andy Warhol, the recent suicide of my friend the sculptor Christopher Wilmarth and a 80" x 96" work dedicated to James Baldwin entitled *Black Monolith* (figure 32). Death intrigues me and I have no answer

for it except to continue living. I am aware of the answers offered in religion, but my absence of belief only confirms my lust for life.

Michael Brenson, art critic for the *New York Times*, wrote an article on Martin Puryear for the *New York Times Magazine*. He spoke specifically of Black artists involvement with memory. I have always accepted memory as being one of the most powerful elements of human consciousness. Through memory we reconstruct our past. We honor the dead through memory. I have read that the ancient Africans placed large significance upon ancestor worship. Is it possible that Brenson has touched upon an important link within modern Black sensibility?"

Whitten sent another concise statement on October 4, 1988, in answer to an inquiry on the subject of "Introspectives: Contemporary Art by Americans and Brazilians of African Descent":

The element of space has always been a prime concern of mine in painting. I have always thought that the understanding of space unlocked the mystery of time and place. As a painter, the materiality of paint is the median used in spatial explorations. I continue to call my paintings experiments. Experiments in the sense that each one is a specific test of the material limitations of paint used in a specific conceptual context.

At present I am very much involved with the process of eliminating the known metaphorical devices in Modern art: 1) I do not want *naturalism* as metaphor, 2) I do not want *sex* as metaphor, 3) I do not want *religion* as metaphor, 4) I do not want *politics* as metaphor, 5) I do not want *decoration* as metaphor, 6) I do not want *formalism* as metaphor, 7) I do not want *art history* as metaphor, 8) I do not want *ethnic stereotype* as metaphor, 9) I do not want the *corporate aesthetic* as metaphor.

"Obviously from this list of denials, I have created a monster of mythic proportion! When my paintings cease to be challenging, I will simply find something else to do with my life. Truth is a process of elimination. I have managed to eliminate more than half of those metaphors listed above and I have a few more to go."

Whitten's articulate balance between art and an understanding of the concrete nature of form are a clear way of staying close to the source of creation. This aspect of memory, of substance for art and the creative urge to explore new forms and ideas, promises to keep Whitten's art alive and vibrantly filled with a nurturing spirit for the future.

WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS

The evolution of William T. Williams' work is, in many ways, concurrent in time and space with the color-field

paintings that emerged in the United States in the early 1960s. Like Sam Gilliam and Alma Thomas, two Washington, D.C., artists whose works were flavored by the colorist tradition in painting, Williams also felt the urge to approach abstraction with a particular emphasis on color. This he did in a manner that gave him complete freedom to achieve an inner light of sorts that remains evident in his work today. But the evolution of Williams' work beyond color-field painting is what has caused him to be singled out as one of the nation's most gifted artists of his generation.

From the point of view of identity, Williams addressed the subject eloquently when he spoke of the lineage his work has in the Afro-American tradition to that of Henry O. Tanner, Aaron Douglas and more recently his fellow artists of this generation. But he has poignantly stated that while the above mentioned ideas count in the final analysis of seeing and saying who he, Williams, is as an artist, they do not say all that can be said about his creative development as a painter. Moreover, he states:

"... the thread that runs through all of my work is that I have not stuck closely to formalism."

Indeed, Williams has not, as his statement in October, 1988, attests:

These works are concerned with memory, memory of place. I hope they evoke the magic that place holds in our lives. My memory of place is informed by the specifics of my historic cultural experience as well as by myth and fiction. It is through the specifics of my personal history that I try to evoke a shared sense of human place. The title *Tune of Nila* refers to the way music has been and is used to transmit cultural information. Humming a tune learned in childhood was its beginning. *Double Dare* (figure 33) refers to the distance I have traveled as an adult. The souvenirs of endless summers, childhood pranks dared and general mischief.

It occurred to me that my memory had become a place rather than a past event. As such, it contains a rich deposit of materials that could be used—not to linger—but to illuminate the future.

It is in this context of referring from time to time to the memory bank that feeds the creative vision of so many American artists of African descent that Williams, like Whitten and other artists before them, provide for us an heritable link with African-American artists before them—just as these pioneers also found their art to have an heritable association with the ancestral arts of Africa. Narrowing the gap in time between these three distinct periods in history brings us closer to a full understanding of the cultural continuum expressed in "Introspectives: Contemporary Art by Americans and Brazilians of African Descent."