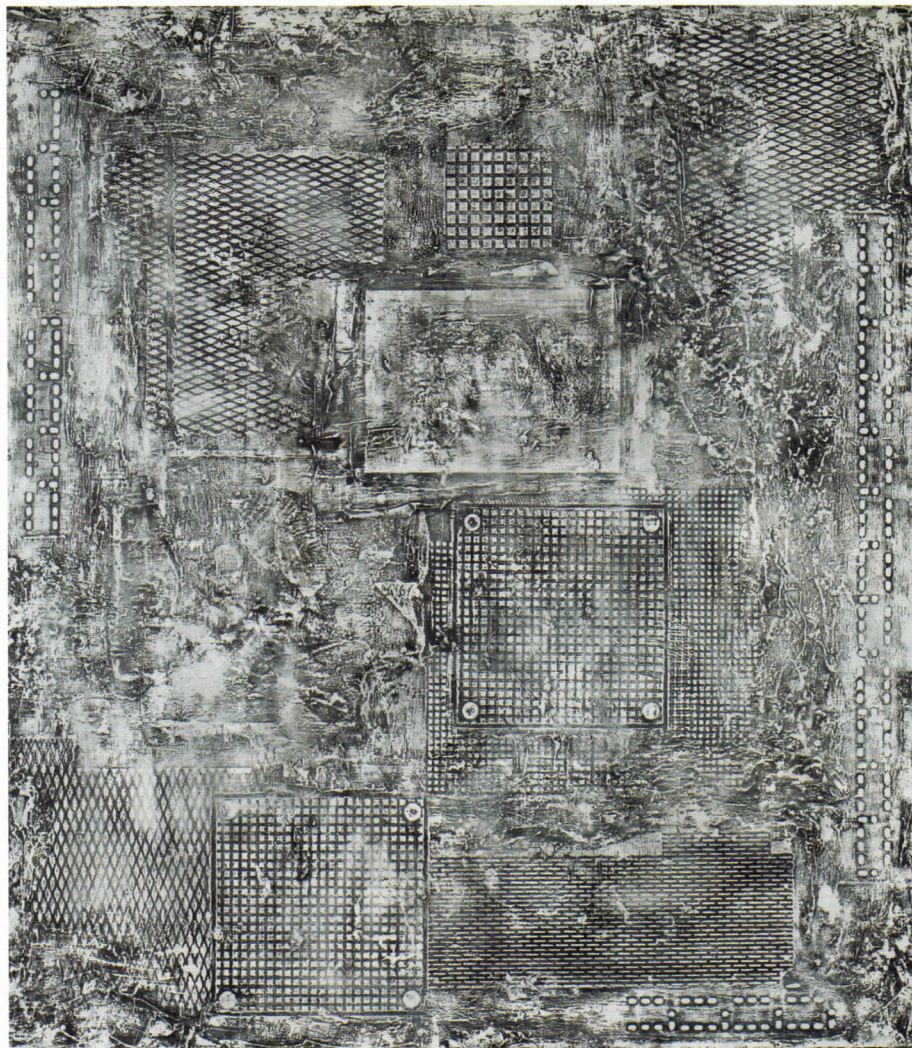


# The Maker

**JACK WHITTEN CAN MAKE ACRYLIC DO THINGS NO ONE ELSE HAS IMAGINED, BUT HE PREFERS NOT TO BE CALLED A PAINTER.** BY REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN



**JACK WHITTEN IS** an artist visibly in love with paint. Over a 40-year career he has made luscious abstract works, at first in oil and later in acrylic. And yet he is quick to point out that he does not consider himself a painter but rather someone who makes artworks with paint.

As a young man in New York in the early 1960s, Whitten's paintings were rooted in the highly gestural Abstract Expressionism then prevalent. Eventually, he felt a

need to forge his own style and so, like his contemporaries who experimented with different versions of color-field painting, Whitten strove to take his hand out of the work. To achieve this goal he built a massive rake with which he could spread paint across a canvas on the floor. "I conceived the whole plane as a single gesture," he explains.

A tall, lean figure with bright eyes, Whitten has a generous and inquisitive nature. He describes his studio as a labo-

ratory, and throughout the '70s, he conducted many different investigations with his rake. He added a strip of rubber to his edge and created glorious squeegee paintings that predate Gerhard Richter by 10 years. Later he replaced the rubber with a strip of steel notched in various increments and combed the surface of the canvas. In the '80s he moved the canvas off the floor and back onto the easel. Still avoiding the brush, he applied thick layers of acrylic to the surface and, as it dried, cut through the skin to reveal the wet paint underneath. In another series he imprinted found objects such as metal screens and the heel of his boot into the wet surface to create geometric patterns.

Experimentation with paint actually directed many of Whitten's choices. He discovered a source that would sell 55-gallon drums of different acrylic polymers and he set out to explore their variances in viscosity, clarity, brilliance and elasticity. To create color he added all kinds of different materials: iron oxide, dry pigments, crushed Mylar,

From left: *Garden in Bessemer*, 1986, acrylic on canvas; Jack Whitten in his studio, which he calls his "laboratory."



