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AN OLD-SCHOOL PAINTER ADAPTS TO A NEW WORLD ORDER: JACK WHITTEN'S 50-YEAR EVOLUTION

BY ***Alex Greenberger*** POSTED **01/19/16 12:43 PM**

Jack Whitten photographed in his Queens studio on October 26, 2015

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In 1974, a monolithic, fire-red painting by Jack Whitten debuted in the Whitney's lobby gallery. Whitten made the painting, titled *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, by laying the canvas on the floor, dragging a squeegee across it to mix colors, and letting the quarter-inch-thick layer of paint dry. It was one of several pieces known as the artist's "Slab" works, and, like the others in the series, it came and went from the museum without much fanfare. Whitten was an abstract painter—and an African American one, at that—when the odds were stacked against him; in the mid-'70s, as tastes skewed more toward the restraint of Minimalism and black artists were largely ignored by institutions, he was lucky to have gotten a show at the Whitney at all.

Thirty-one years later, in 2015, the Whitney's curators, realizing they had a gap in their collection, acquired *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, and showed it in "America Is Hard to See," the inaugural show of the museum's permanent collection in its new building in the Meatpacking District. The Whitney now joins MoMA, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Walker Art Center, and others who have acquired work by Whitten over the past few years, concluding that Whitten is an important, if under-appreciated, piece of American art history after all. The painter's work has never been more visible than it is right now, thanks to a traveling retrospective now on view at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Whitten, at age 76, is more famous than he has ever been in his half-century career.

"I maintain that painting is organic, and it continues to evolve," Whitten said when I visited him in his Queens studio one morning last fall. Behind where he sat was a wall covered with an unruly mess of images that the artist had personally gathered together, ranging from Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* to busty pinup models to photographs of Crete, where he and his wife take vacations. Nearby were silver, spray-painted Nike shoes and several works in progress that, with their subtle arrangements of acrylic, projected an effortless dignity.

Jack Whitten, *Chinese Sincerity*, 1974, acrylic on canvas.
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Whitten has a salt-and-pepper mustache and bushy hair to match, and he speaks with a passion that can be both intimidating and thrilling. When he's not painting, he reads constantly, absorbing ideas from cutting-edge physics, technology, and current events into his work. He would hate not to keep adjusting to the times. As a result, his work from 1974, as compared with his more recent style, looks like the efforts of a different artist.

Kathryn Kanjo, the chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, which hosted the Whitten retrospective in 2014, said of the artist's output, "To honestly realize, Oh, this is all the same person… It's sublime. We have to catch up to him."

Jack Whitten's Queens studio photographed on October 26, 2015

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As Whitten served me tea, we spoke about his practice, which he terms "conceptual painting." "All it means, really, is the ability to design, to lay things out, to literally have something that you can plan ahead and you can follow the steps," he said. "It's all programmed, so when it comes time for the improvisation to take place, the conceptual is thrown out the window."

Born in 1939, in Bessemer, Alabama, Whitten witnessed the effects of longstanding American racism firsthand. He recalled being a part of a black community that revolved around the church, family, and schools—but it was also segregated. "Being black in America, you're always black," he said. "I'm a product of American apartheid. There's no other way to put it. You're talking to someone who grew up in straight segregation."

Whitten became an avid participant in the Civil Rights Movement in the South. In 1957, the same year Congress passed the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction, Whitten met Martin Luther King Jr. in Tuskegee. "I believed in what he preached," Whitten said, "but, when I had the opportunity to test what he was saying, which occurred in Baton Rouge, it changed my life." He was referring to an incident in 1960, when Whitten was studying at Southern University in Louisiana. With 15 other students, Whitten staged a sit-in to protest segregation on campus. What began with his class peacefully closing down the school became a national event: once local clergy got involved, Whitten and the other students marched to the state capitol building in Baton Rouge, where they were attacked. "I didn't fight, I didn't resist," Whitten said. "But I realized that I couldn't do that. That's what drove me out of the South."

Jack Whitten, *Psychic Eclipse*, 1964, nylon fabric and acrylic on canvas.

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That same year, Whitten got on a Greyhound bus to New York and never lived in Alabama again. He applied to Cooper Union and was accepted the following year. By the time he graduated, in 1964, he had come up with a way of describing his artistic vision: "The image is photographic, therefore I must photograph my thoughts." By this, he meant, "I can see it in my brain, and it's reproduced. I'm using the word 'reproduce' in the same sense that you would use a Xerox copy machine or a computer—any form of a reproduction device."

Following this impulse, Whitten's first mature series was a group of black-and-white paintings that look like wisps of smoke, but, according to their titles, represent people and objects. Whitten maintains that he even sees the head of Jesus Christ in one. Using a mesh-like fabric, Whitten was able to mix layers of black and white paint on the canvas, creating what resembles ghosts moving in front of a camera. "They're strange, man," Whitten told me. Allan Stone, Whitten's gallerist at the time, thought so, too—he refused to show the "Head" works, thinking they wouldn't sell.

What Whitten did show were paintings like *Martin Luther King's Garden* (1968), a swirling mix of freeform strokes that seems to refer to the chaos and triumph of the late '60s. Whitten had met and become friendly with artists like Franz Kline, and the work hints at the influence of Arshile Gorky and Joan Miró. But, in its politics, it also demands comparisons to paintings by Norman Lewis, who Whitten knew as well, and who likewise represented the Civil Rights Movement in abstract terms.

By the mid-'70s, Whitten had leapt into total, process-based abstraction, and had even switched mediums—he stopped working with oil paint altogether and took up acrylic because it dried faster. His "Slab" paintings, the works shown at the Whitney in 1974, were very much of their era, which is to say: messy, and positively overwhelming. This is also a fine way of describing the radical shift that happened over the course of the first decade and a half of Whitten's career. He's still trying to find ways of doing this in his newest

work, which has referred to the Newtown school shooting and Barack Obama on purely geometric terms. Whitten said, "I want a worldview that will teach me how to conduct myself in this new world order. That's what I'm working on."

On what would become one of the shaping trips of his life, Whitten went to services for Greek Christmas in Sinai, Egypt, at Saint Catherine's Monastery. Built into the pink-granite foothills of Mount Sinai, the monastery has huge, tiered chandeliers that, over the course of the service, were gradually lit, illuminating the mosaics surrounding them. Whitten described the experience as being transcendent—he realized that the masteri, or the artists behind the mosaics, didn't lay the glass tiles evenly, which allowed them to glow unnaturally when light hit them.

Jack Whitten, *Mask of God I (For Joseph Campbell)*, 1987, acrylic on canvas.

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Whitten has since made entire series of paintings that look like mosaics, but are actually composed of dried-acrylic paint chips unevenly set in wet paint. "Hence today," he explained, "I say three-dimensional light. In the early '70s, it was planar light, because that was all I had. It was more of a Euclidean base. Now, the fractile dimension of light has become multi-dimensional."

The idea had lingered with Whitten since 1965, when he met jazz musician John Coltrane and realized, through his music, that "I was looking for light—light in painting." For a while, however, it lay dormant in his practice. During the late '70s and early '80s, Whitten experimented with minimalist forms, using the teeth of a saw-like tool to create even lines in wet paint. Then he began to move grids toward paintings that looked like circuit boards. But something shifted after a show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, in 1983. He started using frottage-like pieces of acrylic and insetting them in paint. The result is a fractured surface, anticipating the mosaic-like paintings of the '90s.

The works leading up to the '90s are visually stunning—they make you wonder, "How did he do that?" It's no surprise that Alexander Gray, whose New York gallery, Alexander Gray Associates, has represented Whitten since 2007, calls the effect of Whitten's work "the wow, how, wow," or "getting that visual-energy punch and trying to figure out how the stuff is stuck to the canvas."

Gray described being seduced by Whitten's ongoing "Black Monoliths" series—mosaic-like paintings that memorialize figures like Ralph Ellison and Jacob Lawrence, begun in the '90s. When I visited Whitten's studio, he was working on one dedicated to the saxophonist Ornette Coleman, who died last year. Light bounced off the acrylic pieces meant to resemble Coleman's head, creating what really did feel like a glowing presence. Kanjo, the MCASD curator, put the tiled paintings' effect best: "He transforms the materials from what we expect them to do, so we look at paint differently."

For Whitten, his chipped-paint technique refers to abstract physics. "We know now that light occurs in extremely small particles," he said. "That's what allows us to see—those little fucking photons bouncing around your retina, and blam-o, I can see!"

Whitten cites Benoit Mandelbrot, the mathematician who discovered that all organic matter is fundamentally made of geometric shapes, as one of his influences. This, surprisingly, makes a lot of sense. Since the '90s, Whitten's paint chips have continued to mutate into strange, new forms. He's done series based on postage-stamp codes, in which the tiles are laid out in grid-like forms. (A crimson-and-white one is dedicated to the curator Marcia Tucker.) He's also made paintings like *Apps for Obama* (2011), which features a number of candy-like blobs arranged like app icons on an iPad. The technique Whitten is using is millennia old; the way he's using it and the content are ultra-new. "I'm talking about a geometry of the information age," Whitten explained.

Jack Whitten, *NY Battle Ground*, 1967, oil on canvas.

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As she was preparing the 2006 show "High Times Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975," curator Katy Siegel visited Whitten's storage facilities, which, at the time, were in TriBeCa. The exhibition arose from a conversation Siegel had with the painter David Reed, who proposed the idea of doing a painting survey focused on the show's titular eight-year stretch, a time when the medium was believed by many critics and curators to have hit a dead end. This meant having to do some research—and also making some major rediscoveries. Whitten showed Siegel a number of early works, each one better than the last. "I could tell from the first second that I walked into storage that this was a major historical figure," Siegel told me. "I just thought, 'Well, he may be known, but he's not well-enough known.'"

"High Times Hard Times" has been credited with reintroducing Whitten in the last decade, but nobody has shaped his career arc more than Whitten himself.

Siegel told me that, during the '70s and '80s, when writers weren't there for painters and black artists, Whitten became his own critic. The traveling retrospective may be what has brought Whitten's work back to the attention of museums, but "he should've been there all along," Siegel said. "In the decades that he wasn't famous, he was making work that was incredibly important. When the world was ready, there he was, not an iota diminished by those years of inattention."

For his part, Whitten is mostly unfazed by his recent success. At the moment, his plans are to keep painting. "The beat goes on," he said with a smile. "My old dealer, Allan Stone, loved the phrase, 'There's no destination, it's only the journey.' I haven't seen a destination yet, but that's good. I'm still finding new stuff out there."

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