

ART REVIEW

Unfurling and saluting a legacy at Rose Art Museum

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 19, 2013



ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

“Asa’s Palace” (above) and “The Pariah Way” had been rolled up in Jack Whitten’s studio for 40 years.

In the 1980s, the German artist Gerhard Richter started dragging colored paint across his canvases with a large squeegee. Gorgeous, random effects ensued. The aesthetic equivalent of hot flushes, and at times equally disconcerting, they hit a sweet spot in the culture comparable in effect to Kate Moss’s face.

Richter's paintings announced the world as a barrage of indifferent, arbitrary information — one that might, if the coin landed right side up, be staggeringly beautiful. Or might not. Looking at them, your skin tingled with all the old sensuous pleasures of oil paint. Your viscera, meanwhile, remained clammy and inert.

Without these paintings, which date from around 1980, Richter would not have become what he indubitably is: the most influential painter of the past quarter century.

So it can't help but be fascinating to note that, more than 10 years previously, Jack Whitten, an African-American artist then in his early 30s, devised a similar method for applying paint to canvas, and produced comparable results.

Powerful and never previously displayed work from that period appears in a show at the Rose Art Museum called "Light Years: Jack Whitten 1971-1973." You won't want to miss it.

Born in Bessemer, Ala., Whitten was the son of a seamstress and a coal miner, who died when Whitten was a young child. As a pre-med student, he went to hear Martin Luther King Jr. preach in a church in Montgomery. This was in 1957, right in the middle of the bus boycott.

Both men were young. They conversed, and Whitten was inspired to join the movement. He signed up to King's nonviolent creed, and in Baton Rouge, La., where he went to study art in 1959, he organized civil rights demonstrations.

Within a year, he felt pushed beyond his limits: "I believed in Dr King's philosophies," he told the critic, curator, and academic Robert Storr in 2007, but "I found it too difficult to turn the other cheek."

He moved to New York. Studying at Cooper Union, he joined the circle of abstract expressionists who centered around Willem de Kooning and the Cedar Bar in downtown Manhattan.

Light Years Jack Whitten 1971-1973

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University,
Waltham 781-736-3434.
<http://www.brandeis.edu/rose>

Closing date: Through Dec. 15.

Like a young Augie March switching from one great man to the next, Whitten found himself once again in thrall — this time to de Kooning. In an interview earlier this year with the Wall Street Journal, he admitted to “following [de Kooning] around like a puppy.”

“He was useful in a lot of ways. I came in one night after a horrific critique when one of my professors put me down for concentrating too much on process. That was not a word used much then, in 1961. He said I accepted too many accidents. I spoke to de Kooning, and he said to me, ‘There’s no such thing as accidents in painting!’ That was very helpful to me.”

“Process” — or the notion that how you make a work of art can be as charged and significant as how it ends up looking — became key in Whitten’s subsequent efforts to find a voice of his own. Like many of his contemporaries, he was trying both to be true to the politics of the day and to get out from under the shadow of abstract expressionism.

By the late ’60s, Whitten was tired of that movement’s romantic rhetoric of heroic self-expression. He was ready, too, to abandon the psychedelic experiments he’d been lustily conducting. “I thought I was going off the deep end,” he said.

In his painting, his brush strokes, the very movements of his wrist, had become habitual, complacent. He needed to find a way of working that was cooler, steadier, more objective.

Along with three other artists, he received a grant from, of all places, the Xerox Corporation. Whitten and his fellow artists were invited by the company to experiment with its instruments and work with its engineers. (A small aside: Andy Warhol and his poker-faced Xerox aesthetic hovers over the careers of both Whitten and Richter like a devious, half-smiling angel. His silk screens, made by pushing paint over a woven mesh with a squeegee, were precedents for both artists. Perfect, then, that he’s the subject of a simultaneous show at the Rose.)

“My solution,” Whitten told Storr, “was to expand the gesture while taking my hand out of it. I figured if Bill de Kooning had a house-painting brush, if I made a brush 20 times that size, I might be able to overcome his influence, and perhaps the work will lead me somewhere else.”

It's not that the resulting paintings (retrieved from a corner of Whitten's studio, stretched, and beautifully hung at the Rose) look particularly like Richter's — although there are obvious similarities.

Rather, what's interesting is that, from his perch in Dusseldorf, Richter was wrestling with comparable problems: how to escape the intensified subjectivity of abstract expressionism yet still retain sensual surfaces; and, just as importantly, how to get one's artistic tuning fork and one's political tuning fork humming on the same frequency. Remarkably, he found a similar solution: abstract paintings made by pushing paint across the canvas with a mechanical tool.

Whitten's works were shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974. Writing in *The New York Times*, John Russell registered the element of chance in Whitten's raked paint technique (at times he used an Afro comb), and applauded their immediacy. Roberta Smith, writing in *Artforum* the following year, noted the sense of velocity in Whitten's surfaces — a key insight, which holds also for Richter's squeegee abstracts.

The two largest paintings at the Rose, "Asa's Palace" and "The Pariah Way," have velocity in spades. Their impact is tremendous.

Incredibly, until the Rose show was installed, Whitten hadn't seen either of them since he painted them. They had remained rolled up in his studio for 40 years.

"The Pariah Way" has a mottled, purplish surface. It's full of random glimpses of earlier layers of different colors — rust-colored in the top half, green below. What's striking is how taut the entire surface appears, as if the whole complex symphony of layered paint had been fired in a kiln, its surface unified that way.

"Asa's Palace" punctuates an all-over field of horizontal pink and gray striations with elongated blobs of bright or metallic color. Some of these marks have a flat, bubbled texture, like pumice stone; they seem to emerge from layers below. Others seem to sit on top of that field. The longer you look, however, the more spatially ambiguous and technically mysterious they become.

A nearby set of six small collages on brown linen offers clues to Whitten's process. Thin slices of colored acrylic have evidently been removed from the blobs in "Asa's Palace" and pasted to the brown linen to make new works, resembling miniature

cutouts by Matisse.

Other, primarily black-and-white works on paper — the “Cut Acrylic” and “Dispersal” series — stress Whitten’s interest in arbitrary effects of splatter, spray, resist, and removal. All suggest not only industrial processes but the chemical, dark-into-light hocus-pocus of photography (another link with Richter, for whom the photographic image is central).

Even if the mechanical-looking works of Whitten, from the ’70s, and Richter, from the ’80s and beyond, suggest a reaction against the rhetoric of abstract expressionism, they should also be seen as complications of, and hence salutes to, that legacy.

Abstract expressionism’s most celebrated figure, Jackson Pollock, died not long after reintroducing figurative elements into his paintings. Whitten’s belief is that Pollock “had discovered something that he didn’t understand fully” — something “he was just desperately trying to make sense of. . . . My friend David Budd,” he continued, “used to tell me repeatedly, ‘You know, after Pollock, something was swept under the rug,’ and I never knew what he was talking about.”

The statement sets off bells in one’s head; after all, it might just as easily be applied to Whitten. A restless, inventive spirit, he has gone on to make brilliant, commanding work in a variety of styles. But this small show has enough in it to make you wonder whether, around the mid-1970s, he wasn’t desperately trying to make sense of what *he* had discovered, and whether that discovery wasn’t subsequently swept under the rug.

It’s a discovery that he, and we, are still trying to make sense of.