

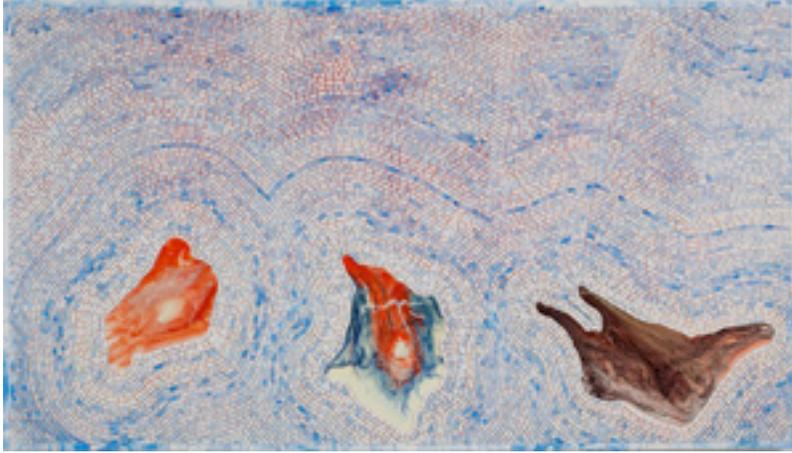
Jack Whitten

by Carrie Moyer

Alexander Gray Associates September 9 - October 11, 2009

Acrylic paint is a relative newcomer to the ever-expanding roster of materials created, loved, and abandoned by painters. Unlike the history of oil paint, which spans over 600 years of discoveries and refinements by countless individual artists and chemists until its eventual standardization and commercialization, the evolution of acrylic paint is short and fairly well-known. Formulated by Len Bocour and Sam Golden in the late 1940s, pigments suspended in acrylic polymer emulsions set the stage for the specific conceptual and formal advancements of the Color Field artists and for Late Modernism in general.

Jack Whitten has been one of the most intrepid and rigorous innovators with this material for nearly 40 years. Like many of his fellow travelers transiting from Abstract Expressionism to Process Art and Minimalism, Whitten's conversion from oil paint to acrylic in 1970 signals a kind of public, declarative break with *The-Baggage-That-Is-Painting*. Since that time, the artist has continued to explore the nexus of abstraction and social consciousness made palpable by late-20th century paint technology. Whitten's recent solo exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates places paintings from 2009 alongside a few select works from the past. Like his 2007 exhibition at P.S.1 in which the epic painting, "9.11.01," was paired with smaller works dating from the Civil Rights Era, this combination of old and new illuminates the evolution of key interests over the duration of a long, rich career.



Jack Whitten, *Zeitgeist Traps (for Mike Goldberg)*, 2009.
Acrylic collage on canvas. 43" x 76-3/8".
Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

The recent exhibition centers on a series of twelve horizontal paintings from 2009 entitled “Ribbons of Honor.” As one has come to expect with Whitten’s work, inspiration seems to come from the world far beyond the studio—specifically the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—and manifests itself in complex, abstract geometries. At around 6 × 40 inches, the horizontal “Ribbons of Honor” look like military decorations stacked and pinned to the wall. Thick, malleable slabs of intensely colored acrylic paint are cut and collaged onto deeply beveled wood panels painted Styrofoam pink. Bars of bright red and glitter bring to mind ceremonial pomp while dark, swirling patches of poured and rubbed paint evoke the smoke and burnt terrain of the battlefield. While the edge of a Whitten canvas is always considered and often highly charged, the deep bevels surrounding the “Ribbons of Honor” push these pieces towards a tangible “objecthood” not seen in other works. The paintings were stacked in groups of four for the exhibition, a configuration that reinforced their military associations. Taken on its own, one imagines a single work would look right at home next to the buoyant abstractions of Mary Heilmann, Stanley Whitney, or Chris Martin.

The “Ribbons of Honor” are amplified by the inclusion of several choice paintings from the 1970s and 80s. Last seen in “High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-75,” the gorgeous, somber “Siberian Salt Grinder” (1974) shows Whitten literally “processing” the paint, and thereby the image, with a custom-made implement—in this case an oversized T-square-cum-rake. In “Persian Echo I and II” (1979), a comb digs a herringbone pattern into soft rectangles of complementary color, resulting in a chromatic haze that reads as a saturated gray when viewed close-up, and as vibrant, individual hues from farther away. In “Ancient Mentor I” (1985), the artist presses the acrylic paint into a rough metal grid, creating a surface pattern that sits up off the canvas. Hand-painted flecks of red and turquoise serve to animate both the painting’s logic and structure. Knobby edges and dusty blacks and off-whites make it feel like an old carpet showing its threadbare weft and warp. The same meditative sense of pleasure that Whitten seems to find in manipulating the grid during this period can also be found in contemporaneous works by Howardena Pindell and Peter Young.

Also included in the exhibition are two recent works that demonstrate the wide range of feeling that can come from nearly identical methods of production. Both “Lateral Shift” and “Zeitgeist Traps (for Mike Goldberg)” put to spectacular effect Whitten’s method of slicing thick skins of acrylic paint into discrete tesserae and reassembling them into mosaic-like pictures glued to the surface of the canvas. This painstaking and complex method of facture seems to place the relative “newness” of acrylic paint technology into a time machine and set the clock way back. The grid, while technically more “present” in the tesserrated works, ironically allows for the introduction of more organic forms (and more humor). The shiny, graphic black and white tiles of “Lateral Shift” look like they’ve been cut from a Jackson Pollock screenprint and converted into a futuristic Mahjong or Dominoes board game. And finally, for sheer

virtuosic display and material mediation, “Zeitgeist Traps (for Mike Goldberg)” (2009), must surely take the prize. Vivid blue and white tesserae hug and then radiate outwards from the three strange poured shapes that hover near the bottom of the canvas. The kaleidoscopic figure/ground relationships and perceptual shifts that Whitten pulls off in this painting are magical. We could be looking at the terracotta wall of an ancient Aegean villa, covered with old tiles and crumbling rosettes. Or are we instead floating above a Japanese rock garden in which the biomorphic pours have become rock/islands and the meticulously aligned tesserae record the progress of the gardener’s rake?