

WALK THROUGH 50 YEARS OF HISTORY WITH PAINTER JACK WHITTEN

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New York Battleground, 1967

Jack Whitten

There's the history you read about in books or find amid newspaper archives and documents, and then there's the one chronicled by artists. These visionaries record the passing of events in ways that are often more vivid and real than a mere log of what happened when. Strolling through the extraordinary exhibition "Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting," now at the Walker Art Center, you get a sense of walking through time, witnessing American history through the artist's eyes.

The paintings, in all their stylistic range, capture moments in time when the artist looked

about and saw the world as it is (and himself in it). From a fierce 1967 abstract painting, called *New York Battleground*, depicting violence that occurred during the Civil Rights struggle, to an epic response to 9/11, the exhibition shares a history that is filled with emotion, grit, and music.



The Blacks, 1963

Jack Whitten

What's especially wonderful about the artist's view of history is that his collection of work – even pieces made over 50 years ago – still resonate. For instance, *The Blacks*, which Whitten created in 1963, feels relevant to today's struggles (a sad reality of our country's persistent racial inequality).

Some of the most riveting paintings are ones inspired by musicians and artists. There's *Black*

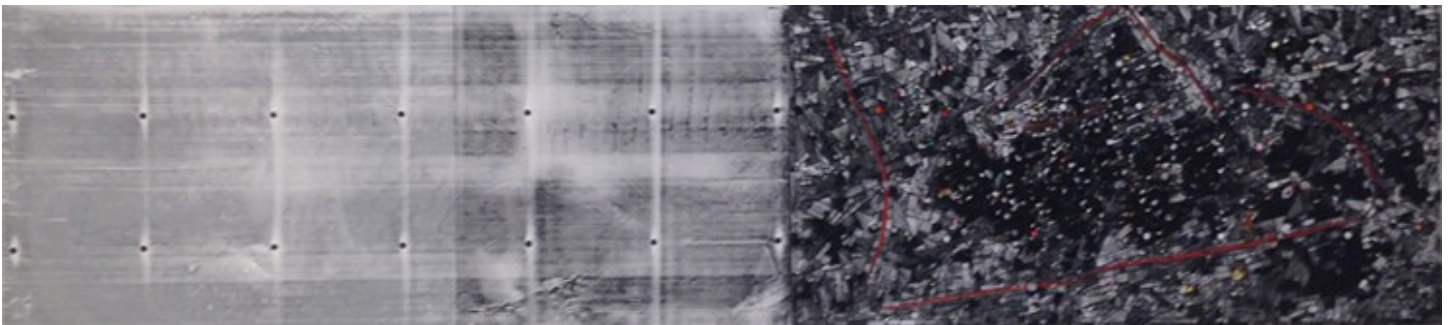
Monolith, V Full Circle: For LeRoi Jones A.K.A. Amiri Baraka, inspired by the great playwright, essayist, and poet. In the piece, a globe hovers in a black sky, as if it were a planet. On small squares are colorful squirts of dried paint and glue, as well as other small objects, making the piece almost sculptural.

In *Black Monolith IV For Jacob Lawrence*, Whitten pays homage to the late African American artist, creating a piece depicting a towering figure with white painted squares, outlined in red, against a black background. The white squares that make up the central mass almost look as if they are empty space, reaching back into infinity.



Soul Map, is another piece that will blow you away. The long, almost panoramic abstract work offers a gradation of paint. On one side, you see a densely packed amalgamation of black squares with bits of gray and other colors (it almost looks like a view of a city from an airplane). On the other side is a much simpler wash of light gray, almost as if it weren't finished yet, or, conversely, as if the thicker side was the result of improvisation and inspiration, resulting from almost nothing.

What's especially great about the show is that many of the pieces contain quotes from Whitten. They not only give insight into the visual work, but are poetic in their own right. Adjacent to *Soul Map*, for instance, is a quote from the artist as he reflects on music. The quote also speaks to how he, as an artist, can interpret history: "Time is a memory bank," he says. "The past, present, and future are encoded in time. Art can be used as a tool decipher time. Break the code and consciousness will expand."



Soul Map, 2015

It's an immense journey to travel through this exhibition, not only to get a view of all of the life and world events that Whitten experienced over a lifetime, but also to see the progression of an artist as he grows and expands, focusing and refocusing his lens on the world through his paintbrush.

IF YOU GO:

"**Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting**"

Through January 24, 2016

Walker Art Center





Apps for Obama, 2011

Jack Whitten