



Jack Whitten

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September 11 – October 12, 2013

Alexander Gray Associates

Jack Whitten in Conversation

Alexander Gray: One of the things that is remarkable about your recent body of work is that each painting has a different stylistic component—there is not one single formal element or concern. Over the years, you have spoken about pushing yourself to make a painting that looked very different from the one that precedes it.

Jack Whitten: I don't have stylistic concerns in terms of formality. The point I want to make with painting is that abstraction, as we know it, can be directed towards the specifics of subject—a person, a thing, an experience. My goal is to use painting to build abstraction as symbol.

AG: Symbolism resonates in this body of work because the individual works contain a specific language. *Warping Pythagoras (For Alan Uglow)* has a geometric, graphic image; *Remote Control* has a system of choices that are on the surface; in *Crushed Grid* you've morphed a grid structure. How do these systems relate?

JW: The underlying principle—or common denominator—is the concept of figure/ground. Keep in mind that both figure and ground are absolute foundations in the history of painting; since the first cave drawings, the visual concept was the figure on a ground. The difference is that the first human who rendered a figure—abstract or representational—did so on a ground that was a ready-made found in nature. My ground is not a ready-made. This goes back to my slab paintings from the 1970s. The slab I create is a ground. It is a concrete statement about matter, the same as a stone fragment, a piece of skin from an animal, a bark from a tree, or a cave wall. Once I make it and put my mark on it then I can apply any variety of subjects or symbols as I desire.

That said, I have not been interested in the Modernist concept of progression, the avant-garde notion of advancing in time. My position has been closer to that of a cosmologist. In other words, we learn by going back in time. The life that we construct is a life that has been out there—we now know—for billions of years. I like the statement about the analogy in painting to the physical world in terms of the sciences. Analogy, not a metaphor. My friend Alan Uglow corrected me once; he said, "We're not dealing with metaphor here we're dealing with analogy." An analogous situation is not one that is metaphorical. Painting shares that quality.

AG: What is interesting now, is that rather than going back in time with nostalgic content, or using existing or traditional material, you are

inventing new materials and new methods. You are working with the paint manufacturers to achieve new physical results, you are dealing with combining matter and material and transforming that into another material. Ultimately, you are doing something that actually does push you ahead of your time.

JW: It's a two-way street. It's true, I'm doing the best I can. I'm a humble person in that sense. But through decades of my work, I probably know more about the concept of matter and materiality in painting than anybody on the planet! But I have found that the more I know, the less I know. It's a paradox. Scientists would say the same thing. We have more knowledge than we've ever had about the nature of the cosmos but there is a greater amount that is unknown.

AG: This issue of paradox also raises the concept of double consciousness that exists in your work.

JW: Paradox is a double thing. Some people might say that it comes out of the historical notion of being Black, and the whole notion of diaspora. I'm aware of all that, but ultimately it's something more. I heard a story here in Crete, a local story, where a teacher is speaking about ancient Greek history with her students. She's talking about Homer and she's trying to introduce the kids to the history and mythology of Homer. A young man in the classroom raises his hand and says, "I know Homer! Homer is my best friend, he's the guy who lives on my block." A question was posed and then somebody answered in a totally different context than how it was originally meant.

AG: Another time shift! Let's talk about how this body of work connects with your previous bodies of work. You are re-introducing expansive slabs of acrylic, which emerged in your work in the early 1970s, and molding individual components, which relate to your cast surfaces from the 1980s. Would you say that this new body of work is a codex to your practice over the past 50 years?

JW: I have developed many conceptual and technical approaches over the past 50 years, and all I'm doing now is going back into my toolbox and using them. I am dealing with the evolution of painting, Western abstract painting in particular. In this way, evolution is the symbol I am trying to capture. That's why each work is so different, it is still in the act of evolving.

I've always said, "I am not a cookie cutter painter." I reject painters who can do 40 paintings all within the same method or process. I don't admire painting done in a formulaic way. Painting is created as an emotive

response—that's why I do it. These paintings were done to evoke emotive responses from the viewer. This is something I don't have control over.

AG: Rather than deliver answers, you are catalyzing dialogue and response. This body of work is provocative in this way because it requires time to investigate.

JW: I would like to feel that it is also evocative in the political sense. If one studied the nature of subjects in these paintings, it is a subversive aesthetic. The subject of *Warping Pythagoras* is both Pythagoras the mathematician, and the geometric form. Pythagoras sets the standard as the ultimate symbolic gesture in the history of Western thought. I took an exact Pythagoras theorem: the square and how to arrive at the hypotenuse of the square. I set it up exactly, laid it out, had it ready to go and at the moment that I used it, I warped it. So, already within the making of this painting, and with its material, any connection with the symbol obliterates; I am subverting these pillars of Western civilization. I'm fucking with it, I'm playing with it, and it's fun. Why not? We know the whole thing is evolving anyway, so let's play with it. Maybe if I'm lucky enough, I might play a part in how it evolves. Maybe it will evolve into something more to my liking, considering what has happened to me historically.

AG: On the subject of social change, and hybridized artistic forms, let's talk about *Nine Cosmic CD's: For The Firespitter (Jayne Cortez)* the painting that pays homage to your friend, the late poet, musician, and activist Jayne Cortez.

JW: When I am dealing with a figure like Jayne Cortez—or other major cultural figures as I have in my ongoing *Black Monolith* series—it is a powerful subject matter. I start with that. Jayne Cortez is in that painting. She was connected with music, with her voice and her command of language. She was in control of her band, The Fire Spitters. I couldn't think of a better way to make a statement about Jayne Cortez except through the idea of music. In the painting, I've made cosmic CDs. They are not regular CDs—I don't expect anybody to try to take them off and put them through a CD player. They're out there in the Cosmos. There's a fantastical mystical edge to that painting, I would like to think that the political statement is totally in the paint and the painting. I don't think anybody would have problems in sensing the presence of Jayne Cortez in that painting. That's the best way I could approach her legacy, through the medium of her music and language.

AG: The scale of *Nine Cosmic CDs* is a parallel to the other monumental painting in the exhibition, *Remote Control*. You talked about Jayne being in control of The Fire Spitters and music—that nexus of art, poetry, and music that was her form. *Remote Control* doesn't have that kind of subject matter—it's about a more political environment.

JW: The theme switches in *Remote Control*. Today, everyone is aware of the presence of remote controls, of Big Brother watching us. At any minute anywhere on the planet you can be wiped out by somebody pushing a button 10,000 miles away. Your bank account could be hacked and wiped off the face of the planet. This is a reality that everyone experiences today—we are tracked, we are controlled, by the very shit we buy! This is another paradox, or as the philosopher Slavoj Žižek describes, a double parallax gap.

AG: When you were working on this painting, were you thinking about the problem or its solution? How do the questions that you're asking get resolved, or do they?

JW: The issues do not get resolved. There are no answers, as we are living in an era of uncertainties. With painting, I can put things out, and while I may want an emotive reaction to the object, we still won't know the answers. That said, the painting is built to be seductive. The painting object becomes a hook, as we find in music. In music, a hook is a set of cords that can be quickly recognized and repeated. Take somebody like B.B. King. The first three cords he hits on his guitar, you know and all of us know we're hearing the song *Lucille*; it's a hook. My painting, *Remote Control*, was built to be very seductive. At times it can be slick and technological and then before you know it, it can revert to an organic messiness.

AG: The last painting that came out of the studio before you left for Greece this Summer was *Warped Circle (For Alan Shields)*, dedicated to the late painter Alan Shields.

JW: In *Warped Circle*, viscosity and materiality changes drastically, with its raked surface and color, it has a strong sense of typology; which covers a whole range of material experiences. Do you realize that every time your eye hits a surface, you're having an experience with typology? So, within the new body of work, one goes from painting to painting and then, when you get to *Warped Circle* you're running a whole range of material stimuli. The loop in that painting, which is a strip of acrylic paint, was a perfect circle that I had laid out for that painting. Then at the last minute I allowed the acrylic strip to warp—another paradox of being caught between that which is static and what is moving. This is the Greek concept of “Stasis” and “Kinesis.”

AG: This sense of wonder, of figuring it all out, is that the Jack Whitten's “hook”?

JW: I like the idea that people are suspended while asking questions about process. I like the idea that the viewer might be frozen by wonder, trying to understand what they are looking at, or how the painting was made, or even what materials I am using. That search might generate an emotion that takes us beyond the intellectual. Overall, in the exhibition, I am willing to guarantee you that the emotive response from every viewer will be different for every painting. I want that. If that doesn't happen then the work is not successful.

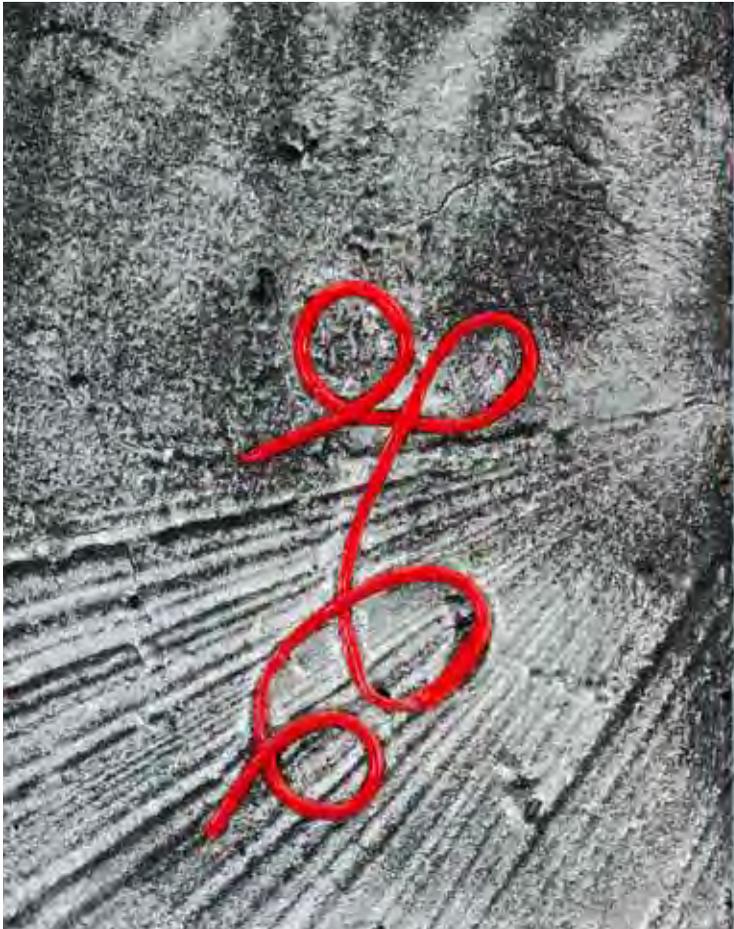
Gray, Alexander. Telephone interview with Jack Whitten, July 11, 2013.



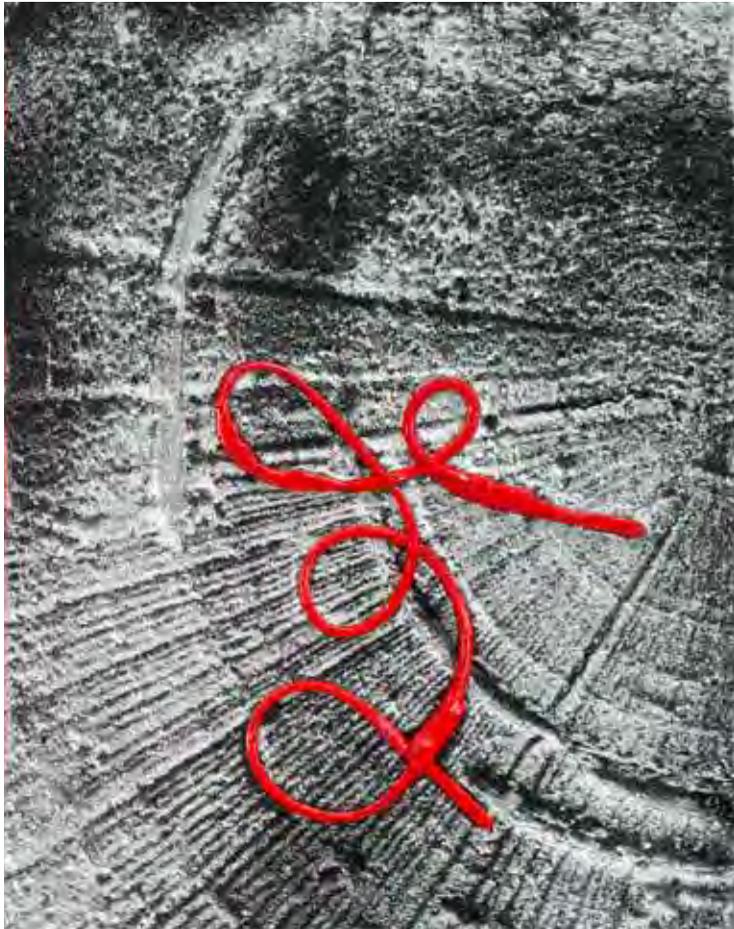
Warped Circle (For Alan Shields), 2013



Above: *Single Loop: For Toots*, 2012
Left: Detail



Quadraloop #1, #2, #3, 2013





Cupcakes I, 2013



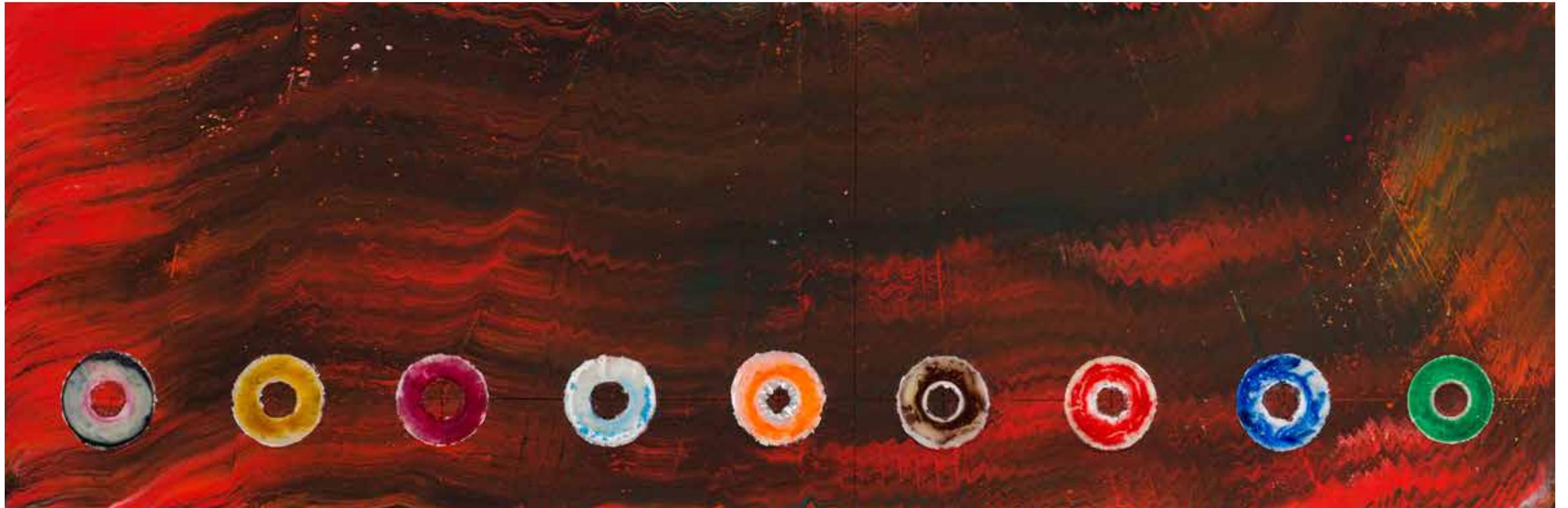
Cupcakes II, 2013



Crushed Grid, 2013



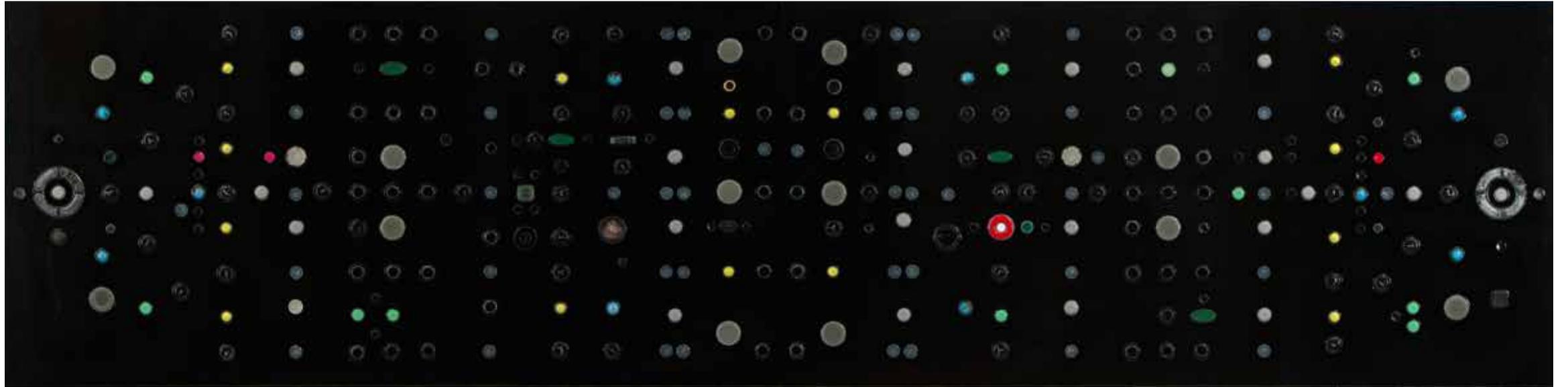
Feedback Loops II (The Curse of Ivan Mestrovic), 2013



Nine Cosmic CDs: For The Firespitter (Jayne Cortez), 2013

Nine Cosmic CDs: For The Firespitter (Jayne Cortez), detail, 2013





Remote Control, 2013

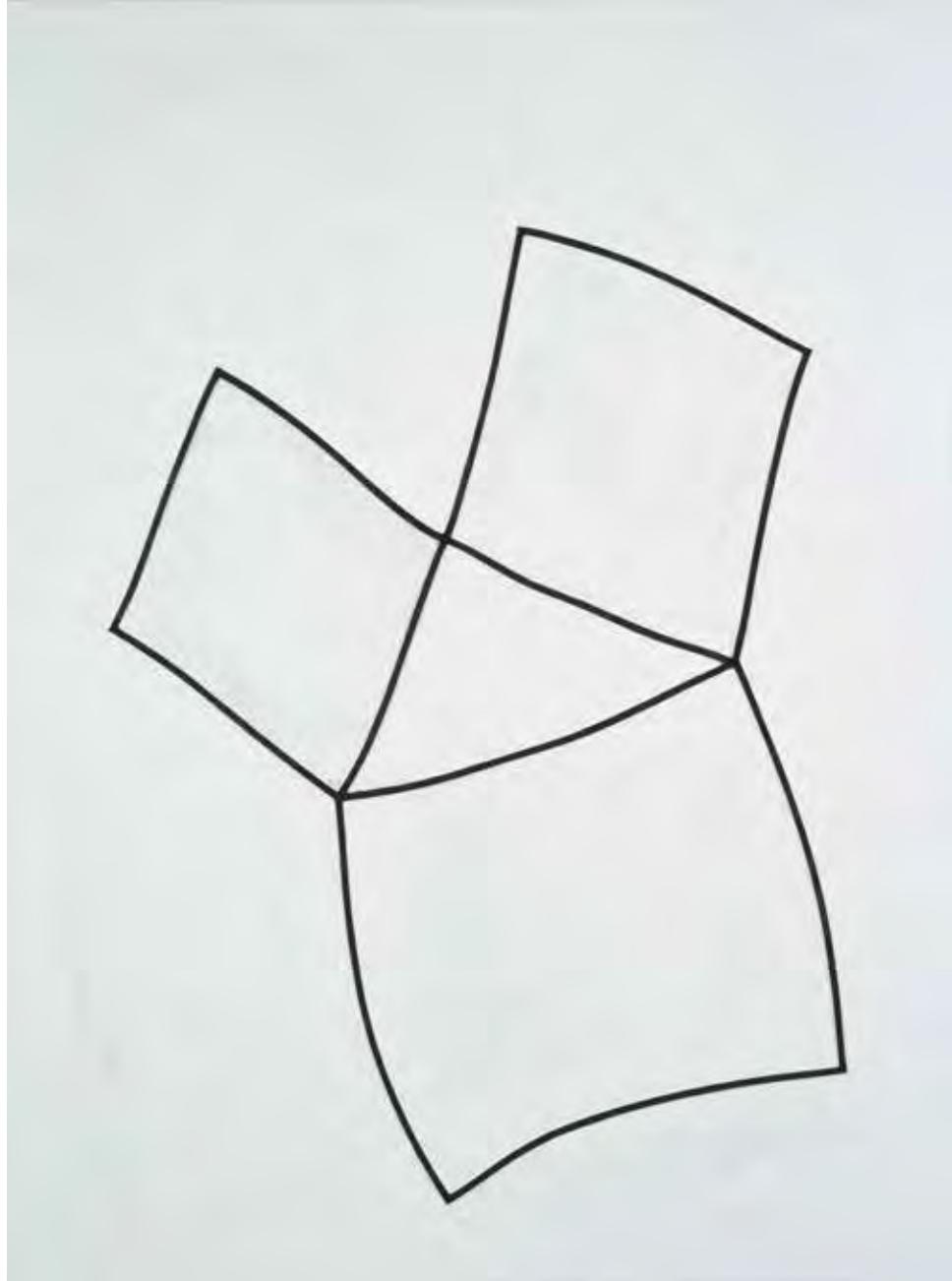


Remote Control, detail, 2013





Above: *Sandbox: For the Children of Sandy Hook Elementary School*, 2013
Left: Detail



Warping Pythagoras (For Alan Uglow), 2013



Space Busters I, 2013



Installation views, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2013



Installation views, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2013

Jack Whitten (b.1939) began his earliest experiments in painting during the 1960s by creating dynamic works inspired by Abstract Expressionism. Born and raised in Bessemer, Alabama, he moved to New York City in 1960 to attend The Cooper Union. Noted for raucous colors and density of gesture combined with topical content, his artwork of this period manifests emotionally complex meditations on the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War.

Experimentation turned to abstraction for Whitten in the 1970s; a new method of painting developed, one that resonates more closely with photography. Gesture is removed from the making of the work; the paint and canvas are “processed”; produced from large troughs of paint dragged across the canvas with tools including squeegees, rakes, and Afro combs. This process yields palpable surface texture, line, and void.

Paint became a metaphor for skin during the 1980s when Whitten experimented with “casting” acrylic paints and compounds to create new surfaces and textures. In contrast to the narrative-based and didactic work made by many African-American artists during this period, Whitten’s artworks reintroduce gesture with aspects of sculpture and collage.

Since the 1990s, Whitten’s experiments with paint as a medium have progressed further towards sculpture, beginning with transforming paint compounds into tiles, and applying them to the canvas as mosaics. These artworks allude to ancient architecture and murals, and serve as both an homage to and memorial of celebrated public figures and intimate friends. Recently, Whitten has repurposed the gamut of techniques he developed over the decades to deepen his engagement with art history, re-contextualizing his experimentations to achieve innovative new surfaces, structures, and symbols.

Whitten’s work has been exhibited in the 1969 and 1972 Whitney Annuals at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the landmark 1971 exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America* at the Whitney Museum of American Art; *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980* at The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY (2006); and *High Times Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*, organized by Independent Curators International (2006); *Blues for Smoke* (2012), organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; *The Encyclopedic Palace* at the *55th Venice Biennale*, Italy (2013). Recent solo exhibitions include P.S.1/MoMA Center for Contemporary Art, New York (2007), the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, GA (2008), Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, GA (2012), Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY (2007, 2009, 2011) and Zeno-X Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium (2011, 2012). Whitten’s work will be the subject of solo shows *Light Years: Jack Whitten, 1971–73* at the Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA (2013); and *Jack Whitten: Evolver*, at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT (2014). A retrospective exhibition of Whitten’s work will be presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA in Fall 2014.

Checklist

Single Loop: For Toots, 2012
Acrylic on canvas
58h x 58w in (147.32h x 147.32w cm)

Crushed Grid, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
63h x 103w in (160.02h x 261.62w cm)

Cupcakes I, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
28h x 42w in (71.12h x 106.68w cm)

Cupcakes II, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
28h x 42w in (71.12h x 106.68w cm)

Feedback Loops II (The Curse of Ivan Mestrovic), 2013
Acrylic on canvas
63h x 103w in (160.02h x 261.62w cm)

Nine Cosmic CDs: For The Firespitter (Jayne Cortez), 2013
Acrylic on canvas
45h x 137.5w in (114.3h x 349.25w cm)

Quadraloop #1, #2, #3, 2013
Acrylic on panel
14h x 11w in (35.56h x 27.94w cm) each

Remote Control, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
44h x 176.63w in (111.76h x 448.64w cm)

Sandbox: For the Children of Sandy Hook Elementary School, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
72h x 54w in (182.88h x 137.16w cm)

Space Busters, 2013
Acrylic and Polyurthane on panel
16h x 20w in (40.64h x 50.8w cm)

Warped Circle (For Alan Shields), 2013
Acrylic on canvas
63h x 63w in (160.02h x 160.02w cm)

Warping Pythagoras (For Alan Uglow), 2013
Acrylic on canvas
72h x 54w in (182.88h x 137.16w cm)

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Cover image: *Warped Circle (For Alan Shields)*, detail, 2013, acrylic on canvas
63h x 63w in (160.02h x 160.02w cm)

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