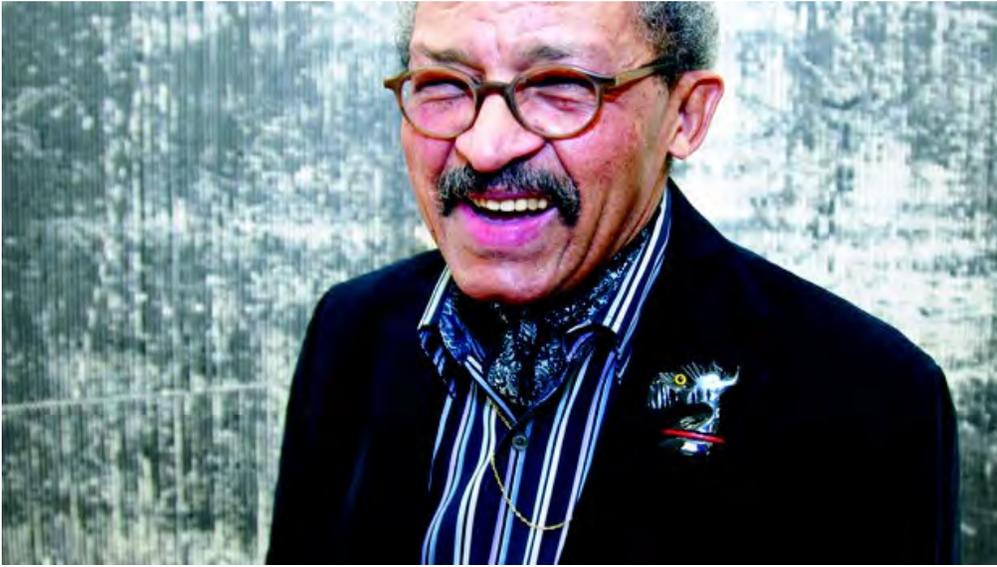


In Painterly Fashion: Jack Whitten retrospective opens at MCASD in La Jolla this weekend

By MCASD Reports Sept. 17, 2014



Jack Whitten *Courtesy*

With 60 canvases from the 1960s to the present, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MCASD) will host “Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting,” Sept. 20-Jan. 4 at 700 Prospect St. in La Jolla.

The show will be the premiere installation of the largest traveling, full-career retrospective exhibition of this consistently active artist.

For 50 years, Whitten has explored the possibilities of paint, the role of the artist, and the allure of material essence in his innovative studio process.

“With compositions that are abstract and elegiac, Whitten operates with both discipline and intuition,” write curators in a press release advancing the exhibit.

“Whitten foregrounds material properties of paint-pigmentation, viscosity, and mark-to capture the momentary and suggest the enduring. Whitten exploits the potential of acrylic paint to convey immediacy and historicity.”

Born in Bessemer, Alabama, in 1939 Whitten attended the Tuskegee Institute before transferring to Southern University. While initially studying medicine, he was compelled to switch direction and pursue the visual arts.

A participant in the civil rights movement, Whitten met Martin Luther King Jr. and adopted his call for peaceful protests. Ultimately, the incivility Whitten encountered during such protests caused the artist to abruptly leave the South, moving to New York City.

Art scholars often describe Whitten working through the gestural influences of Abstract Expressionism before achieving creative maturity in the mid-1970s.

This show will debut a series of small black-and-white “ghost” paintings from 1964 that reveal Whitten working “without the wrist” almost a decade before his noted abstractions of the 1970s.

These early wet-on-wet paintings are followed by an interlude of gestural works (his “garden” series), which may be seen as a digression from the material-based experimentations to which he returns in the 1970s.

Throughout the '70s, Whitten emphasizes formal innovation and devises tools to help him produce his effects — long-handled squeegees, rakes and serrated combs. As his figurative references fade, his intent to realize the total picture plane in a single gesture ascends. Works from the period will include test slabs and drag canvases, which were featured in Whitten's 1974 one-person exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

For more than three decades, Whitten has spent a portion of each year on the Greek island of Crete.

He often breaks down words to their Greek etymology and, in the late-1970s, used the Greek alphabet as an ordering system for his optical canvases. In these primarily black-and-white works, Whitten subtly introduces color by rubbing pure powdered pastel into the wet acrylic.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Whitten amplifies his plastic treatment of the acrylic paint by working directly with Aquatec staff and introducing acrylic emulsions such as Rhoplex.

Collage, an admitted influence of Romare Bearden, manifests itself in Whitten's tessellated constructions, wherein he creates paint tiles and then adheres them to the canvas: he breaks down the paint to remake the painting. In these decades Whitten also develops overall textures and patterns with imprints of screens, grates and other materials.

As the century turns, Whitten references bar codes and apps — the geometry of the Information Age.

This retrospective will be followed by a national tour, and is accompanied by a richly illustrated publication with a lead essay by exhibition curator Kathryn Kanjo, an artist interview conducted by art historian Robert Storr, and new writing by poet Quincy Troupe.



Jack Whitten's 'Apps for Obama' (2011) is made from acrylic paint on hollow core door.

Courtesy