

Jack Whitten

September 9 – October 11, 2009



Ribbons of Honor #9, 2009, acrylic collage on board



Ribbons of Honor #2, 2009, acrylic collage on board



Ribbons of Honor #6, 2009, acrylic collage on board



Ribbons of Honor #11, 2009, acrylic collage on board

Alexander Gray Associates is pleased to present Jack Whitten's second one-person exhibition with the gallery. Since the 1960s, Whitten has devoted his artistic practice to the potential of painting, transforming material into process, and breaking ground with the plastic and sculptural possibilities of abstraction.

In the exhibition, new small-scale paintings *Ribbons of Honor* (2009), demonstrate Whitten's ability to shock and awe with color, surface tension and geometry. In these works, described by the artist as "acrylic collages", mixed-media and acrylic surfaces are adhered to painted panels. With geometric designs inspired by the modular forms of military ribbons, the soft pink under-glow of the verso of the panels offer a tension with the bold colors, glossy and shimmering ornamentation of the poured acrylic surfaces.

Providing grounding for these sculptural paintings, works from the late 1970s and mid-1980s are also on exhibit. In *Persian Echo I* and *Persian Echo II* (1979), black and white decorative patterns create a moire-effect over softer pillows of color, juxtaposing optical tricks and impressionistic abstraction. In *Ancient Mentor* (1985), a pixelated grid of pressed paint is treated with color, resulting in a play with Pointillism and computer circuitry. The exhibition is further punctuated with a new black and white painting, employing Whitten's signature tessare forms, titled *Lateral Shift* (2008). This work, with its strong linear forms, recalls Whitten's *Theta* series from the late 1970s, and draws inspiration from the 2008 presidential election.

Based in New York, Jack Whitten's experiments with painting date to the 1960s, when, inspired by Abstract Expressionism, he created dynamic works noted for their raucous colors and density of gesture, combined with topical content—emotionally complex meditations on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War. In the 1970s, Whitten's experimentation turned to abstraction, when he developed a method of painting that he related directly to photography. In this work, gesture was removed from the making of the work; instead, paint and canvas were "processed", using large troughs to hold paint, and dragging canvas across, with squeegees, rakes, Afro combs to create surface texture, line, and voids. The 1980s saw further experimentation with paint as a metaphor for skin, with Whitten "casting" surfaces and textures with acrylic paints and compounds. These works reintroduced gesture with aspects of sculpture and collage at a time when narrative-based and didactic work was de rigeur for Black artists. In the 1990s, Whitten's experiments with paint as a medium moved further towards sculpture, as paint compounds were transformed into mosaic-like tiles and were applied to canvases, referencing ancient architecture and murals. In this work, and into the current work, memorial and persona became sources for content, as works paid homage to celebrated figures and close friends of the artist.

Whitten's work was included in the 1969 and 1972 Whitney Annuals, the landmark 1971 exhibition, *Contemporary Black Artists in America* at the Whitney Museum, *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980* at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2006); and *High Times Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*, organized by Independent Curators International (2006). In Summer 2007, P.S.1 MoMA Center for Contemporary Art presented a solo exhibition, juxtaposing Whitten's epic 2005 painting, *9/11* with paintings from the 1960s; The Atlanta Contemporary Art Center organized an exhibition of Whitten's memorial works in 2008. His work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Birmingham Museum of Art, Harvard University Art Museums, and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Concurrent with the exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates, Whitten will have a one-person exhibition in Berlin at Galerie Kienzle & Gmeiner, opening October 16, 2009.