

Unmasked: All-American art of Jack Whitten opens at Walker Art Center

Walker Art Center celebrates the painter's 50-year career in a show opening Sunday.

By Mary Abbe (<http://www.startribune.com/mary-abbe/10644306/>) Star Tribune |

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Given the 50-year trajectory of his career, New York-based painter Jack Whitten seems to have been hiding in plain sight. He had a prestigious solo show at the Whitney Museum in 1974, a 10-year retrospective at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1983, and a New Museum exhibit in 1993. Steady recognition, but not quite sizzling.

Then in the past decade Whitten's career soared with more than 40 gallery and museum shows from New York to Miami, Dubai to the Venice Biennale. The Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, the Tate Modern in London and other prominent sites bought his work.

This weekend Walker Art Center will open "Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting." It's a lush retrospective of big, mesmerizingly beautiful abstractions by an all-American artist of cosmopolitan grace and international style. It runs Sunday through Jan. 24 and will be a revelation to many viewers, as it was to me.

Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, the show includes 60 paintings and more than a dozen works on paper. They range from a racially charged image of masks, done in 1963, to a monumental memorial to the Sept. 11 tragedy, which Whitten saw from his TriBeCa studio, watching in shock as the first plane struck the World Trade Center that sunny morning.

Memorializing that appalling event is a challenge few have met with the intensity and eloquence Whitten brings to "9 - 11 - 01." Given the atrocity's scale in lives lost and buildings destroyed, a canvas 10 feet tall by 20 feet long seems about right — big enough to overwhelm yet intimate enough to be grasped.

Its centerpiece is a dark triangle of debris incorporating crushed bones, glass, ash, scraps of newspaper and magazines, footprints embedded in pigment. Composed of tilelike rectangles of acrylic paint, the image looms like a memorial pyramid in a wasteland backgrounded by ghostly towers. At once ominous and elegiac, the painting's darkness sucks the air from the room, even as hope sparkles from flecks of glitter and shards of glass.

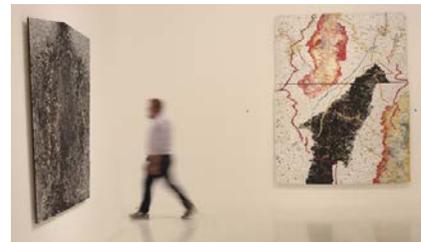
Racial politics and art

Born in Bessemer, Ala., in 1939, Whitten is a black artist who expresses his heritage in subtle ways. The son of a coal miner, he once hoped to be a doctor. Inspired by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s oratory, he became involved in civil rights demonstrations and protest movements, for which he designed signs and posters while still a student.

After studying briefly at the Tuskegee Institute and Southern University in Baton Rouge, La., Whitten headed for New York City and in 1964 earned a B.A. in fine art from prestigious Cooper Union.

Both his originality and the artistic ferment of the time are evident in his 1967 abstraction "NY Battle Ground," a 7-foot-wide by 5-foot-tall picture in which a tornado of purplish black descends to suck up a fleshy volcano of pink paint. Around their dramatic encounter, multicolored scribbles explode and buzz like angry insects. After nearly a half-century, that canvas is still a showstopper bristling with quarrelsome energy.

It comes from a moment when, fresh out of college, Whitten was hanging out at the Cedar Bar, the legendary downtown watering hole frequented by abstract painter Willem de Kooning and his Euro-American pals. Simultaneously Whitten was playing jazz and keeping company uptown with Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and Harlem talents whose narrative style was defining midcentury Afro-American art.



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_1441903691725/)
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Walker curator Eric Crosby with the 1998 Jack Whitten painting "Black Monolith III (For Barbara Jordan)," left, and the 1998 work...

Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting

When: Sept. 13-Jan. 24. Open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Wed. & Fri.-Sun., 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Thu.

Where: Walker Art Center, 1750 Hennepin Av. S., Mpls.

Events: Artist talk at 2 p.m. Sun.; painting workshops Sept. 17 and Oct. 8 from 6-9 p.m.; dance, music, theater performances in galleries, 6-9 p.m. Oct. 1; storytelling at 7 & 8 p.m. Oct. 8. Free with gallery admission.

Admission: \$9-\$14. Free for ages 18 and under and for all on Thursday evenings. 612-375-7600 or www.walkerart.org.

“He’s absorbing and processing racial history at the same time he’s developing his own style,” said curator Eric Crosby, who oversaw the Walker installation. “He wanted to transcend the narrative trend of black art but also to articulate the politics of race.”

One of the show’s most raw and haunted paintings, “The Blacks” (1963), suggests his conflicted status as a black man in a white-dominated art world. In it, black faces with thick lips peer from behind a ragged screen of masklike ivory shapes — black men in a Kabuki pantomime of whiteness.

Experiments in form & paint

From the start, Whitten was an experimenter. He developed novel ways to apply paint — building up layers of color, pouring puddles of pigment, using a squeegee to make atmospheric marks, or a rake to create stripes. He embeds ribbons and ropes of pigment in the surfaces of paintings, uses footprints as autobiographical references, and stains canvases with controlled splashes of color.

The show unfolds eloquently, tracing the evolution of his ideas in paintings from each decade. Titles are often multicultural and poetic. The “Chinese Doorway” of 1974 is a calligraphic landscape swiped into a bed of color. “Delta,” “Gamma” and other Greek-alphabet paintings of 1975-78 are lean and linear, their gray surfaces etched like ancient stone.

“Since the 1960s Jack and his family have traveled to Greece in the summer,” Crosby said. “His wife, Mirsini Amidon, is a Greek-American and their daughter Mary is his studio manager and keeper of his archives. In the summer he spends much of his time there, making olive oil, spearing fish and carving wood.”

His love of Greece and his black-American heritage fuse in the “Black Monolith” paintings from the 1990s, mosaic-like abstractions in honor of Miles Davis, Ralph Ellison, Barbara Jordan, Thelonious Monk, Jacob Lawrence and other black leaders, including President Obama.

“Much of his work is indebted to Greek culture, and all of it is rooted in his past, where he’s been, his experiences,” Crosby said. “It’s abstract, so it’s autobiographical without being descriptive. But he does like people to know the history behind his work.”