



Artist Jack Whitten at the opening for his solo show, September 2011, Alexander Gray Associates, New York



Jack Whitten
Broken Spaces # 5
1974
Museum of Modern Art, New York



Jack Whitten FROM GARBAGE TO GEMS by Elisabeth Kley

When veteran abstract painter **Jack Whitten** (b. 1933) first began experimenting with art as a child in Alabama in the 1940s, his canvases were the leftover pelts of the raccoons and muskrats he hunted with his friends and peddled for 30 cents each. "I've always thought of the picture plane as a skin," Whitten told Atlanta Contemporary Arts Center director Stuart Horodner in a 2008 interview. (This was, of course, 60 years before **David Hammons** used rich people's fur coats as targets of his painterly expressions.

Such audacity with materials has characterized Whitten's work since the start of a legendary four-decade career shaped by historical tumult. In 1960, he was studying in Baton Rouge while helping to lead civil right marches. "Horrific experience," Whitten told poet Kenneth Goldsmith in 1994. "I will never forget at the steps of the state capital building, praying, and people throwing piss out of the offices, bottles and eggs, all kinds of shit."

Quickly getting out of the polarized South, Whitten moved to New York to continue his art studies at Cooper Union -- the first time he'd been in a classroom with white students. He became friends with **Willem de Kooning**, who influenced his early hallucinatory gestural paintings, including a series based on Martin Luther King.

In the '70s, inspired by his Afro comb, Whitten developed a method of moving large fields of color across huge canvases with single swipes of 12-foot-wide homemade rakes and metal squeegees. A decade before **Gerhard Richter**, he'd already removed the traces of his personal hand from abstract painting -- without losing accident's excitement.

Whitten's next invention -- cutting small tesserae out of sheets of dried acrylic paint and then sticking them on the canvas -- has occupied him since the early '90s. A well-received 1994 exhibition at Horodner Romley gallery included *28 Black Holes (Dedicated to Jackie O)* (1993-94), a composition taken from a Lalounis jewelry advertisement. Leaping from fashion's mundane frivolity to the scientific sublime, Whitten transformed the openings in seven enormous buttons into representations of the universe's incomprehensible immensity.

On 9/11, outside his Tribeca studio (only 15 blocks above Ground Zero), Whitten witnessed the World Trade Center disintegrating into flying glass as people plunged out of the windows. Five years later he created *9/11/01* (2006), a monumental 10 x 20 ft. memorial painting of a pyramid (symbolizing money) being pierced by silvery shards. In addition to acrylic, the work was made from bone fragments, silica, rust, copper and a gallon of blood -- a chilling combination of materials that echoes the web of mourning and nefarious interests that have unfolded since the tragedy.

Whitten's experience of 9/11 may help explain why Alexander Gray decided to put on his third solo exhibition during the attack's anniversary month. At the opening on Sept. 7, 2011, Lorraine O'Grady, **Melvin**

Jack Whitten
28 Black Holes (Dedicated To Jackie O)
1993-1994
Alexander Gray Associates



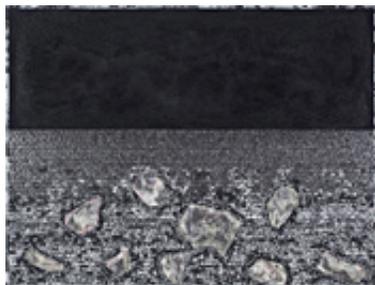
Jack Whitten
9-11-012006
Alexander Gray Associates



Artists Melvin Edwards and Ed Clark at the opening of "Jack Whitten," September 2011, Alexander Gray Associates, New York



Jack Whitten
Apps for Obama
2011
Alexander Gray Associates



Edwards, Coco Fusco, Ed Clark, Stanley Whitney and Adam Pendleton were among the crowd admiring Whitten's latest works.

In *Apps for Obama* (2011), the show's major painting, an infinitesimal grid of celestial tesserae ranging from deep blue at the top to pale blue at the bottom, is punctuated by several rows of what appear to be plastic lids or dishes, each containing a different color. A central row of deflated plastic bags lined with colorful liquid paint interrupts the work's solidity -- seemingly advising our beleaguered President to look to the sky for a solution to Republican trash.

The upper section of *Time's Dilemma* (2011), a comparatively somber painting hanging in the black room, is a black rectangle that thickens in the center to a surface resembling tar. Below, another grid of tesserae becomes progressively more and more silvery, like a metallic brick wall. Nine irregular openings are lined with more plastic bags -- turning, as painter Mira Schor remarked, garbage into gems.

The exhibition also includes a set of 20 almost Turner-esque watercolor collages, as light as the paintings are substantial. Pulsating clouds of incandescent liquid acrylic seem to be exploding into smoky haze, materially and metaphorically transforming themselves through Whitten's special alchemy. Prices range from \$5,000 to \$125,000.

"Jack Whitten," Sept. 7-Oct. 15, 2011, at Alexander Gray Associates, 508 West 26th Street #215, New York, N.Y. 10001.

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Jack Whitten
Time's Dilemma
2011
Alexander Gray Associates



Jack Whitten
Clearview II
1970
Alexander Gray Associates



Jack Whitten
Saturation #10
2011
Alexander Gray Associates