

INCONVERSATION

# Jack Whitten with Robert Storr

by Robert Storr

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On the occasion of Jack Whitten's two exhibits, at P.S.1 (from now until September 24th) and at Alexander Gray Associates (from September 13th to October 20th), *Rail* Consulting Editor Robert Storr spoke to the artist about his life and work.

**Robert Storr (Rail):** After having seen your show at P.S.1, I had no idea you painted in that idiom at all at the beginning of your career (maybe partly because I got to know your work when I came to New York in the late 1970s). Can you talk a little bit about what your experience of that period was like, and where you were coming from?

**Jack Whitten:** Actually I showed those works in a group show called "Four Voices – One Theme" at Allan Stone Gallery in 1965. In fact, it was my first commercial gallery showing in New York.

**Rail:** How did Allan Stone become aware of you?

**Whitten:** He became aware of me through the painter Joe Overstreet, who had arranged a meeting with Allan and other artists at his studio. I was just one year out of college from Cooper Union.

**Rail:** There's a lot of variety within the group—I mean, between 1962 and 1968 you were dealing with all kinds of pictorial problems, and arriving at different pictorial solutions. Take "See the Funny People" for example, where the separations from density to openness are highly delineated, whereas in most other paintings there's a sense that all the forms and all the marks are potentially bleeding into each other or inter-weaving as if they were painted with greater urgency and spontaneity.



Portrait of the artist. Photo by John Berens

**Whitten:** Well, you're talking about the whole decade of the '60s. On the one hand I was struggling with the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, and on the other, I was, like most other people at the time, living precariously through my own experience with the psychedelic.

**Rail:** *(laughs)* Now Jack, how dedicated of a researcher were you?

**Whitten:** That's what was in the air; that's what people were feeling, so all of the inter-mingling or one thing melting into another was considered natural at the time. *(laughs)*

**Rail:** Let's focus on the political condition and how it affected you. First of all, there's about half of the paintings that in some ways, by their titles at least, make references to Dr. Martin Luther King. For example, "MLK's Garden," "King's Wish," "For MLK," and "U.S.A. Oracle," which is the most complex one, in that it has a lot of sub-themes. Maybe you can tell us just a little bit about what Dr. King meant to you at that time, and how you went about making pictures in a context where there was breaking news about the war and then his subsequent assassination in April of 1968?



Jack Whitten, *9.11.01* (2005). Mixed media and acrylic on canvas, 120"x240". Photo by John Berens. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

**Whitten:** I met Dr. King when I went to hear him talk at a local church in Montgomery, Alabama, which is not far from where I was going to school at Tuskegee Institute in 1957. It was my freshman year, and right in the middle of the bus boycott. So I had a chance to speak to him about our political struggle.

**Rail:** What was he like to deal with one on one?

**Whitten:** You know, having been brought up in the Christian Fundamentalist Church in Bessemer, Alabama; I was already accustomed to witnessing such a preacher man. The only thing different was that he was a great one—charismatic beyond belief of course, but what was important to me is that I was able to connect with a type of spirituality that the man had.

**Rail:** He was still a very young man at that time.

**Whitten:** Absolutely. And this was his first introduction to the national stage. At that time, as you know, all of our buses were segregated; we had white sections and colored sections. I remember the sign on the bus in Bessemer—the front said 'white' and the back said 'colored.' I knew a young man, he was actually one of my older sister's best friends who came back from the Army with his Army uniform on, got on the bus and sat down one day, and the bus driver asked him to move, and he told him he was tired and wanted to sit down. So the guy pulled out a pistol and killed him. So what King did within that context was an extremely brave thing to do.

**Rail:** Did you ever come across him again in person or did you mostly follow what he did in the news the way other people did?

**Whitten:** I was present in Washington, D.C. for his famous 'I have a dream' speech, but I never met him again. What I did on my own when I was down in Southern University in Baton Rouge in 1959 was try out his theories of non-violence by participating in numerous sit-down demonstrations. In fact, I was one of the organizers.

**Rail:** Was it part of the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) or was it a spontaneously organized demonstration by you and your colleagues?

**Whitten:** It started as a campus protest among students, and then it spread out, involving all the local clergies, and was nationally televised. In fact, that march convinced me that I couldn't participate any longer. That's why I left and came to New York to further my study at Cooper Union in 1959.

**Rail:** Because the violence was directed at you?

**Whitten:** I just couldn't go on. I believed in Dr. King's philosophies; but in reality I found out that I didn't have it in me to continue in this direction. I found it too difficult to turn the other cheek.

**Rail:** So when you came to Cooper Union, what kind of work were you making before those paintings that are now on view at P.S.1?

**Whitten:** The best way to describe my experience at Cooper Union in 1960-1964 is that it was influenced by both German Bauhaus and Abstract Expressionism. But as soon as I graduated I met Bill de Kooning and Franz Kline, my work became more Abstract Expressionistic, with some surrealist overtones. I was influenced by Gorky as well as Pollock.

**Rail:** So the notion of "Hide and Seek" had an impact on you.

**Whitten:** I remember once visiting a friend, and how I kept seeing faces on the windowsill. At first I found them very disturbing, because I didn't know what was happening.

**Rail:** Were you being, perhaps, anxious about a certain thing, or was it a vision of some sort?

**Whitten:** I think it was more like a vision, because I started seeing these faces in everything that I looked at. In addition, it was my friend Jeff Waite, a carpenter and a philosopher (he was Welsh and had earned his PhD from McGill University) who one day saw me pick up one of these found objects which I collected and grabbed my hand and asked me, "Why did you pick up this one and not that one?" And I said, "I never thought there was any difference between them. I just pick whichever one attracted me." At any rate, it was Jeff who interested me into reading philosophy and aesthetics. And then, as we say today, connect the dots. One thing led to another. The structuring of personal aesthetics is what those

paintings are about.

**Rail:** In spite of the fact that there's a lot of references to the social conflicts in the '60s and so on, it's hard to tell in some of the paintings whether these images are emerging from the ground, or are in a sense being sublimated into the painting.

**Whitten:** At that time, I was doing the best I could to contain the kind of imagery I was seeing. It wasn't an intellectual situation, but rather, it was an emotional necessity. As a matter of fact, they're my autobiographical paintings. I mean, I was going through a serious crisis in my life. But then everybody was. The whole race issue forced me to pick myself apart subconsciously until I met people like Leroi Jones, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence who had found other solutions for their creative lives.

**Rail:** That was a very interesting chapter in the history of African-American artists altogether. For example, Norman Lewis was shifting towards abstraction in the '50s, which was considered at that time very radical, but his work by far has not been well represented in art history, nor has it been well shown in museums. And I guess one of the things that's exciting about your show is that it brings up all of those issues.

**Whitten:** That's one part of the problem, the other is the tension that exists between abstraction and figuration, which has to do with pictorial or formal problems rather than political ones.

**Rail:** You're right—there is quite a lot of range in what you see. I mean, they're gestural paintings from a distance, but when you look closer you see faces and other references to the figure. At the same time, the spatial organization varies enormously.

**Whitten:** It'd be difficult to tell you what sort of mental state I was going through by late '68. For the first time in my life I had to see a shrink simply because I thought I was going off the deep end. I would occasionally go and talk to Jacob Lawrence. And he would tell me, "Well, you got to keep your mind on the plastic." It's like the Van Gogh syndrome. Van Gogh was obviously emotionally intense, but if he hadn't maintained some sort of a structural integrity, he would not have been able to make those paintings. That's what made his paintings so great.

**Rail:** Yeah. Form is a way of absorbing and dealing with tension, so that it doesn't run into chaos!

**Whitten:** It's a way of trying to make sense of things. You're a painter yourself, you know what I'm speaking of.

**Rail:** I do, actually. Emotionally as well as formally. All of us want to be in charge of it. Now, one of the things that's also striking, is that in "Look Mom," you get these opaque surfaces, certainly less atmospheric than others ones, and you begin to see a clarification of the physical parts of the painting other than gesture. Does that work, in some ways, have greater connection to your abstractions in the '70s?

**Whitten:** That painting coincided at the time when I started using paint right out of the tube. I discovered what I call “the spatial overlay,” which gave me a different way to deal with space. It was my own way to get away from that psychedelic influence. Anybody with any sense from my generation who was serious about painting by the late '60s had to realize that the psychedelic was a perpetual dog chasing its tail. And in our own way, we had to invent our way of making paintings.

**Rail:** Your painting, “Siberian Salt Grinder” in the show “High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967 – 1975,” curated by Katy Siegel at the National Academy of Design, was so uncanny because it looks so much like Gerhard Richter’s work, but it was made before Richter made paintings of that kind. Again it was a question of suddenly discovering a chapter in your personal history, but it’s also problematic, if you want to call it that; in that nobody was aware of it unless they happened to be real lucky to have seen them.

**Whitten:** That painting was first shown at the Whitney Museum, in a show curated by Marcia Tucker. It was painted in '74, a good ten years before Richter. By the time I did the last show at Alan’s in 1969, I realized that I had to do something drastically radical from the relative gesture of my wrist, which was becoming too habitual. In the middle of all this, I got a grant from Xerox Corporation along with three other artists, Steve Antonakos, Bob Whitman, and Agnes Denis, and all of us were invited to Rochester to experiment with their instruments and work with their engineers. And my solution was to expand the gesture while taking my hand out of it. I figured if Bill de Kooning had a house-painting brush, if I made a brush 20 times that size, I might be able to overcome his influence, and perhaps the work will lead me somewhere else. Ultimately, they were critical for me because they allowed me to make new leaps in other directions. The total picture plane was conceived of as a single line.

**Rail:** You certainly did that. Not only did they give you a new direction, but they were also critical of the kinds of assumptions that went with what gesture was, and the idea of direct painting. Here you’ve got something where the kind of sensual and physical quality, with such gorgeous effect, could co-exist with a removed and formal conceit.

**Whitten:** I think in his last paintings, Pollock was dealing with those issues between Abstract Expressionism, gesture, and figuration, all at once. While many others tend to put him down because they thought that he was going back to figuration, I’m one of those who believe that he had discovered something that he didn’t understand fully. He was just desperately trying to make sense of what he had discovered, that’s all.

**Rail:** And he didn’t assume that it was a one-directional situation anyway.

**Whitten:** Well, my friend David Budd used to tell me repeatedly, “You know, after Pollock, something was swept under the rug,” and I never knew what he was talking about. At that time, when older painters talked to you, they did it in some sort double-talk or riddled way, and if you didn’t have a feeling for the painter’s language, you didn’t know what the hell they were talking about. Bill de Kooning used to talk that way.

**Rail:** Yeah. With his wonderful Dutch accent. In any case, when you started making these paintings, did you care for the fact that you were going against the grain of geometric abstraction? In other words, were you navigating, in a sense, off of that, or were you perfectly happy to be seen in respect to that?

**Whitten:** By 1970 I was seeing a lot of Henry Geldzahler, who was a great supporter of my work at that time. He would come to the studio and we would talk a lot about the grid; the grid being a kind of, as he put in a little essay he wrote for me once, “aspect of civilization.” In my own way, I was introduced to it by my afro-comb. That’s where it started.

**Rail:** So that’s when you began to use your comb as a painting tool?

**Whitten:** Yes. First I used the afro-comb with a couple of paintings, and then I began to recognize a pattern. That’s when I wanted more control, so I started making the device myself. The afro-comb became a big carpenter saw. In fact, MoMA has one from 1978.

**Rail:** That’s the one I included in my first show at MoMA.

**Whitten:** Exactly. I remember one of the critics said “There’s a Jack Whitten painting that looks like it just wants to jump off the wall and start dancing.” But for the most part, no one knew what to do with those paintings. It took a long time to bring those paintings back into the public view with the proper understanding which they deserve.

**Rail:** That’s why Katy’s show was so important, because what happened during that period cannot be reduced to just a couple of names.

**Whitten:** Even the period we were talking about earlier, from the black perspective in the ’60s; no one has attempted to make sense of that.

**Rail:** The Whitney or other museums should do or should have done something on that period. Anyway, let’s shift a little bit to the 9/11 painting. What was your sense of that day, and how did you get to the point of thinking that one day you could make a picture after such an event?

**Whitten:** I was on Lispenard Street, where I had lived since 1962, with some firemen that morning because of a gas leak on our block. Do you remember the voice of somebody saying, “Holy shit!” from the first video clip that was available on TV? That’s my voice. Anyway, all of a sudden, there was this horrible sound coming our way, and we all look up and see this enormous plane flying right over our heads, and it went directly into the North tower. And when it hit, the first thing you saw was this big crystal burst; before you saw any smoke, before you saw any flame, the sky was just filled with crystal glass, which was hard to see on the video. It was like this huge chandelier, that’s what you saw. One of the firemen said, “Oh, it’s a horrible accident,” and so did my tenant and a few others among my neighbors. But my gut feeling was, “Hey man, that was no goddamn accident.” I had two years of pilot training down at Tuskegee, so I know that you can muscle a plane’s steering and take it off course.

Believe me, that plane was like an arrow shooting at a target. The firemen stopped what they were doing, got into their trucks and they took off immediately toward the Trade building, and while some of us were still arguing about whether or not it was an accident, the second plane hit the South tower.

**Rail:** Because we live in Brooklyn, we could only see the whole thing from afar. We didn't experience the impact. I can't imagine what it would be like to have actually seen the impact up close as you did.

**Whitten:** Watching those poor people jumping out of the buildings was the most terrifying and horrible experience. To think that close to 3,000 people were murdered in my neighborhood—nobody gets over that, you really don't. So I made a vow to do something about it. I made the decision before that happened to sell my building, and got a new studio in Woodside, Queens. I remember Ms. Gund came to visit me at the studio in the middle of renovation, and I said to her, "The first painting I'm going to do when I get this studio together is going to be the 9/11 painting." When I finished the painting four years later, I called her up and invited her to come and see it, and she did.

**Rail:** She has got more time for people, more energy to really try and make things happen than anybody I know. So in some ways, the 9/11 painting is part of your memorial painting series that grew out of the '60s?

**Whitten:** Absolutely.

**Rail:** But what was the first one?

**Whitten:** The first one probably was for my older brother Tommy, who was a jazz musician, and was killed in a fire in 1965. I did two Kennedy paintings, a painting of children who were killed in Birmingham, and one of Nat King Cole, which were all destroyed in a fire. I've had two major fires in New York.

**Rail:** Could you talk a bit about what you'll be showing at Alexander Gray this month?

**Whitten:** Five memorial paintings that are based on electronic-stamps, which are for friends and people I knew: Al Held, Al Loving, Marcia Tucker, Bobby Short, and the last one for my younger brother, Billy, who died last year.

**Rail:** I only know the two Als and Marcia, but my daughter Katherine and I are big admirers of Bobby Short.

**Whitten:** Bobby was a great supporter of the Studio Museum. He gave a lot of time and effort to the Studio Museum, and that's how I first met him. I told him that we play his music loud during the summertime at my house on Crete and that the swallows would go crazy flying in and out of the porch! Bobby gave me a big hug and said, "Darling, that's so marvelous."