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NEWSMAKER

JACK WHITTEN

THOUGH HE'S BEEN MAKING work since the 1960s, Whitten is in the midst of a well-deserved renaissance. His pivotal experiments in process-driven abstraction were revisited in a major show on view through March at the SCAD Museum of Art, in Savannah, and also included in "NYC: 1993" at the New Museum this past spring. This month new paintings go on view at New York's **Alexander Gray Associates**, and pieces from 1971 to 1973 will be shown at Brandeis University's **Rose**

Art Museum from September 17. In 2014, the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego will give Whitten his first major retrospective. Scott Indrisek met with the artist at his studio in Sunnyside, Queens, to talk about his experimentations with paint.

SCOTT INDRISEK: *How do you work with paint as collage, exactly?*

JACK WHITTEN: Collage has been sort of the keystone of modernist thought. With

Picasso, with Matisse. What I have done is remove the paint from the canvas, which makes it physical. I can pick it up and hold it in my hand, I can cut it and I can reapply it. This is the essence of the notion of making a painting as opposed to painting a painting. **SI:** *Some of the most recent works involve the shape of a loop. How'd that come about?* **JW:** I was having an interview with a German fellow in the studio, and he was asking me the same question. I took a sheet

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of paper and I tried to explain to him. I drew a line coming out of Africa to America, and I said, when I started learning about painting and art history, I had to move from America, I had to go up to Europe. I had to go way over to the Far East, to Japan and China, all the way over to Australia. I'm going back and forth globally. It's a map—an autobiographical map. That's where the loop started, but as I got into it, it became something more mystical. André Malraux had a theory he called Museum Without Walls, that one should be able to travel mentally through all the world's cultures, the whole repository of human knowledge. Major museums now, their holdings are listed online. You can go and you can punch into the Louvre and walk through the whole collection. Go up to the Tate, come back through the Prado, go through the Metropolitan.

SI: *Can we talk a bit about your rather unique technical process?*

JW: I make these strips of acrylic beforehand, all in different shapes. And then when I put the strips into the wet field of paint, they relax. It's very conceptual. Everything comes together with the last step. This is not an overlay, that's an inlay; it's inlaid into a field of wet acrylic, and when that happens, you get a strange spatial juxtaposition. For painting, that's a new space. I first saw a glimpse of that space in the '70s, and I've been chasing it ever since. But now I've chased it up to a point where I can force it into a corner.

SI: *Can you tell me about the painting Remote Control, which will be in the show at Alexander Gray?*



JW: That whole surface is poured; it's not a painted surface. It's about five layers. It's like pouring concrete. You build a form, it has to be absolutely level and then you start pouring. Then the paint moves where it wants to. It's contained; in Greek that's what is called *kaloupi*, which means "a parameter, form."

SI: *Are you ever actually applying a brush to the canvas?*

JW: Not so much. Sometimes, if I'm looking for a thin glaze, I might resort to some types of brushes. But to actually sit down and paint with a brush, no. I cut paint, I laminate paint, I grind paint, I freeze paint, I boil paint. I just gave a talk at Yale University and some kids were asking about the process, and I said, "Well, it's like Chinese cooking." You've got to select everything, find the best quality you can, wash it, clean it, cut it to the desired amounts, and you have all these component parts laid out to do a stir-fry. And then there is step one, step two, step three, right? And at the last moment, all these

ingredients come together and the whole thing takes place in four minutes at the most.

SI: *And what are the other 3-D forms that are inlaid into the paint?*

JW: They come from all over. They are made from molds. One is from my orange juice bottle, Simply Orange. My wife and I went to the supermarket and bought a whole shopping cart full of it, \$150 worth of orange juice, when all I was after was the bottles. The computer mouse died yesterday. We had to go to Staples to get a new mouse, and the container it came in—that's a mold. I bought a lot of clams and took the shells and used them as molds. I call this stuff ready-now. Duchamp called his found objects



readymades; I make these and I call them ready-nows. All of these plastics are different. I have to experiment to find a release that will allow me, once the acrylic is set, to be able to pull it out of the mold. My dealer in Antwerp wears a hearing aid. The last time I was in Antwerp, his wife had saved all the containers for his hearing aids and gave them to me. So I brought them back to New York and got a very good painting out of it, which of course I gave to her. The cooking industry is making a lot of nonstick products, and they're fantastic.

SI: *And how do you get the color into the molds?*

JW: I'm mostly using an acrylic medium that is transparent, and the ratio of pigment to the medium is less than 1 percent. It's important that I keep working with the theme of transparency. I wanted it see-through.

SI: *Have you ever worked with oil paint?*

JW: In the 1960s. But when I started being more experimental in the '70s, acrylic was the way to go. Oil paint does not allow you to experiment to this extent. You can't do it.

Jack Whitten
 ABOVE: *Sandbox: For the Children of Sandy Hook Elementary School*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 54 in.

LEFT: *Warped Circle (for Alan Shields)*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 63 x 63 in.

BOTH IMAGES: ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

I'll be waiting for it to dry for months. And now that different manufacturers are coming up with different mediums within the acrylic polymer, the range is incredible.

SI: *You have a house in Crete where you spend the summers. Do you work while you're there?*

JW: I carve wood. I don't paint in the summer much. In wood carving you use chisels, axes, saws, hatchets, grinders; you are cutting, laminating, shaping. It's a very physical process. All of these processes now have gotten into the painting. So the greatest influence on my painting is my wood carving.

SI: *What are those airplane models hanging from the ceiling?*

JW: These are the airplanes the Tuskegee airmen flew. I went to Tuskegee, you know. My first years in college were there, where I was a premed student. What happened was that one particular early morning in our ROTC class, the base colonel was leading the class on weaponry. All I remember is standing up from my seat—now, you wouldn't do that. ROTC in Tuskegee is some serious shit. I stood and

I mumbled, "What the fuck am I doing here?" My buddy grabbed me, but I just repeated it: "What am I doing here?" We were getting ready to take a big test,

Jack Whitten
Crushed Grid,
2013. Acrylic
on canvas,
63 x 103 in.

and I just realized this was not for me. I knew that I had to leave Tuskegee. Before going to Tuskegee, my thing was art and music. Tuskegee didn't have an art program, and I went further south to Baton Rouge. Southern University, they had an art program. State school, segregated. I started studying art and

started off as a campus thing, but then it enlarged into a whole civil rights thing. The local clergy became involved, and people in the community, and we organized a march downtown to the state capital of Baton Rouge, and that turned nasty. That's what forced me out of the South. At Tuskegee a professor

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got involved in the civil rights demonstrations. My class closed down Southern University, shut it down. We organized a march. It started off as a protest against the state because we didn't think that the state was funding our school to the degree that they were funding the white school. This was the first time anyone had protested against it. The damned thing

of architecture had told me about Cooper Union. That it was tuition free. They accepted me for the fall semester. It's a hell of a story because now you know the problems at Cooper Union. They have destroyed their legacy. They fucked up. Now for somebody like myself, with the need that I had, it's no longer an option. It's a pity. **MP**

