

# Whitten



**Jack Whitten: Evolver**

Curated by Richard Klein

April 6 to July 6, 2014

**The Aldrich** Contemporary Art Museum



## Jack Whitten: Evolver

*Jack Whitten: Evolver* is one of a series of exhibitions mounted in connection with The Aldrich's 50th Anniversary that present the recent work of artists who played a significant role during the first decade of the Museum's history. Jack Whitten's career began in the mid-1960s, but it was in 1970 that he first produced work that established the true direction his painting would take over the ensuing forty-three years. *Evolver* focuses on works Whitten created in the past sixteen months—a remarkably productive period—but also includes as a touchstone *Shadows*, a 1971 painting that was in the collection of Larry Aldrich, the Museum's founder. Like a dark mirror, *Shadows* eerily portends Whitten's future evolution while also looking back at history, a condition that has characterized the artist's endeavors to the present day.

Whitten refers to the works from the early 1970s, such as *Shadows*, as his "slab" paintings, denoting thick surfaces that have been raked and leveled in a manner reminiscent of the finishing of concrete. Paint was applied to the canvas in layers, with the final layer being horizontally troweled by a variety of tools—some fashioned by the artist, such as large squeegees; some ready-made like saw blades and afro combs. But the term slab goes beyond a metaphor for the paintings' simple manufacture to point to their nature as grounds (as in the term figure/ground), albeit in this case missing the usual complementary figure. Whitten's formative influence was Abstract Expressionism, but he came of age during both the ascendancy of Minimalism and a period when, to many, painting seemed to have run its course, reaching the dead end posited by artists such as Ad Reinhardt, who created severely reductive "black" paintings in the early 1960s. The slab works were Whitten's response to this situation, where figures have been literally wiped away and subsumed beneath the painting's monolithic surface by one grand gesture. Despite Whitten's efforts at erasure, smudged ghosts of imagery remain, giving the paintings a strange, out-of-focus photographic quality. Both the horizontal format and striations on these paintings' surfaces suggest landscape space, and *Shadows*, in particular, calls to mind a vast, atmospheric ocean reach, including wave-like pentimenti in the foreground. Allusions to the ocean have frequently appeared in Whitten's paintings, and evolved hand in hand with the artist's interest in the history and mythology of the ancient Mediterranean world.

As the 1970s progressed into the 1980s, abstract figures in various forms appeared in Whitten's work and the artist's constant experimentation led to wildly inventive paintings that consistently pushed the boundaries of what was expected of both the painting process and even paint itself. Whitten's work exhibits a profound degree of knowledge about technical developments in the chemistry of paint and pigments and the materiality of paint. This knowledge, however, was



*Shadows*, 1971





gained through the act of painting, not from outside sources. As much as Whitten's work comes out of Abstract Expressionism, his process is quite different, reflecting an approach that mixes intuition, philosophical inquiry, and quasi-scientific experimentation in equal measure.

Whitten describes two different activities as he approaches a new canvas. First, a process of reflection in which an image rises into consciousness. "Painting is a reproduction of a mental pattern," the artist has stated. "I have to see the painting before I start."<sup>1</sup> Whitten, working in this manner, is tapping into the deepest patterns of psychic functioning, a position that echoes certain precepts in archetypal psychology. In trying to locate the "soul" of a new painting, Whitten is thinking of soul in terms of perspective: a reflective viewpoint towards the world, rather than a disembodied spirit or substance. This fluid and open attitude allows for the inclusion of empirical knowledge along with poetic intuition. Or, in the artist's words, "The substance of painting is the difference between being smart and being wise."

The second step in starting a new work is based on responding to the base materiality of paint. Usually, materiality and soul are looked at as polar opposites, but the success of Whitten's work is based in their reconciliation. "The hardest part of what I do," Whitten reflects, "is to find a pigment that will locate a symbol." This statement is almost alchemical in nature, giving paint itself the qualities of soul by bestowing it with a mythical and spiritual dimension. Whitten's interest in finding subject matter in paint is a tradition that the artist feels has been lost. For instance, he has spoken about the use of certain pigments in Medieval and early Renaissance painting—such as Fra Angelico's use of the blue mineral Lapis—based on meaning, not just color. Even as recently as the 1950s and 1960s, Whitten relates, painters including de Kooning, Guston, and Rothko would speak reverentially about the specific qualities of paint, something which seems to have been lost in our increasingly virtual world. As the artist quips, "Matter, it's the *real* shit."





Whitten haunts the specialty painting supply shops of New York, particularly Kremer Pigments in Chelsea, which carries both traditional pigments and newly developed products. For instance, the artist uses a variety of black pigments, from common ones such as ivory black, made from burnt bone, to spinel black, a synthetic version of the semi-precious gemstone that is evenly non-reflective across the entire visible spectrum (it's the pigment that's used on the surface of Stealth Bombers). Typically, the grounds of Whitten's paintings have as many as twelve layers of paint, but they can have as many as twenty-five and often total as much as three-quarters of an inch thick, as evidenced by an inspection of their edges. Whitten has utilized acrylic-based paints exclusively since the 1960s, with acrylic emulsion giving him the ability to not only build up layers relatively quickly, but also cast shapes, which he often embeds in the paintings' surfaces. The acrylic is sometimes straight out of the tube, but more often mixed directly with dry pigments, which gives Whitten the ability to make paint that appears "dry" with a flat, porous, organic-looking surface. This physicality does not come through well in reproduction. For instance, in the painting *Omphalos*, the turbulent and coarse gray ground is made primarily with volcanic pumice in acrylic emulsion (it actually resembles pumice stone), with the coiled linear element in the painting's central motif being a multi-colored "rope" made entirely of acrylic paint that has been embedded in the work's surface. When asked the complex question of how he defines painting, Whitten responds with the simple (and obvious) statement, "Paintings are made of paint."

The subject matter of Whitten's paintings often references the mythology of the ancient Mediterranean. The artist first visited Greece in 1969, and he built a house on Crete in 1984, drawn there by both the landscape and the surrounding sea (Whitten is an avid fisherman<sup>2</sup>). The deep history of the Mediterranean region, however, has had a profound effect on the artist's work as evidenced by his tessellated paintings from the 1990s that resemble ancient mosaics, and the titles of works that often reference Greek history or philosophy. For instance, the painting





*Nine Cosmic CDs: For the Firespitter (Jayne Cortez), 2013*  
Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York

*Omphalos*, which means “navel” in Greek, contains a central figure that resembles a placenta or a flower with a spiraling, umbilical cord-like appendage. According to Greek mythology, Zeus sent two eagles to fly across the surface of the earth, and where their paths eventually crossed defined the omphalos, the center of the world. Looming over Crete and visible from Whitten’s home is Mount Ida, the highest mountain on the island and birthplace of Zeus. Although it is not critical to be aware of these facts in order to appreciate the painting, they do indicate both a linkage with Greek history and a profound sense of time and place. Additionally, Whitten’s use of pumice in the making of the painting suggests violent origins and hints at the cataclysmic disruption of civilization that volcanic eruptions have played in the history of the Classical world.<sup>3</sup>

Whitten’s subject matter often oscillates between the universal and the personal, with frequent references to figures who have influenced the artist’s life. Never literal portraits, these works embody—as abstraction itself does—essential truths about singular individuals, including artists and musicians who have passed away, philosophers, and historians. In speaking about his paintings that are dedicated to specific people, Whitten has said, “This is very important. Part of being human. I grew up with it in the South with the Fundamentalist religion. You would be expected to sit up in church and say it. Testify! So when I dedicate paintings it is my way of acknowledging that certain people existed as a spirit and energy. I take material and present it in a way to say that these spirits are here. This is my job. David Budd, Miles Davis, Norman Lewis, Chris Wilmarth, Romare Bearden, these people existed. I spoke to them, I knew them.”<sup>4</sup> Included in this exhibition are the paintings *Warped Circle (For Alan Shields)* and *Byzantine Quartet (For Stephen Antonakos)*, dedicated to artists who were friends of Whitten and who have recently died (Shields in 2005 and Antonakos in 2013). Both these artists were significant figures in the New York art world beginning in the 1960s, and interestingly both had works in Larry Aldrich’s collection.

The painting *Nine Cosmic CDs: For the Firespitter* (Jayne Cortez) is a tribute to an African-American poet, activist, and spoken-word performance artist who passed away in 2012 and was a friend of Whitten's. Cortez performed with a band named the Firespitters, and Whitten's painted tribute, anchored with a row of cast acrylic CDs, plays as a turbulent discography of Cortez's life and accomplishments. *Nine Cosmic CDs* is an example of a work containing cast acrylic forms, a technique that Whitten has utilized since the mid-1980s. The artist collects blister packs and other disposable plastic objects, such as the bottoms of plastic orange juice bottles, and uses them as molds to cast acrylic paint. Made utilizing a variety of pigments and acrylic mediums, these forms take on a life of their own and usually offer no hint of their former purpose. Besides functioning as abstract elements, the objects frequently have an archeological aura, or, in many cases, a suggestion of primitive life. These metaphorical overtones transform the specific into the universal, emphasizing general abstract qualities apart from the reality of each form's origins in consumer culture.

The title of the painting *Gateway to Time: For George Kubler* references art historian Kubler's influential 1962 book *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*.<sup>5</sup> Kubler's book presented a radical rethinking of historical change in both art and technology, disconnecting objects from temporal fashion and placing them in a larger continuum of humankind's repeated need to answer the big questions that change slowly over time and define major periods in history. Titling is the final act in making a work for Whitten, and although much of a painting's content has resolved itself in his mind before and during the process of painting, the final decision on a title is made when a finished work can be scrutinized over days—and in some cases, weeks. The series of titles that Whitten considered for *Gateway to Time* are glimpses into his process, with possibilities that were considered, then discarded, including (in no particular order) *Open Door*, *The Gift of Time*, *Time Chaser*, and *Coltrane's Wave*. But let us consider the painting itself: situated on a crumpled, diagonally striated ground is a distorted ring that flickers with spectral flashes of color. On close inspection, the ring resolves itself into a three-dimensional object embedded in the ground's surface. The ring alternately floats free of the ground and is subsumed into it—there is a sense that, like a hallucination, the ring might disappear at any moment. The culprit is the crashing force of the ground, "Coltrane's Wave," which suggests the inevitability of erasure. Whereas, in a painting such as *Shadows*, erasure has occurred, in *Gateway to Time* the viewer is actively witnessing a struggle between figure and ground. What remains when time moves forward? When the sea breaks on the shore, what is left behind? The force of evolution is a promise of invention, change, and eventually obsolescence. Whitten, over the course of his career, has harnessed evolution—the will of nature to move forward—to consistently reinvent abstract painting in brilliant and unpredictable ways.

-Richard Klein, Exhibitions Director

Jack Whitten was born in Bessemer, Alabama, in 1939 and lives and works in Queens, New York.

- 1 All quotes by the artist, unless otherwise noted, come from conversations with the author on October 24, 2013, and January 20, 2014.
- 2 Whitten's notion of nature has been expanded by a lifelong interest in fishing, particularly saltwater spear fishing without scuba equipment. See Whitten's fascinating article about hunting and preparing octopus (originally published by the online arts journal artlies.org): [http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www\\_alexandergray.com/Whitten\\_Art\\_Lies\\_Spring\\_2009.pdf](http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_alexandergray.com/Whitten_Art_Lies_Spring_2009.pdf)
- 3 Besides the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD that destroyed Pompeii, the Greek island of Thera was torn apart by a massive volcanic eruption in the second millennium BCE, contributing to the decline of the Minoan civilization. This resulted in the northern coast of Crete being devastated by a massive tsunami, and volcanic ash and pumice from the explosion covering the eastern Mediterranean region.
- 4 Quoted from an interview between the artist and Stuart Horodner in the exhibition catalogue *Jack Whitten* (New York: Horodner Romley Gallery, 1992), p. 9.
- 5 Kubler's book has influenced numerous artists since its publication in 1962, including Ad Reinhardt, Robert Smithson, and John Baldessari. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Shape\\_of\\_Time:\\_Remarks\\_on\\_the\\_History\\_of\\_Things](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Shape_of_Time:_Remarks_on_the_History_of_Things), pg. 8





*Gateway to Time: For George Kubler, 2014*  
Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York

## Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions h x w x d in inches

*Shadows, 1971*  
Acrylic on canvas  
58 x 105  
Collection of the American Republic Insurance  
Company, Des Moines, Iowa

*Byzantine Quartet (For Stephen Antonakos), 2013*  
Acrylic on canvas  
45 x 87

*Cupcakes I, 2013*  
Acrylic on canvas  
28 x 42

*Cupcakes II, 2013*  
Acrylic on canvas  
28 x 42

*Feedback Loops II (The Curse of Ivan Mestrovic), 2013*  
Acrylic on canvas  
63 x 103

*Nine Cosmic CDs: For the Firespitter (Jayne Cortez), 2013*  
Acrylic on canvas  
45 x 137 1/2

*Omphalos, 2013*  
Acrylic on canvas  
64 x 64

*Warped Circle (For Alan Shields), 2013*  
Acrylic on canvas  
63 x 63  
Private collection

*Gateway to Time: For George Kubler, 2014*  
Acrylic on canvas  
64 x 64

All works courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray  
Associates, New York, except where noted

# The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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*Omphalos*, 2013  
Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York



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