

Starr Review

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Saturday, June 13, 2015

Jack Whitten's Black Monoliths: Born in Bessemer

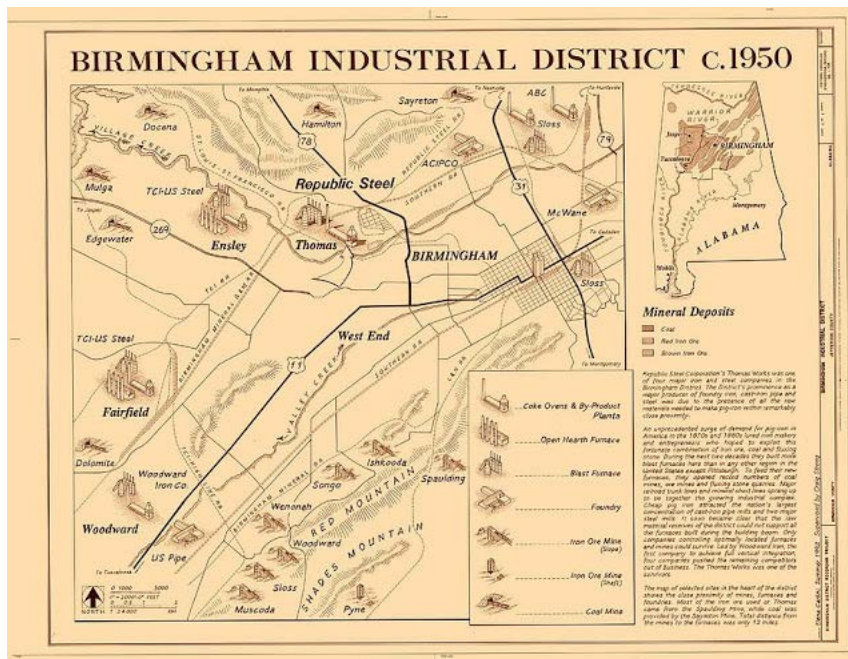


Jack Whitten, *Black Monolith II. Homage to Ralph Ellison The Invisible Man*, 1994, Acrylic, molasses, copper, salt, coal, ash, chocolate, onion, herbs, rust, eggshell, razor blade on canvas, 58 x 52." Brooklyn Museum, William K. Jacobs Fund 2014.65

Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting runs through August 2 at the Wexner Center for the Arts. The show displays fifty works by an artist of outrageous originality and dynamism. So driven by the need to experiment is this man that, were labels withheld, a gallery visitor might reasonably assume this to be a group show of six or seven abstract artists.

While the show, organized by the [Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego](#), refers to Whitten as a *painter*, I think this artist would much more precisely be called a *fabricator* rather than a painter through much of his career. One often sees this impulse in printmakers and sculptors, for whom innovation with processes and materials can be as important as the glimmer of the image down the road. Whitten works with acrylic paint, but he has rarely made works that would be universally identified as "paintings." He has used acrylic in its liquid form not only to carry pigment for making images, but also for its industrial properties: It is elastic; it can be layered and separated; it can be molded or cut; its colors can be blended or separated in sheets. Acrylic is plastic.

I think the direction of Whitten's artistic inquiry has to have been shaped by location. He was born in 1939 and grew up in Bessemer, Alabama, a close western suburb of Birmingham. Heavy industry dominates the whole region, which is known for ore mining, iron smelting, and the manufacture of railroad cars, including Pullman Standards. Bessemer's African-American population has always hovered around 75%. The labor for the city's vast industries was provided by integrated unions. Whitten's father was a coal miner; his mother was a seamstress.



1950 map showing heavy industry in Birmingham, Alabama and suburbs. Bessemer would lie in the lower right area, approximately eight miles from Birmingham.

Whitten's maturity and artistic career have been spent in New York, where he arrived in 1960 during the flowering of the Abstract Expressionist movement. This mid-century milieu is reflected in his work of the period. Whitten worked among the artists of the New York School, particularly with Willem DeKooning, but he apparently maintained an independence from them too, associating himself with other artists of color, and experimenting with his own ideas about abstraction.

Before New York, though, Whitten studied at Tuskegee Institute and then at Southern University in Baton Rouge, where he discovered his vocation for art. His move to New York City had as much to do with his despair over the South's intransigence during the movement for civil rights reform as

with any intention to attend Cooper Union—which in fact he did. Entering the art school at 21 was Whitten's first experience as the lone black in a white environment.

Of the many bodies of work represented in *Five Decades of Painting*, I find myself most fascinated by works begun during the 1990's, the *Black Monoliths* that honor Whitten's African American heroes and friends. As in the *Homage to Ralph Ellison* above, each of these is a mosaic composed of thousands of colored tesserae. Each tile is formed from acrylic paint (and any additives). Since detail is difficult to interpret at such a reduced scale as in these pictures, I point out that the tiles don't contain image, only color.

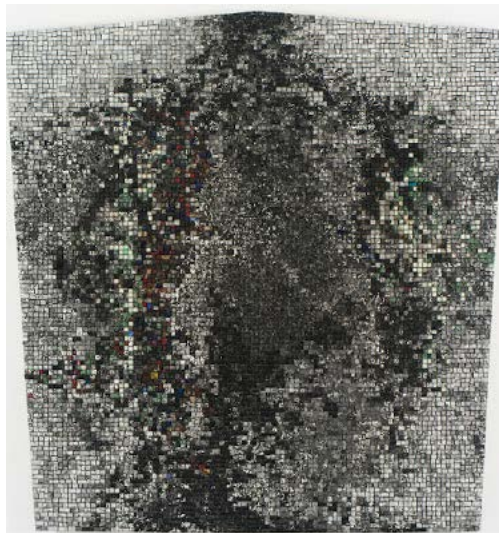


Jack Whitten, *Black Monolith IV For Jacob Lawrence*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 in. (243.8 x 243.8cm). Courtesy the artist, Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp. ©2015 Jack Whitten/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Philipp Scholz Rittermann.

Whitten makes no claim that these are attempts at portraiture, though it's difficult not to attach the idea of likeness to them in at least a rough way. The homage to Ralph Ellison, above, takes the form of an anonymous silhouette, the sort we see when a journalist interviews a person whose identity must be protected in order to maintain their safety. In this work though, the silhouette is nevertheless, in layer upon layer of irony, "the only Black in the room." While he is anonymous because he is faceless, he is unmistakable against the unbroken wall of white and blue, the two colors that provide no prayer of invisibility or protective coloration for a Black man. The homage is to the courageous daily bravery of the visually conspicuous, for whom freedom from invisible individuality remains so tortuous and tragic.

When I encountered *Black Monolith IV For Jacob Lawrence*—breathtaking at eight feet by eight feet, yet every tessera worthy of scrutiny when you're close to it—I first thought I had come upon a remarkable map of Manhattan, glimmering and demarcated against a dark world. But then, there is also a strong resemblance to a capped (*not* hooded) smoking silhouette out of a Philip Guston painting—that ambiguous, vaguely threatening, possibly explosive character. Only after that did I see the title referring to Lawrence. Maybe both of my thoughts have a home in this work?

Lawrence's subject was the common life of African Americans—not always a visually attractive subject, given the poor material and social conditions in which so many lived. The series of painting with which he is perhaps most identified is his *The Migration of the Negro*, which tells the story of rural Blacks moving to the industrial cities of the north. Lawrence lived in New York City most of his life, having spent his earliest years in New Jersey, and moving with this wife to Seattle when he was in his fifties.



Jack Whitten, *Black Monolith III For Barbara Jordan*, 1998, acrylic collage on canvas, 69 x 65 1/2 in. (175.3 x 166.4cm). Mott-Warsh Collection, Flint, Michigan. ©2015 Jack Whitten/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Philipp Scholz Rittermann.



Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro, Panel One*, 1941. Posted in accordance with fair use principles on Wiki Art.

Maybe it is a map of Manhattan, white Manhattan with conspicuous dikes raised against a coal-black sea. As an homage to Lawrence, perhaps Whitten reflects bleakly on African-American migration to cities where they haven't ultimately been integrated or their lives bettered? Where they remain immigrants? The Gustonian, alienated smoker neither sees nor responds. He doesn't wear a hood anymore, but his anonymous indifference testifies to his enduring hostility.

However one interprets the particulars, *Black Monolith IV* strikes me overall as a phenomenal commentary on immigration in the 21st century. It is certainly the most pressing issue of our time as Africans, Middle Easterners, and Central Americans—people of color—risk all to reach Europe and America, whose nations bravely fight the tide and erect walls of all sorts against them.

I love Whitten's *Black Monolith III (For Barbara Jordan)* if only because it's not monolithic. A monolith is not only massive, but it is coherent and unified—which this so conspicuously is not. Whitten has also altered the shape of his support, giving it "shoulders" and sloping its sides inward toward the bottom: like a memorial or gravestone? Like a figure?

The disposition of black and white tiles, while interspersed, nevertheless tends to converge in the suggestion of a torso. This notion is strengthened by the column that rises at the center top, out of the picture like a neck, giving the image the sense of an x-ray. Is that big dark shape a massive heart? This body lacks clear edges, quite unlike the others in the *Monolith* series and, again, contrary to the definition of the word. Perhaps this suggests Jordan's aptitude for politics, that art of compromise, of dancing between black and white to move people together while respecting the rights of those on the edges? The name for monolithic politics is tyranny.



Jack Whitten, *Black Monolith, V Full Circle: For LeRoi Jones A.K.A. Amiri Baraka*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 63 in. (213.4 x 160cm). Collection of Sheldon Inwentash and Lynn Factor, Toronto. ©2015 Jack Whitten/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Philipp Scholz Rittermann.

The experience of *Full Circle: For LeRoi Jones A.K.A. Amiri Baraka* is like looking at the Earth from a space ship, or through a telescope on the moon. The best part about it is that all the life of the universe is encapsulated on our planet, for there are no stars and no hint of any other life in a sky that is impenetrably black. It is a wonder that Whitten could manufacture so black a black as the space that surrounds this globe.

The globe, however, is infinity. By creating intensity at the center with lots of color and small elements, Whitten draws the eye in ever deeper and we eagerly search beyond what we see. Though this caption provided identifies the materials here as "acrylic," it is a great jumble of collaged materials, not all of which are made of acrylic: There are lots of found materials as well, colorful, hard scraps of life.

In this there is almost no contrast between black and white. The edge is between blank black and black that is filled with color: with idea, life, and, above all, the representation of deep time. Here's an image of the history of the world in Baraka's color—all of his colors: the colors of thought, idea, travels, loves. This is also a mirror, it seems, for any viewer. You look at it less than you look *into* it. As you do, it's impossible not to *want* to find something, to see what you relate to, to pick out your place. In the other *Monoliths*, there are boundaries to consider and we are asked to deal with their significances for us. This one is different. The boundary is the ends of the earth and we cannot but fall in.

Viewing Whitten's *Black Monoliths*, I continue to be nagged by the memory of another artist from Bessemer, the wonderful self-taught artist, [Thornton Dial](#).

Dial was born in 1928 (Whitten in '39) and work in the fields before he moved to the city where he was a metal worker, in the Pullman factory particularly. Much of his art is sculpture made from re-purposed found materials, from tin cans to mattress springs.

I think that there is a kinship between Whitten and Dial in that they share a deep central aesthetic of fabrication born in Black, industrial Bessemer. Dial was a manual laborer; Whitten was not. But I believe that Whitten's youth in a city that was all about manufacture, mining, and callous-producing labor affected his outlook as a visual artist. Five Decades of Fabrication?

Posted by STARR REVIEW at [9:53 AM](#)

Labels: [abstraction](#), [African-American artists](#), [Jack Whitten](#), [Thornton Dial](#), [Wexner Center for the Arts](#)