



MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART
SAN DIEGO

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**MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART SAN DIEGO (MCASD)
PRESENTS *JACK WHITTEN: FIVE DECADES OF PAINTING* AT
MCASD LA JOLLA ON SEPTEMBER 20, 2014**

Exhibition is premiere showing of artist's major traveling retrospective

San Diego, CA— On Saturday, September 20, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MCASD) will present *Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting* at its La Jolla location. The exhibition will remain on view through January 4, 2015.

Featuring 60 canvases from the 1960s to present, this will be the premiere installation of the largest traveling, full-career retrospective exhibition of this consistently active artist. For 50 years, Jack Whitten has explored the possibilities of paint, the role of the artist, and the allure of material essence in his innovative studio process. With compositions that are abstract and elegiac, Whitten operates with both discipline and intuition. Whitten foregrounds material properties of paint—pigmentation, viscosity, and mark—to capture the momentary and suggest the enduring. Whitten exploits the potential of acrylic paint to convey immediacy and historicity.

Born in Bessemer, Alabama in 1939, Jack Whitten attended the Tuskegee Institute before transferring to Southern University. While initially studying medicine, he was compelled to switch direction and pursue the visual arts. An active participant in the civil rights movement, Whitten met Martin Luther King and adopted his call for peaceful protests. Ultimately the incivility Whitten encountered during such protests caused the artist to abruptly leave the South, moving to New York City. There he enrolled in Cooper Union and discovered an embracing art scene. Whitten moved freely between communities of racially-identified artists and those associated with the New York School whom he met at the Cedar Bar, even as he pursued his own language of abstraction.

Current scholarship often describes Whitten working through the gestural influences of Abstract Expressionism before achieving creative maturity in the mid-1970s. This show will debut a series of small black-and-white “ghost” paintings from 1964 that reveal the artist working “without the wrist” almost a decade before his noted abstractions of the 1970s. These early wet-on-wet paintings are, in fact, followed by an interlude of gestural works, Whitten’s “garden” series, which may be seen as a digression from the material-based experimentations to which he returns in the 1970s.

Throughout the 1970s, Whitten emphasizes formal innovation and devises tools to help him produce his effects—long-handled squeegees, rakes, and serrated combs. As his figurative references fade, his intent to realize the total picture plane in a single gesture ascends. Works from the period will include test slabs and drag canvases, which were featured in Whitten’s 1974 one-person exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

For more than three decades, Whitten has spent a portion of each year on the Greek island of Crete. He often breaks down words to their Greek etymology and, in the late 1970s, used the Greek alphabet as an ordering system for his optical canvases. In these primarily black-and-white works, Whitten subtly introduces color by rubbing pure powdered pastel into the wet acrylic.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Whitten amplifies his plastic treatment of the acrylic paint by working directly with Aquatec staff and introducing acrylic emulsions such as Rhoplex. Collage, an admitted influence of Romare Bearden, manifests itself in Whitten’s tessellated constructions, wherein he creates paint tiles and then adheres them to the canvas: he breaks down the paint to remake the painting. In these decades Whitten also develops overall textures and patterns with imprints of screens, grates, and other materials. As the century turns, Whitten’s ordering devices reference new technologies for tracking and cataloguing—bar codes and apps—the geometry of the information age. From his first spectral canvases, as a graphic trace of a haunted soul, to his recent *App For Obama*, a key for complex, contemporary life, Whitten’s poetic and physical compositions capture what is remembered and what is next.

This major survey will be followed by a national tour including presentations at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (May 15-August 2, 2015) and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota (September 12, 2015-January 26, 2016). The retrospective will be accompanied by a richly illustrated publication including a lead essay by exhibition curator Kathryn Kanjo, an in-depth artist interview conducted by art historian Robert Storr, and new writing by poet Quincy Troupe.

For interviews with Jack Whitten and high resolution imagery, please contact Communications & Marketing Manager Leah Straub, or Communications Associate Patricia B. Dwyer.

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MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART SAN DIEGO

Founded in 1941, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MCASD) is the preeminent contemporary visual arts institution in San Diego County. The Museum's collection includes more than 4,500 works of art created since 1950. In addition to presenting exhibitions by international contemporary artists, the Museum serves thousands of children and adults annually at its varied education programs, and offers a rich program of film, performance, and lectures. MCASD is a private, nonprofit organization, with 501c3 tax-exempt status; it is supported by generous contributions and grants from MCASD Members and other individuals, corporations, foundations, and government agencies. Hugh M. Davies is The David C. Copley Director and CEO at MCASD.

Institutional support for MCASD is provided by the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture.

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