



JACK WHITTEN

Museum of Contemporary Art
San Diego

I once saw a lecture by a gay male artist who did not make work about being a gay male artist. During the Q&A, he was asked to describe his videos in regard to his sexuality. He refused to answer, deeming the idea irrelevant and archaic. But, the asker persisted: wasn't all art, in some sense, identity art? This uneasy exchange darted through my mind as I moved through this sensational Jack Whitten retrospective. How to account for 50 years of abstract paintings made by a black man who grew up in an Alabama steel-mining town under Jim Crow laws and was, in his 20s, an active participant in the civil rights movement? How to avoid pigeonholing a person who refuses the term 'black artist' but in no way avoids discussing how race has imprinted his personal relationships, political life and studio practice? These questions are made richly complicated by Whitten's work.

The many paintings in this show were neatly organized by decade. Whitten's earliest works, which date from the mid-to-late 1960s, have something of a figurative vocabulary. In his 1964 series 'Heads', pale and ghostly shapes float in fields of dusky black. Despite being made using acrylic paint, the canvases appear like rubbings, impressions or erasures of some kind. One of the six heads is titled *Head IV Lynching*, pre-figuring a strategy Whitten was to put in place in the coming decades: to pointedly name a single piece within a larger series. Other notable works from this era include *The Blacks* (1964), a sparser painting that has the unlikely effect of looking like a Romare Bearden and Marc Chagall collaboration, and a collection of large, brightly coloured and explosive paintings recalling the gestural mania of William de Kooning, whom Whitten knew and admired as a young man in New York. These early works are ambitious and intriguing, though mostly because they demonstrate Whitten's willingness to experiment and point us toward what's in store.

Whitten's canvases from the 1970s shift to total abstraction and possess sophisticated restraint. Each has a more distinct palette (muted reds, yellows and greens, stark black and white), size (consistently in the 1.2 x 1.8 metre range) and style (fine vertical and horizontal sweeps). Not coincidentally, 1970 was the year that Whitten received a grant from Xerox Corporation along with three other artists, Steve Antonakos, Bob Whitman and Agnes Denes. His resulting paintings describe mechanical process together with human intervention and error. In one body of work from this period, Whitten used a giant squeegee to create a blurred pull across a layered canvas (comparisons with Gerhard Richter's squeegee paintings a decade later are unavoidable; it's hard to imagine that Whitten's series were unknown to the German artist). For another series from this period, Whitten created a large 'rake' to drag across his works, an idea that arrived after he traced his afro pick through wet

paint, forming long tracks in the composition. To further complicate this method, Whitten placed objects beneath the canvas and along the instrument's path. In works like *Delta Group II* and *Sphinx Alley III* (both 1975), string, wire, pebbles and pieces of cardboard subtly upset the otherwise even grooves. The effect is not unlike a raised scar. Elegant at a distance and blunt from up close, these series of paintings are among Whitten's finest works.

The works from the 1980s have a funk assemblage aesthetic. They are filled with *stuff*: plastic bags, bubble wrap, pieces of other things. Here, Whitten seems less taken with gliding across a surface and more interested in piling weight upon it. The effect is dizzying, as if looking down on a thing rather than across it. It's the tar of a city-sidewalk or, perhaps, the tar of a whole city. The later paintings are the largest – around 1.8 x 2.2 metres – and see a return to rich colour. Whitten experiments with a kind of painting-based mosaic style in these works that resembles quilting, low-resolution pixels and urban topography all at once.

While it is hard to measure the degree to which we should read these abstract works through questions of identity, it is worth noting that the majority of Whitten's paintings are named in dedication to black artists of the last century. Musicians such as Miles Davis, Lena Horne and Bobby Short, artists Romere Bearden, Al Loving and Norman Lewis, and writers and poets including Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez and Ralph Ellison all appear in titles. By attempting to read the agenda of his work through its narrative content, we may miss the larger picture: that the making of creative work can *itself* be political action. (We'd do well to consider other black abstractionists such as Sam Gilliam, Alma Thomas and William T. Williams in this light.) Robin D.G. Kelley alludes to this idea in his book *The Lonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*. (Monk is another artist to whom Whitten makes tribute, and used to watch play on the Bowery.) The making of visual art, like music, can be a terrific means through which to confront and refigure the world.

CARMEN WINANT

1
Jack Whitten
Chinese Sincerity, 1974, acrylic
on canvas, 1.7 x 1 m

2
Jack Whitten
*Black Monolith, II: Homage
To Ralph Ellison The Invisible Man*,
1994, acrylic, molasses, copper,
salt, coal, ash, chocolate and
eggshell on canvas, 1.5 x 1.3 m

3
Ana Andrade
'Nongos' (detail), digital
photograph, 2013

4
Louis Hock
'Nightscope Series' (detail),
2000-03, digital pigment
print, 43 x 60 cm