

Process, Image and Elegy

A number of exhibitions have lately turned the spotlight on Jack Whitten, whose 40-year career is a vital link between Ab-Ex painterliness and a more contemporary engagement with unorthodox processes and Internet inspirations.

BY SAUL OSTROW



Jack Whitten: New York Battleground, 1967, oil on canvas, 60 by 83 7/8 inches. All photos this article courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Jack Whitten's paintings have been shown regularly since the late 1960s. He was recognized with both a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1974) and a 10-year retrospective at the Studio Museum in Harlem (1983). Yet Whitten remains an overlooked and only narrowly appreciated artist. I believe this is because his works tend to appear tangential to the dominant themes of their day, and only in hindsight does their pertinence come to be recognized. Now that the '70s are being reevaluated by historians, dealers, collectors, curators and younger artists—all searching for overlooked practitioners and alternative practices that do not neatly fit into the post-1945 modernist paradigm—Whitten's art has attracted fresh attention.

"Memorial Paintings," an exhibition curated by Stuart Horodner at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, will examine how the theme of remembrance courses through Whitten's oeuvre regardless of changes in his process, esthetic and imagery. This will be the first major consideration of Whitten's work to take place in the South.

Born in 1939 and raised in Bessemer, Ala., Whitten grew up in the Old South of the '40s and '50s, and attended the Tuskegee Institute (now University), with the intention of becoming an Army doctor. His decision to be an artist arose from an epiphany of self-awareness and was an act of resistance to a social order intent on narrowly defining what he was and could be. Whitten went on to study art at Southern University in Baton Rouge. In

His work was included in two recent group shows that epitomize the revisionist current. "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975" [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '07], a (still) touring exhibition curated by Katy Siegel for Independent Curators International, surveys the less easily categorized work that was overshadowed by the critical clash between Minimalism and post-painterly abstraction. "Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction, 1964-1980," curated for New York's Studio Museum in Harlem by Kellie Jones, brought together the work of 15 black artists who produced abstract art rather than the ethnocentric and politically engaged work advocated by the Black Arts Movement.¹ Three solo exhibitions, two in the fall of '07 and another opening next month, address different aspects of Whitten's 40-year career. A small sampling of his early figurative expressionist paintings from 1964-68, plus one monumental piece from 2006, were on view in New York at P.S.1, while Alexander Gray Associates showed representative works from the '70s as well as a group of recent paintings. The forthcoming



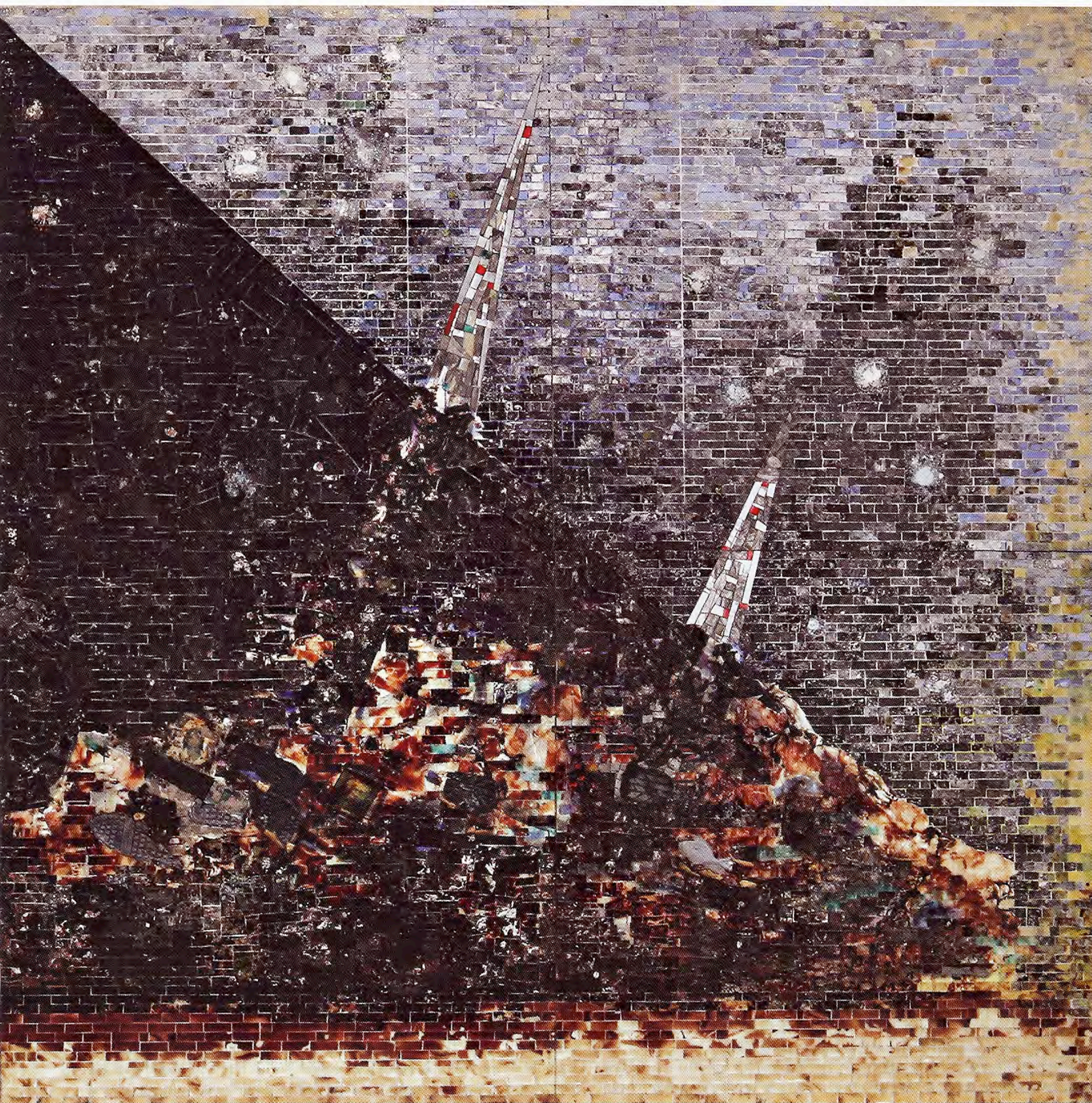
U.S.A. Oracle, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 84 by 72 inches.



9.11.01, 2006, mixed mediums on canvas, 120 by 240 inches.

1959, inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitten participated in a major civil rights campaign, which first forced the university to close down and then expanded into a protest march through Baton Rouge to the State Capitol Building. The anger, hatred and violence that met this march so horrified Whitten that he realized he could no longer live in the South. In 1960 he left for New York to further his studies at Cooper Union, where he received his BFA in 1964.

The early 1960s were a good time to be a young artist in New York. Less preoccupied with money and fashion than today, the art world then was open to all comers, its social life revolving around gatherings at bars, studio parties and gallery openings. The Artists' Club, though no longer the central hub, continued to meet regularly in a loft over Rosenthal's Art Supply on 4th Avenue, and one could still go there to hear lively discussions on contemporary art and encounter veteran artists. As



for the spectrum of political opinion, it ranged from the anarchist views of Barnett Newman and the progressive liberalism of Robert Motherwell to the hard-line communist views still held by some. Though divided by cliques, this art world was small, intimate and supplied young artists with not only a sense of community but access as well.

In this milieu, Whitten came to know not only significant African-American artists such as Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis and Bob

Thompson, but also Willem de Kooning, who would play a crucial role in the younger painter's stylistic development—a paradox, since one driving ambition for artists of Whitten's generation was to define their own esthetic and declare their independence from the mythic figures associated with Abstract Expressionism. The options included post-painterly abstraction, Minimalism, Pop, and the nonexpressionist approaches of individual artists such as Ron Gorchov, Ralph Humphrey and Anne



Chinese Sincerity, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 67½ by 40 inches.

Truitt, whose work occupied the gap between Greenberg's process-oriented formalism and Minimalism's reductive industrial esthetic. What these approaches to painting (and art-making in general) shared was a sense of material literalism derived from Abstract Expressionism. In Whitten's case, the transition from figurative expressionism in the '60s to abstraction in the '70s reflects an internalization of these debates as well as his own highly personal, nonpartisan determination to use aspects of differing perspectives to continue to give expression to his feelings.

Whitten's figurative work addressed the issue of his identity as a black artist as well the broader themes of race and the war in Vietnam. These subjects are manifest in the near surreal, expressionistic figuration of the "Martin Luther King" series, which was shown at P.S.1. Not a preconceived cycle of paintings, these works evidence Whitten's struggle to establish his own esthetic and to reconcile the creative life of the artist with the political turmoil around him.

The earliest work at P.S.1, *Look Mom, Look, See the Funny People* (1964), has a surface that is opaque and hard, unlike the later paintings in the series. A dark band bearing the painting's title occupies the upper half of the composition; below that lies a pastel blue and "fleshy" pink plane populated by a jostling crowd of clearly delineated person-

ages. These figures, which combine animal and human characteristics and have masklike heads, are drawn in a near comic style that combines references to Arshile Gorky and early Jackson Pollock with a bit of the world of the animator Max Fleischer, who gave us Betty Boop and Coco the Clown. The somewhat later *New York Battleground* (1967) consists of a Roberto Mattaesque abstract landscape in which small knots of gestural marks form what might be regarded as insectlike winged demons preparing to attack a triangular pink and red mountainous form composed of violent brushwork.

The rest of the paintings of the "Martin Luther King" series—*Conversation Piece*, *Guardian of the Field II*, *King's Wish (Martin Luther's Dream)*, *Martin Luther King's Garden*, *U.S.A. Oracle*, *The Assassination of Martin Luther King* (all 1968)—are meditations on the life of the civil rights leader that combine topical subjects with raucous colors and a density of gesture. Abstract, landscapelike spaces are inhabited by disembodied heads (some are portraits, others imaginary faces) and lurid figures that bleed into one another as if painted with a sense of urgency. The hallucinatory, almost psychedelic (remember, it was the '60s) quality of these paintings is reminiscent of Pavel Tchelitchew's *Hide-and-Seek* (one of the most popular paintings hanging at the Museum of Modern Art during this period). Whitten has been plainly influenced, too, by the quasi-abstract figuration of the influential group of artists in the 1950s that included Jan Müller, Robert Goodnough, Lester Johnson, Larry Rivers, Robert Beauchamp, George McNeil and Bob Thompson.² These painters had absorbed from Abstract Expressionism in general, and from de Kooning in particular, a reverence for loaded brushwork, gesture and color, which they used to explore the expressive possibilities inherent in retaining references to the figure.

By the end of the 1960s, Whitten was turning away from expressionism, replacing the figurative and landscape references with a loose geometry. These new unstretched paintings, exhibited in 1972 at Allan Stone Gallery, reflect Whitten's continued commitment to Abstract Expressionism's concern for incident and material. But Whitten did decide to move beyond de Kooning's influence by abandoning the individual gestural marks that had become relatively habitual. To create a greater range of effects, Whitten began using Afro combs, carpentry saws and two-by-fours, eventually devising his own tools with wood, rubber, notched sheet metal, brass rods and Plexiglas. He built a platform with rails to guide the sometimes oversize implements. Standing at one end of the apparatus, he could spread massive quantities of poured acrylic paint across his canvases with a single push or pull.

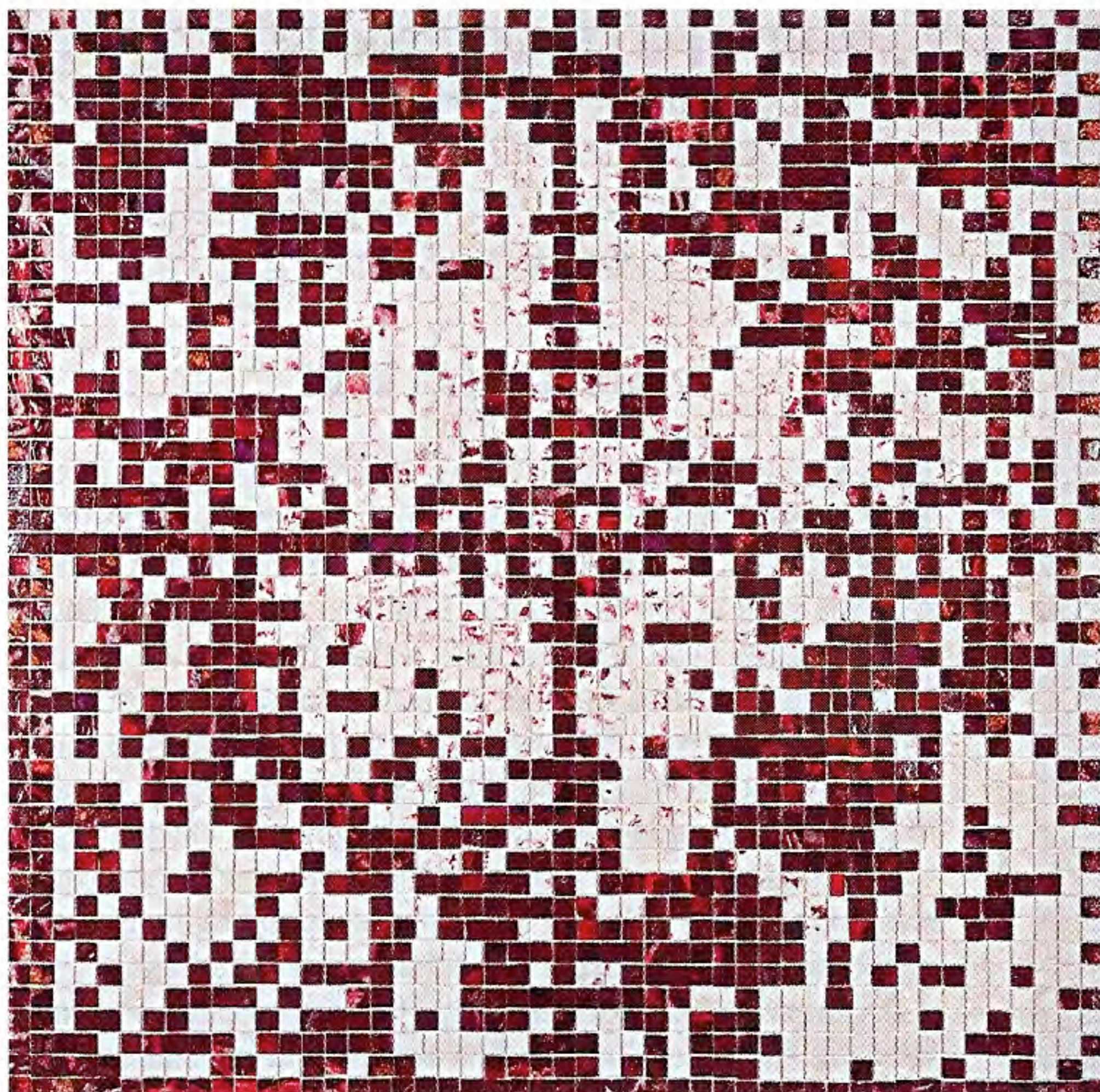
These process-oriented works, which emphasize the sensual, physical quality of paint as opposed to the artist's touch, were exemplified in the Alexander Gray exhibition by *Chinese Sincerity* (1975), a vertical painting with a horizontally streaked ground of rusty oranges, muddy blues and mauves that is interrupted by a broken vertical line on the left, a wavering white line across the bottom and a blurry irregular form of yellow ochre extending down from the top edge. The painting stresses that the picture plane has been created by means of a single gesture or pull. At the time, this painting would have been understood as addressing both Color Field painting (the concern with hue and stain of artists like Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Ronnie Landfield) and the literal postminimalism of David Diao, Dan Christensen, Mary Heilmann and David Reed. In retrospect, Whitten's transformation of gesture into a semi-mechanized act that yielded a blurry image anticipates Gerhard Richter's squeegeed abstractions of the 1980s.

By the end of the '70s, while maintaining his commitment to painterly incident, Whitten began to make works that are simpler and more austere in effect, using very thin paint and a palette of black, white and gray. *Rho 1* (1977), shown at Alexander Gray, presents a scarred-looking surface of horizontal and vertical lines that are blurry, ghostly, as if objects had been placed beneath the canvas during painting. The image

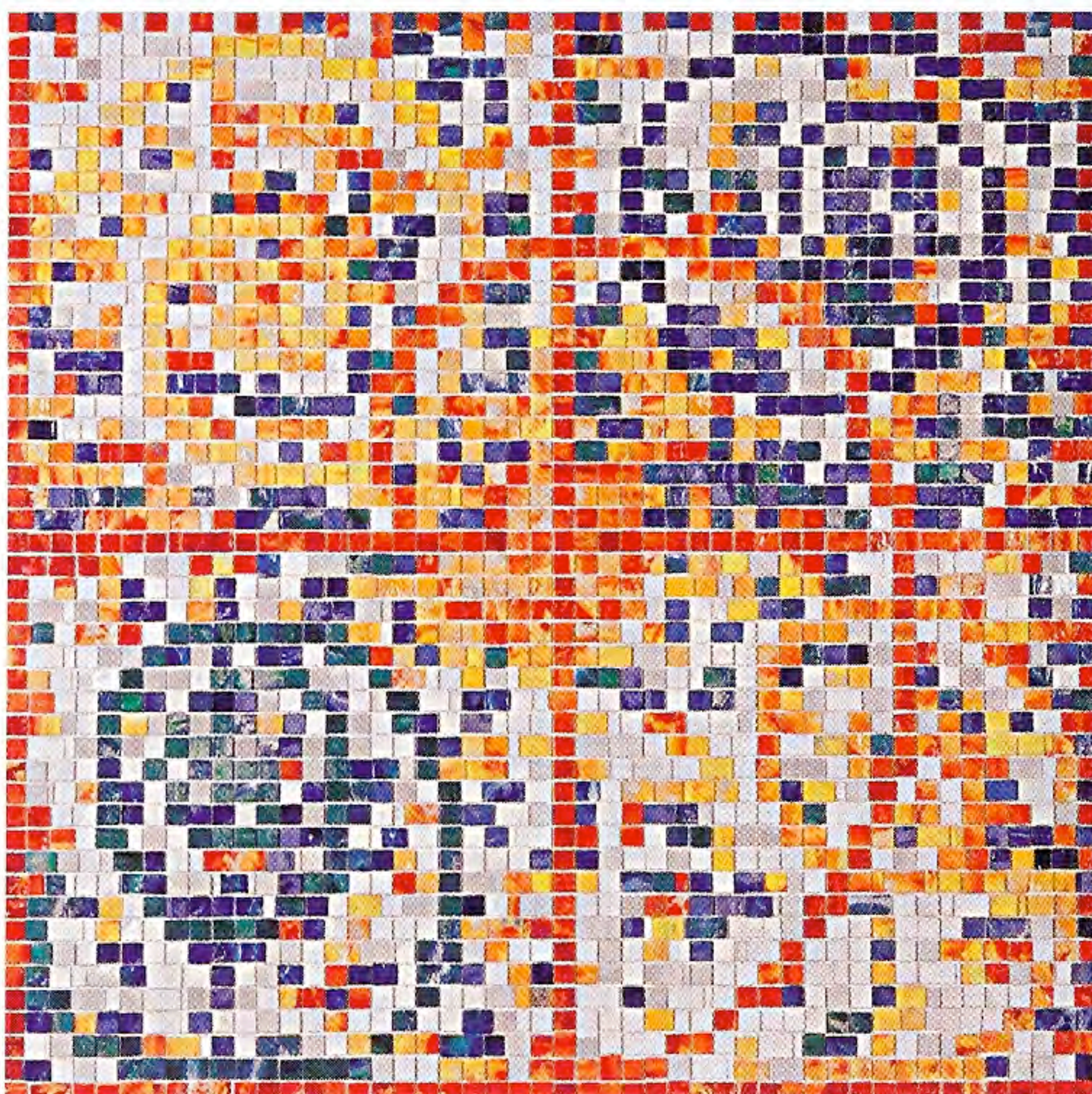
suggests black-and-white television static or the remnants of a composition that has been defaced by a belt sander. Nevertheless, as light rakes across the finely ridged surface, the paint shimmers.

In an interview with Robert Storr for the *Brooklyn Rail*, Whitten described his turn to nonobjective painting as “a way of trying to make sense of things.”³ Focusing on form was a means of absorbing and coping with the political and social tensions of the '60s and '70s, even as this pursuit was viewed by some as being inherently Eurocentric and formal-

E-Stamp III (Red Velvet: For Marcia Tucker), 2007, acrylic on canvas, 48 inches square.



E-Stamp IV (Five Spirals: For Al Loving), 2007, acrylic on canvas, 48 inches square.



Opting to derive compositions rather than invent them, Whitten uses the grids, spirals and perforations of e-stamps in his memorial paintings.

ist, and its black practitioners in denial of their identity and responsibilities. Notwithstanding the disapproval of those engaged in identity politics, Whitten proceeded to reduce his paintings further, to black and white fields of thinly streaked lines marked by phantom fragments of geometry. Then, in the 1980s, he abandoned the direct process that had allowed him to sustain the unified, nonhierarchical field of Abstract Expressionism along with a measure of its spontaneity. The new direction emphasized the potential of painting as a physical surface.

To create what he calls the “skin” paintings, Whitten used acrylic paints and plaster compounds to “cast” the topographies of found materials laid out on a table. The continuous textured skin that results is affixed to canvas. Returning to an earlier title for the deeply tactile *U.S.A. Oracle* (1986) at Alexander Gray, Whitten used the imprints of screens, meshes and metal grates, along with gestural marks, to create a silvery gray monochrome skin of fractured grids. The chaotic jumble of textures recalls the *brut* surfaces of the early works of Jean Dubuffet, Antoni Tàpies, Leon Golub and Eduardo Paolozzi.

Though the rugged skin paintings may seem visually and esthetically removed from the graphic refinement of Whitten’s late '70s works, they are recognizable as both a conceptual and practical extension of his understanding of painting as the by-product of a given act or set of procedures. This notion of painting-as-residue perpetuates something of Harold Rosenberg’s characterization of Abstract Expressionism as “action” painting. On the other hand, Whitten’s concept of a painting as a physical object—rather than a painted image—anticipates the work of such younger artists as Fabian Marcaccio, Mark Bradford and Ingrid Calame.

Whitten’s pattern of near-decadal shifts between directness and mediation in his approach to process and materials continued in the 1990s, when he began to create mosaic paintings. Acrylic paint was mixed with assorted materials (coffee, blue-green copper, silvery tinfoil, strands of hair) and formed into sheets that were cut into regular little tilelike bits and assembled in gridded compositions on canvas. Since then, the intellectual play of Whitten’s work has centered on the way he fragments painterly abstraction into incremental, pixel-like units, while continuing to literalize process and the grid.

Despite his continued preoccupation with such formal issues, Whitten’s subject has never been restricted to painting itself. In every period of his career, Whitten has dedicated paintings to the memories of recently deceased friends and acquaintances (Romare Bearden, Miles Davis, Henry Geldzahler, James Baldwin, Clement Greenberg) and other admired or mourned individuals. The earliest of these elegy paintings (Whitten also uses the terms “homage,” “remembrance” and “commemoration”) was for Whitten’s older brother Tommy, a jazz musician who was killed in a fire in 1965. He also dedicated paintings to John and Robert Kennedy, the children killed in the Birmingham church bombing and Nat King Cole. (All of these were destroyed in a studio fire in 1968.)

Certain of Whitten’s memorial paintings have been prompted by such tragic events as the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle and the Sept. 11 attacks. The mural-size 2006 work called *9.11.01* (included in the P.S.1 exhibition) features the pyramid shape from the U.S. dollar bill, its triangular side meant to symbolize, according to the press release, the unholy trinity of “blood, money and oil.” The paint incorporates a

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wide range of materials—silica, crushed bone, blood, urethane, mica, rust, ash, Mylar—and is combined with casts of tire tracks, sneaker soles and the iron bars used to hold down newspapers at newsstands. Usually, only the titles distinguish the paintings intended as elegies from others done in the same style. Consequently, *9.11.01* is rare insofar as its imagery is referential. (Others include *Yankee Clipper: For Joe Di Maggio*, 1999, with its vertical pinstripes, and *Flying High: For Betty Carter*, 1998, which includes a suggestion of an aerial map.)

The Alexander Gray exhibition gathered five recent memorial paintings, all 48 inches square, their mosaiclike compositions derived from the grids, spirals and perforated edges of e-stamps.⁴ This use of a readymade compositional device dates back to the 1990s, when Whitten sought to derive his compositions rather than invent them. Some paintings were organized according to the forms of individual kernels of popcorn, random arrangements of buttons or fragmentary shapes from maps. The mosaic memorials include the colorful *E-Stamp IV (Five Spirals: For Al Loving)*, 2007, along with the darkly somber *E-Stamp II (The Black Butterfly: For Bobby Short)*, 2007. In each case, Whitten has chosen a palette and design that best conjures up for him some sense of the achievements, ideas or spirit of the person memorialized. Communicating these subjective and hermetic specifics is not part of his intention. As has



Martin Luther King's Garden, 1968, oil on canvas, 51 5/8 by 41 1/2 inches.

been true of his art for some 40 years, the relationship between form and content is ultimately an exploration and expression of Whitten's own psychological and spiritual reality. □

1. Some of the major critics and artists associated with the Black Arts Movement (BAM) are LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Nikki Giovanni, Harold Cruse, Ray Durem, Adrienne Kennedy, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez. *The Black Aesthetic*, by Addison Gayle, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1971, offers a useful account of the principal perspectives within this important movement. *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, eds., Piscataway, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 2006, provides more contemporary assessments.

2. A significant sampling of these painters' works was last seen in New York in 1988, when the Grey Art Gallery presented "The Figurative Fifties: New York Figurative Expressionism." Curated by Judith Stein and Paul Schimmel, the exhibition was meant to rectify the lingering impression that New York's avant-garde painters eschewed the figure in the 1950s, while also refuting the notion that artists who painted the figure after the advent of Abstract Expressionism produced work that was inferior for doing so. The late 1980s was an opportune moment for this argument, for it was just at this time that Neo-Expressionism and the new figuration had come to dominate contemporary painting.

3. Archived at <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2007/09/art/whitten>.

4. E-stamps are postage that can be downloaded from the Internet and printed directly onto an envelope by using special software and a standard printer.

Jack Whitten's work was on view at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center [May 24-Oct. 15, 2007] and Alexander Gray Associates [Sept. 13-Oct. 20, 2007], both in New York City. "Memorial Paintings" will appear at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center [Apr. 18-June 14].

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