

VIVIEN RHYNOR

NEW YORK TIMES

10 FEB 84

Cézanne (because of his own arrogance, it is said), he might have learned from him that art is not something accomplished on the run.

Also of interest this week:

Jack Whitten (Studio Museum, 144 West 125th Street): As a student at Tuskegee University in the late 1950's, Jack Whitten was heading toward a career in medicine. Then, at age 20, he reverted to the art he had taken classes in as an adolescent, and it's been art ever since — teaching it (at the School of Visual Arts, among others) and producing it, most notably for a 1974 solo at the Whitney Museum and most recently for his 1978 appearance at the Miller Gallery. In the catalogue to this display, which was organized by Henry Geldzahler, Mr. Whitten states, "Abstract Expressionism was my academy, nothing else," and on a wall label he writes of a need to "balance the effects of technology" and of using his art "as a belief system."

This is all very well, but the 50 or more canvases and works on paper spanning 1970 to 1980 speak plainly of science — through imagery that is often geometric and that in some late examples implies outer darkness and the instruments used to plumb it, and through exceedingly complicated techniques. Early in the 70's, the artist, using a medley of tools, including a saw, combs, squeegees et al., produced surfaces like corduroy. Contrived though they are, their consistently horizontal grain recalls the abstractions based on landscape by Edward Clark, while the ridges are reminiscent of Sam Gilliam's style. A recent development is an allover mesh design, generally dark, which screens washes of delicate pastel hues. No matter if it's acrylic on canvas or pastel and Xerox toner on paper, Mr. Whitten will settle for nothing less than technical perfection. And, as hung in the museum's pristine new premises, the results are

beautiful but not a little intimidating. (Through March 18.)

Richard Merkin (Dintenfass, 50 West 57th Street): Richard Merkin also intimidates, but in a vastly different way from Mr. Whitten. His art insists on viewers being as hip to the 1920's and 30's as he is, and if perchance they don't know that the word "Legs" in a picture refers to the legendary Legs Diamond, don't care that one John O'Connell Jr. was ransomed for \$40,000 by his powerful Democratic Party family and relish neither baseball esoterica nor the thought of S. J. Perelman burnoosed in Morocco, so much the worse for them. An intellectual as well as a sartorial dandy, Mr. Merkin rarely explains. Even so, you can muddle through this sizable show of scenes in pastel and oil quite enjoyably. The colors get a bit icky at times, but they are redeemed to some extent by a wiry black line and an attack related to that pioneered by the equally irrepressible William Copley. (Through March 1.)