

## In the abstract: 50 years of Jack Whitten's art

Tracy Mumford · Sep 11, 2015



Jack Whitten, *Apps for Obama*, 2011, acrylic on hollow core door, 84 x 91 in. *Courtesy of Walker Art Center*

### **LISTEN Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting**

14min 20sec ([http://www.mprnews.org/listen?name=/minnesota/podcasts/tom-weber/2015/09/1120150911\\_whitten\\_20150911\\_64.mp3](http://www.mprnews.org/listen?name=/minnesota/podcasts/tom-weber/2015/09/1120150911_whitten_20150911_64.mp3))



Jack Whitten in the studio, 1970s *Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates*

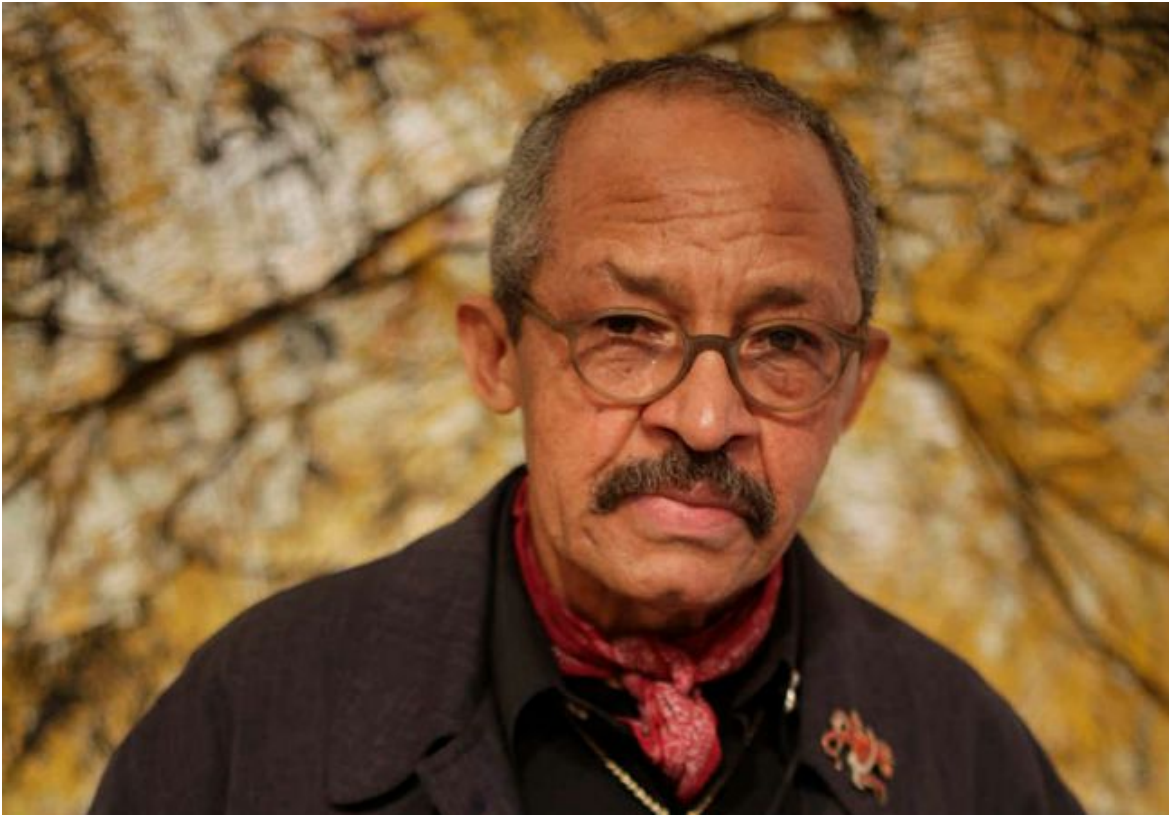
Jack Whitten has been painting for over 50 years — but his life was once set to go in a very different direction.

Born in 1939 in Bessmer, Ala., Whitten grew up in the segregated South.

"Coming out of high school from a poor family," he said, "I was not encouraged to go into the arts because of the practical notion that you can't make a living at it."

He enrolled at the Tuskegee Institute as a pre-med student instead and joined the ROTC. His life plan seemed obvious: become a doctor, join the Air Force, be an officer. "That was a guaranteed living — if you don't get killed in the process."

But after two years of studying at Tuskegee, he had a revelation. He stood up in the middle of his ROTC class, breaking rank, and said: "What am I doing here?" (He admits his actual exclamation may have been more colorful than that.)



Whitten in 2013 *Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates*

He left Tuskegee and enrolled as an art student in Baton Rouge, La. That was the beginning of his long and accomplished career as an abstract artist. He went on not only to make a living — but to make an impact.

This Sunday, the "[Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting](http://www.walkerart.org/calendar/2015/jack-whitten-five-decades-painting)" (<http://www.walkerart.org/calendar/2015/jack-whitten-five-decades-painting>) exhibit will open at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Whitten joined [MPR News' Tom Weber](http://www.mprnews.org/topic/tom-weber) (<http://www.mprnews.org/topic/tom-weber>) to discuss his career and his newest painting, *The Soul Map*.

He completed *The Soul Map* last spring. The painting is two panels, and it marks his first attempts to explore the depths of his soul through painting and art.

"It occurred to me; we have mapped everything. We have Google that has mapped the whole planet; we're mapping the cosmos," he said. "The only damn thing that hasn't been mapped is the soul."

As for whether viewers will "understand" the painting, Whitten is accustomed to answering confused questions about his abstract works. People frequently come up to him at shows and ask for help interpreting his paintings. Working in the abstract means there is no one correct interpretation.

"Any abstract painter would agree with me," Whitten said. "We have our notions of concept, our notions of meaning, but we know that we're dealing with the public — different individuals with different sensibilities — and people are going to bring their own understanding."

The retrospective of his work opens Sunday at the Walker and runs through Jan. 24, 2016.



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 in. *Courtesy of Walker Art Center*