

Press Release

Jack Whitten. Transitional Space. A Drawing Survey.

28 January – 4 April 2020

Hauser & Wirth New York, 69th Street

Opening reception: Tuesday 28 January, 6 – 8 pm



New York... Beginning 28 January 2020, Hauser & Wirth is pleased to present the first major survey of Jack Whitten's works on paper, spanning the artist's six decade career. Jack Whitten (1939 – 2018) made it his mission to disrupt the discipline of art history through experiments with material, process, and technique. He effectively constructed a bridge between gestural abstraction and process art, constantly working toward a nuanced language of painting that employs deeply personal expression. Whitten was also a prolific and powerful draughtsman. The unique body of works on view at Hauser & Wirth testifies to the immensity of his commitment to drawing as a means to make manifest his ideas and advance his methods.

'Jack Whitten. Transitional Space. A Drawing Survey.' spotlights the artist's playfulness and improvisational skill in searching for his own special visual language. Paper was more than an effective medium for Whitten; for him, working on paper was akin to scientific research. With an aesthetic hypothesis in mind, he worked tirelessly on paper to both subvert and elevate the history of art and how best to represent the many layers of information packed inside his imagination.

Drawing was an integral part of Whitten's artistic and technical maturation. His analysis of the properties of different mediums engaged materials as diverse as watercolor, toner, cuttlefish ink, homemade walnut ink, and endless variety of Japanese and specialty papers. The trial-and-error of Whitten's methodology can be felt through the multiple versions and renditions he created of particular works, many of which served as preliminary studies for subsequent paintings and monumental series.

About the Exhibition

'Jack Whitten. Transitional Space. A Drawing Survey.' showcases the evolution of Whitten's drawing process by exploring a range of styles, techniques, and use of varied materials from the 1960s to the late 2010s. The many phases of his practice – which he described as 'conceptual' – are united by a passion for technical exploration and a mastery of abstraction's potential to map geographic, social, spiritual, and psychological locations, often

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within the African American experience. 'Drawing is an act of brave exploration into unknown territories,' Whitten said in his seminal 1993 essay, 'Working on Paper.' 'I investigate everything and anything through the act of drawing.'

Organized chronologically, 'Transitional Space' begins with works from the 1960s, a period of self-analysis for Whitten. Drawing from such sources of inspiration as the late Surrealism of Arshile Gorky and the abstraction of Willem de Kooning, as well as his studies of African sculpture, Whitten was driven by an interest in the current political climate of the 1960s and a search for identity. At a time in New York when abstract expressionism was the dominant vocabulary, Whitten worked to find a way through and beyond those notions, and worked to develop his own point of view through this lens. The exhibition features works from 1964 that bring attention to the artist's early gestural practice. In the group of portraits, which includes 'Ruby' (1964) and 'Viola' (1964), Whitten depicts African American women which at the time, was a radical subject for art. The Forms series are early experiments with processes and relate to his later Ghost paintings. Grappling with recent events of that time, the King's Garden series is dedicated to the revered civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. These landscape-based works, still quasi-representational and clearly related to issues of race, comprise a harbinger of the direction Whitten's practice would take. Toward the end of the Sixties, Whitten began the Transitional Space series, shifting from naturalistic representation into the pure abstraction that would characterize his work in the 1970s.



In the 1970s, Whitten experimented with mechanical automation, moving away from gestural mark-making. He relied heavily upon the capacities of non-traditional tools for drawing and painting, finding inspiration in the Xerox machine's electrostatic printing technology, which allowed him to update his visual vocabulary and manipulate planes and spaces. Whitten began moving toward collage at this time, building compositions with pieces of dried acrylic paint, which he thought of as 'skins.' Employing muted monochromatic shades of red, brown, and grey in works like 'Broken Plane #4' (1972), and bright colors in 'Untitled' (1973), Whitten again expanded his visual language. Later, in 1980s, Whitten would expand on this practice, renaming these paint 'skins' as 'tesserae,' referring to ancient Greek and Roman mosaic tile.

By the 1980s, Whitten's predilection for the cosmic and quantum guided his focus further toward advanced science and technology and its relationship to spirituality. For Whitten, syntax – the ability to make sense of opposing systems of thought – was crucial. In 'Geometric Collusion #1' (1981), Whitten employs these ideals within the permanent nature of his mediums of acrylic and charcoal, and in the experimental, intentional strokes that work to evaluate notions of control. His artistic production functioned as a bridge between spirit and matter.

In the 1990s, Whitten further honed his singular talent for transfiguring materials beyond their original intended uses. Experimenting with Sumi ink in the Presence series, and metal filings in the Assassin series, he constructed, deconstructed, and reconfigured forms. In the 2000s, Whitten combined wax or glitter with powdered pigment and acrylic to arrive at new expressive hybrids, as seen in such works as 'Space Flower #9' (2006).

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'Transitional Space' concludes with a group of works from the 2010s, a time when Whitten confronted the past. Perceiving the body as a transmitter of cosmic data, he illuminated the relationship between space and time, and their engagements with the human brain. 'Study for Atopolis E' (2014) presents the viewer with a dark universe in which light is built from tiny pieces of matter – chaos depicted through intense accumulation, overwhelming with its frenetic power and yet meaningful through the artist's determined and skillful arrangement of his transformed materials.

About the Artist

Born in Bessemer, Alabama, in 1939, Whitten was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement before moving north to New York City in the early 1960s and enrolling in Cooper Union. He mingled downtown with the Abstract Expressionists, absorbing the influence of Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Franz Klein, and Philip Guston, while engaging uptown with Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden. But Whitten would soon prioritize his own distinctly experimental vision, engineering breakthrough after breakthrough with techniques and materials, articulating new pathways between artworks and their inspirations. At times he has pursued quickly applied gestural techniques akin to photography or printmaking. At other times, the deliberative and constructive hand is evident. From his series of small Ghost canvases of the 1960s and subsequent pulled Slabs and dragged canvases of the 1970s, Whitten moved on to collaged acrylic Skins of the 1980s, and eventually to his more recent tessellated constructions – paintings that look like mosaics but are actually composed of dried-acrylic paint chips as tesserae unevenly set into acrylic medium.

Jack Whitten's work has been the subject of numerous solo museum exhibitions, including 'Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963 – 2017,' which opened April 2018 at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore MD and traveled to The Met Breuer in September 2018. A major retrospective 'Jack Whitten. Five Decades of Painting,' was organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego CA (2014) and traveled to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis MN and the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus OH (2015). Additional institutional exhibitions include: 'Jack Whitten. Erasures,' SCAD Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah GA (2012); 'Jack Whitten,' MoMA PS1, Long Island City NY (2007); 'Jack Whitten. Ten Years, 1970 – 1980,' The Studio Museum in Harlem, Harlem NY (1983); and 'Jack Whitten. Paintings,' Whitney Museum of America Art, New York NY (1974).

Whitten's work is included in prestigious public and private collections around the globe, including the permanent collections of New York's Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Whitney Museum of American Art; National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; and Tate, London, England. Whitten has received numerous grants and fellowships throughout his career, including the John Hay Whitney Fellowship (1964), Individual Artist's Fellowship from the National Endowments for the Arts (1973), and the Guggenheim Fellowship (1976). In 2014 he received an Honorary Doctorate from the San Francisco Art Institute. Brandeis University awarded Whitten an Honorary Doctorate in May 2016 and in September of the same year he received the 2015 National Medal of Arts in recognition of his major contribution to the cultural legacy of the US.

'Jack Whitten. Transitional Space. A Drawing Survey.' will be on view at Hauser & Wirth New York, 69th Street from 28 January through 4 April 2020.

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Gallery Hours:

Tuesday to Saturday,
10 am – 6 pm

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Space Flower #9, 2006
Acrylic, pastel, powdered Mylar on Rice paper
18.4 x 21 cm / 7 1/4 x 8 1/4 in

Transitional Space 10, 1969
Oil and acrylic on glazed paper
25.4 x 33 cm / 10 x 13 in

King's Garden #6, 1968
Watercolor on paper
57.3 x 78.7 cm / 22 1/2 x 31 in

Study For Atopolis E, 2014
Acrylic on Blotter paper
46.4 x 33 cm / 18 1/4 x 13 in