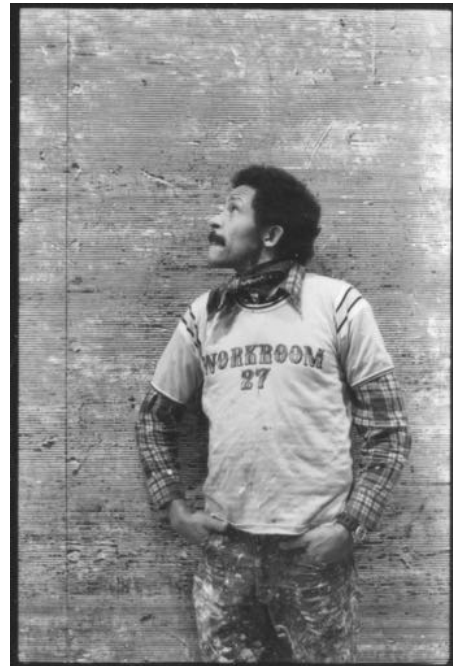


HAUSER & WIRTH

Press Release

Jack Whitten. Speedchaser

Hauser & Wirth London
7 October – 21 December



'The black + white paintings have forced me to be cooler, imposed a limitation upon my work habit and structure; forced me to tighten the visual concept; provided a personal framework of references plus a stamp of originality: THEY SAY WHITTEN.'

— Jack Whitten, December 1975

Over the course of a six-decade career, Jack Whitten's work has bridged rhythms of gestural abstraction and process art, arriving at a nuanced language of painting that hovers between mechanical automation and intensely personal expression. Focusing on Whitten's paintings, works on paper and sculptures from the 1970s, this exhibition showcases a juncture in the artist's career, which saw him reject the gestural brushstrokes of abstract expressionism in favour of experimental processes and materials. Displaying Whitten's long-standing interest in craft and woodworking, the exhibition also includes carved and assembled sculptures made by the artist during the 1970s.

The exhibition includes rare works from Whitten's landmark, monochromatic Greek Alphabet series (1975-78), which was the focus of a dedicated exhibition at Dia Beacon, New York, from 2022 to 2023. This exhibition in London goes beyond the monochrome to also display Whitten's experimentation with colour during this process-based period. In March 2025, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) will open 'Jack Whitten: The Messenger,' the first comprehensive retrospective dedicated to the groundbreaking American artist.

During the 1970s, Whitten made the conscious decision to remove all gestural mark-making from his work, switching gears to focus more on mechanical automation. At this time, the artist was inspired by his early training in craft and science—in particular, his ongoing research into quantum mechanics and contemporary

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imaging technologies. Removing the use of pens and brushes in his drawings and paintings, the artist instead made and used unconventional tools to create abstract constructions. As Whitten stated, 'After several experiments, I built what I called the Developer, an analogy to photography, which was meant to rebuke the notion of touch.' Employing rakes, rubber squeegees, saws and Afro combs, Whitten's floor-based tool allowed him to spread and manipulate wet paint as he pulled the 'Developer' through the liquid surface. Working on the floor of his studio, the artist created a flat platform, the drawing board, on top of which he placed his canvas. Examples from Whitten's DNA series (1979) are on display, where a painted, abstract background has been raked or combed to create a gridded pattern, a technique likened to deconstructing the photographic process, revealing—or in photographic terms, 'developing'—imagery beneath an acrylic coating. A second technical innovation came when Whitten began to place a variety of flat found objects—metal sheets, pebbles or wire—beneath the surface of his canvas to generate 'disruptions' in the form of frottage. Reiterating the innovative nature of this period, Whitten said, 'I like to think of my studio as a laboratory where experiments are conducted.'



On view in the exhibition and exemplary of Whitten's indirect painting methods are four works from the artist's renowned Greek Alphabet series. Greece was an important influence throughout the artist's career. Whitten's wife, Mary, was Greek and the two first visited the country together in 1969. They would later decide to spend every summer on the island of Crete. Realized between 1975 and 1978, Whitten's Greek Alphabet series consists of variations of predominantly black and white, abstract compositions ordered per the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet. Featuring repeated parallel vertical and horizontal lines that varyingly intersect, 'Xzee III' from this series recalls the complex meander pattern of ancient Greek art, inspired by extended periods of time spent in Crete. The 'Greek Alphabet' paintings, including other works such as 'Nee II' (1977) and 'Gamma Group #1' (1976), are not only technical and material explorations but deeply intimate works that speak to Whitten's personal connections to Greece as well as his identity as a Black American. While making the series, Whitten studied modern Greek, which had an obvious impact on the work titles, many of which are phonetic spellings of letters in the Greek alphabet.

It was mainly in the Cretan village of Agia Galini that Whitten's sculptural practice was carried out. Working in an outdoor workshop, these works consisted of carved wood, often in combination with found materials sourced from his local environment, including bone, marble, paper, glass, nails and fishing lines. Whitten's sculptural works were private in nature, their creation an act of ritual as much as expression and were of great personal significance to the artist. This includes the sculpture 'Reliquary For Orfos' (1978) with an upright, slightly tilted posture recalling that of ancient Cycladic figures, made using black mulberry wood and housing the bones of the prehistoric-looking Orfos fish, which the artist hunted in underwater caves in Crete.

Whitten not only explored various artistic tools but also a range of mediums. Following a grant received by the Xerox Corporation in 1970, Whitten made a major discovery: dry pigment or toner needed no binder but was made permanent by applying heat. Relying heavily on the capacities of Xerox's electrostatic printing

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technology, which allowed him to push traditional visual vocabularies and manipulate the idea of plane and space, the artist began applying toner directly to canvas and paper, utilizing heat lamps to set the images. With total abstraction and sophisticated restraint, 'Xeroxed!, III' (1975) is emblematic of Whitten's investigative spirit of the decade.

In his paintings towards the end of the 1970s, he shifted from oil paint to acrylic. In doing so, the artist often mixed aluminium and metal powders into the paint to create different tonalities and to experiment with colour, visible in works such as 'Formal Relay I' (1979). Yet, his works of this period retained a pared down colour scheme in comparison with the bold and vibrant abstract expressionist works that came before. Citing this shift as a poignantly personal and political decision, he says, 'I removed all spectrum colour from the studio ... I reduced them down to black, white, and a range of greys. ... you have to understand that in getting rid of all the chroma and taking it to black and white is not just a formal exercise. I'm very much aware of the meaning of black and white in American society, which informs who I am as an African American. The formal reasons for black and white are one thing but there are also the reasons coming out of the political situation, and I wanted to see if I could combine them.' Mary Whitten highlights that despite works from this era being resolutely concept-driven and process-based, 'Jack felt that the technical studies and experimentations were always working towards a goal of spirit and soul in the work. Never just the dry illustration of an idea.'



Learning

Accompanying the exhibition our Learning Programme will engage a range of learners with Jack Whitten's work. In addition, an 'Educators Evening' takes place on 7 November and 'Painters on Painting' on 28 November in which artists and tutors facilitate a conversation with university students around Whitten's practice.

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Gallery hours:

Tuesday to Saturday
10 am – 6 pm

www.hauserwirth.com

Caption and courtesy:

Jack Whitten
Nee II
1977
Acrylic on canvas
162.6 x 162.6 cm / 64 x 64 in
© Jack Whitten Estate
Courtesy the Estate and Hauser & Wirth
Photo: Thomas Barratt

Jack Whitten in his 40 Crosby Street Studio in New York, circa 1974-1975.
Photographer unknown
© Jack Whitten Estate.
Courtesy the Estate and Hauser & Wirth

Jack Whitten in his 40 Crosby Street Studio in New York, circa 1974-1975.
Photographer unknown.
© Jack Whitten Estate.
Courtesy the Estate and Hauser & Wirth

Jack Whitten
Xzee III
1977
Acrylic on canvas
130.2 x 103.5 cm / 51 1/4 x 40 3/4 in
© Jack Whitten Estate
Courtesy the Estate and Hauser & Wirth
Photo: Thomas Barratt

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Jack Whitten
Reliquary For Orfos
1978

Black mulberry, bones from the Orfos, copper wire, metal spear point with spear gun, rubber, metal tacks, glass from diving mask, window pane glass

73.7 x 20.3 x 30.5 cm / 29 x 8 x 12 in

© Jack Whitten Estate

Courtesy the Estate and Hauser & Wirth

Photo: Genevieve Hanson

Jack Whitten
Formal Relay I
1979

Acrylic on canvas

55.9 x 55.9 x 2.1 cm / 22 x 22 x 7/8 in

© Jack Whitten Estate

Courtesy the Estate and Hauser & Wirth

Photo: Sarah Muehlbauer

Jack Whitten in his 40 Crosby Street Studio in New York with paintings from the following series:

'The Annunciation', 'Ascension', 'DNA', 'Formal Relay', 'Persian Echo' in 1979. Photographer unknown. © Jack Whitten Estate.

Courtesy the Estate and Hauser & Wirth