

HAUSER & WIRTH

Press Release

Jack Whitten

Hauser & Wirth New York, 22nd Street
26 January – 8 April 2017
Opening reception: Thursday 26 January, 6 – 8 pm



New York... Beginning 26 January 2017, Hauser & Wirth is pleased to present its first exhibition devoted to the work of American abstractionist Jack Whitten. The show will feature selections from the artist's newest bodies of work from 2015 – 2017, including tessellated paintings from the series *Quantum Walls*, and *Portals*; a piece from Whitten's ongoing *Black Monolith* project honoring African-American visionaries; and assorted lenticular works on evolon. Lushly material explorations of space and its apertures, these works celebrate the distinctive painterly language that Whitten has developed over the course of a five-decade career.

'Jack Whitten' will remain on view at Hauser & Wirth's West 22nd Street space through 8 April 2017.

Moving to New York City to study art at Cooper Union in the early 1960s, Whitten was exposed to a range of influences, from the vigorous paintings of fellow artists Willem de Kooning and Norman Lewis, to the rich complexity

HAUSER & WIRTH

of bebop. Within this cultural milieu he developed an experimental style that combined the expressive physicality of gestural abstraction with the conceptual rigor of systems art. A radical breakthrough in 1970 provided the basis for his mode of working today: lifting a thick slab of acrylic paint off its support, Whitten realized that paint could be coaxed into the form of an independent object, challenging preexisting ideas about dimensionality in visual art. He began to lay sliced acrylic ribbons in wet, uneven fields of paint, mimicking the setting of mosaic tesserae into wet masonry. 'For painting, that's a new space,' Whitten once said. 'I first saw a glimpse of that space in the 70s, and I've been chasing it ever since. But now I've chased it up to a point where I can force it into a corner.'

It is no coincidence that the tessellated appearance of the new paintings on view at Hauser & Wirth calls to mind satellite imagery of topographies rendered in pixels and bits. Whitten, who nurtures a passion for astrophysics, views abstraction as an area in which he can probe space and time as both scientist and mystic. Works from the Portals series, begun in 2015 with 'First Portal', explicitly tempt the viewer into cosmological rabbit holes; their effects evoke planetary passageways as seen through a telescope. These works seductively imply partially veiled other worlds. 'I practice thought experiments in abstract painting,' Whitten has said of this series: 'Thought experiments allow me to...travel anywhere I want without the encumbrance of matter.'

The Portals series led Whitten to his majestically-scaled Quantum Walls paintings, a series of five works begun in 2016, with the fifth completed in January 2017. Shimmering with brilliantly colored acrylic tiles, these works celebrate the beauty of the universe's fundamental opposition to closure. 'Quantum mechanics has rendered obsolete any notion of a wall,' Whitten explained. 'Quantum Walls is not to be misunderstood as a stand-in for utopia... I only want that which is possible.'



The exhibition introduces viewers to Whitten's little-known sculptural practice with 'Quantum Man (The Sixth Portal)' (2016), a work that combines such disparate materials as marble, Cretan walnut, Serbian oak, lead, and acrylic, to startling effect. The sculpture's human scale invites reflection upon how our bodies exist in space and, by extension, in relationship to other bodies, other souls.

HAUSER & WIRTH

The exhibition forays into a celebration of humanity with the painting 'Black Monolith X, Birth of Muhammad Ali' (2016). This work is part of Whitten's ongoing Black Monolith series, which memorializes important black artists, writers, thinkers, and poets. Whitten has said that this body of work uses abstract symbols to 'honor our own and grieve our own,' adding a very personal note: 'The passing of Muhammad Ali was extremely painful for me. His raw, primal power channeled through the plasticity of boxing is something I seek in painting.'



About the Artist

Born in Bessemer AL, in 1939, Jack Whitten was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement before moving north to New York City in the early 1960s and enrolling at 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 in wet paint.

The common denominators across the many phases of Whitten's artistic practice – which he describes as 'conceptual' – are the avidity of his technical explorations and his mastery of abstraction's potential to map geographic, social, and psychological locations, particularly within the African-American experience. Recalling his time as a pre-medical student at Tuskegee Institute (today Tuskegee University) in the 1950s, he once said, '[It was] an all-black college where the African-American scientist George Washington Carver did all his experiments. His laboratory is still intact. He was also a painter. I'm convinced today that a lot of my attitudes toward painting and making, and experimentation came from George Washington Carver. He made his own pigments, his own paints, from his inventions with peanuts. The obsession with invention and discovery impressed me.'

Jack Whitten's work is held in numerous major museum collections including Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago IL; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas TX; Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York NY; MoMA, Museum of Modern

HAUSER & WIRTH

Art, New York NY; SFMOMA, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco CA; Tate Modern, London, UK; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis MN, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York NY. Recent solo exhibitions include: 'Five Decades of Painting' Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego CA (2014) which traveled to Walker Art Center, Minneapolis MN (2015), and Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus OH (2015); 'Light Years: Jack Whitten, 1971 – 1973', The Rose Art Museum, Waltham MA (2013); 'Erasures, Paintings from 1975 – 1979', SCAD Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah GA; 'Jack Whitten', Art 41 Basel, Switzerland (2010), and 'Jack Whitten', MoMA PS1, Long Island City NY.

Press Contacts:

Andrea Schwan
info@andreaschwan.com
+1 917 371 5023

Annie Rudnick
annie@hauserwirth.com
+1 212 476 9432

Hauser & Wirth

32 East 69th Street
New York NY 10021

511 West 18th Street
New York NY 10011

548 West 22nd Street
New York NY 10011

Gallery hours:
Tuesday to Saturday, 10 am – 6 pm

www.hauserwirth.info
[@hauserwirth](https://twitter.com/hauserwirth)

Celebrating 25 Years of Hauser & Wirth
Discover more at hauserwirth.art

#25YearsofHauserWirth

Copyright and Courtesy Credits:

All images:
© Jack Whitten
Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Quantum Wall, II (Missing Matter)
2016
Acrylic on canvas
121.9 x 243.8 x 7.6 cm / 48 x 96 x 3 in

The Third Portal
2016
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas
121.9 x 121.9 cm / 48 x 48 in

The Fifth Portal
2016
Acrylic on canvas
121.9 x 121.9 cm / 48 x 48 in

The Third Entity #5
2016
Black graphite and renaissance wax on evolon
76.2 x 55.9 cm / 30 x 22 in

The Third Entity #7
2016
Black graphite and renaissance wax on evolon
76.2 x 55.9 cm / 30 x 22 in

The Third Entity #10
2016
Black graphite and renaissance wax on evolon
76.2 x 55.9 cm / 30 x 22 in