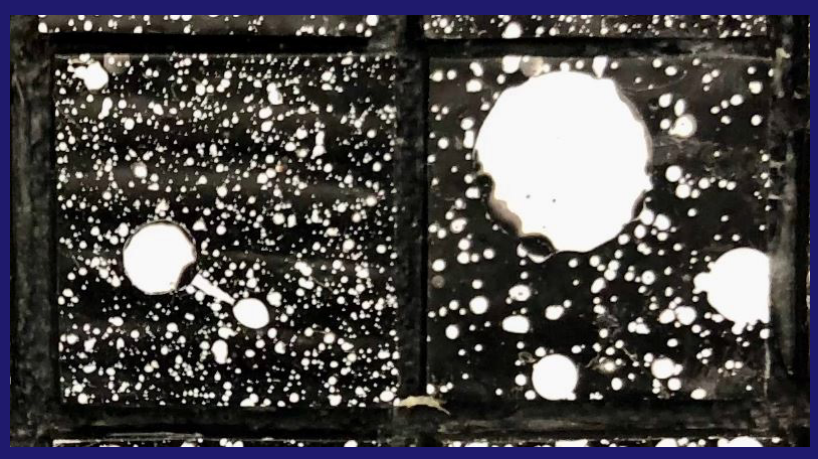
“Art is our compass to the cosmos.”

The artist’s brother Tommy, a jazz musician, first introduced him to Miles Davis in 1960. The legendary trumpeter and bandleader had a lasting impact on Whitten and his art. Following Davis’s death in 1991, Whitten created this painting by slicing hardened sheets of acrylic into small tiles, which first had been splattered with droplets of white paint. He then reassembled the tiles like a multidimensional puzzle to produce, in his words, a “cosmic net.” The artist described the painting as an attempt to capture Davis’s soul, proclaiming, “Miles is in the details!”



Detail of *Homecoming: For Miles*

This painting was created by slicing ultrathin films of acrylic into small tiles, then rearranging them like a vast, multidimensional puzzle. The black support was first splattered with skeins and droplets of white paint, and only then cut into tesserae—their recombination evoking a constellation of stars. Each unit was “loaded with data,” Whitten wrote, and carefully rearranging them allowed him “to choose any symbol or combined symbol depending on the psychic necessity of the moment.” In this work, Whitten sought to capture the essence of jazz musician Art Blakey and his musical collective, the Jazz Messengers. Deeply inspired by Blakey’s gift for improvisation, Whitten looked to jazz as more than a musical genre. “Jazz is a philosophy,” he later said. “It means the expansion of freedom: when freedom expands, consciousness expands.”

Head IV Lynching is a haunting example from Whitten's "gray paintings," as he called them. These works represent the artist's first experiments with a process that connected painting to photography. To create them, Whitten used a scraper blade to smear black and white paint over a cotton canvas. He then stretched a fine mesh over the surface, trapping a thin layer of acrylic between the two supports. Finally, he scraped away the excess paint to reveal ghostly forms that resemble blurred photographs being developed. Figures and heads seem to emerge, then dissolve into abstraction. At the time Whitten made these works, he was "desperately struggling" with his experiences of racial violence. He spoke of seeing images on walls and floors, and his need to convey their spirit: "It just got to the point that faces stared out at me from the paint and my hand just put them there."

"How can anyone justify staying in the studio when your people are dying? What is the artist supposed to do?" Whitten wrote. Confronted with the violence of the 1960s—from the suppression of the Civil Rights movement to the Vietnam War—Whitten created *NY Battle Ground* in a world that seemed to be in flames. Though the forms are ambiguous, they manifest struggle, combat, even apocalypse. Disturbed by endlessly circulated images of wartime helicopters abroad and of police violence in the American South, Whitten reinvented the gestural brushstrokes of his Abstract Expressionist mentors to evoke the catastrophes of the world. He framed the composition with a black curved line, suggesting a television set.

While the works in this gallery focus on the 1960s, Whitten's 1994 homage to the writer Ralph Ellison echoes the ghostly figures he had painted decades prior. Whitten dedicated this painting to Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, which explores the inner world of an unnamed African American man living in New York. For Whitten, "*Invisible Man* was the first time that anyone had put into print the exact dimension of being black in America." *Black Monolith II* is composed of hundreds of tiles cut from sheets of dried acrylic paint, which Whitten began making around 1990. Embedded into these tiles are unusual, organic materials such as eggshells, molasses, and rust. At the center of the composition, Whitten lodged a razor blade—suggesting "the double edge of black identity," which, he noted, "cuts both ways."

Artist Glenn Ligon wrote about this work in the exhibition catalogue. To learn more, visit moma.org/Whitten.

While on a road trip between New York and Massachusetts in 2009, Whitten unexpectedly needed to have his car radiator replaced. "As an object, the old radiator was so interesting that I had to bring it back to the studio," he later reflected. "With its fascinating grillwork, I immediately sensed its possibilities as a drawing tool." The artist made these works by rubbing graphite over paper laid on the radiator's surfaces. As with his "paint as collage" works from the 1980s, Whitten used objects he found in everyday situations to create new abstract forms, impressions of the world around him.

"*Birmingham 1964* is a wound. . . . Every time I've experienced physical violence, I've had a visual response," Whitten explained. He created this work after the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama—not far from his hometown of Bessemer—which took the lives of four Black girls. Beneath a ruptured layer of foil covered in black paint, Whitten stretched a sheer stocking over a newspaper photograph of another violent encounter: a police dog attacking a teenager during a 1963 Civil Rights protest in Birmingham. Whitten chose collage for its "immediate quality of communication," to channel his visceral emotions and reflect on the way such events were both represented and obscured by mass media.

Whitten met Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in 1957, after hearing him deliver a speech in Montgomery, Alabama, on "the spiritual strength to overcome the legacy of slavery." Following the Civil Rights leader's assassination in 1968—which left Whitten profoundly shaken—the artist dedicated this painting to King. Whitten drew upon the gestural marks of Abstract Expressionism and the dreamlike compositions of Surrealism to suggest faces among a field of brushstrokes. For Whitten, the stakes of his work were personal as well as political: "The content of my paintings from the sixties dealt with my search for identity."

Every night for a week in 1965, Whitten went with his brother and jazz musician, Tommy Whitten, to see John Coltrane perform at Club Coronet in Brooklyn. Describing his music to Whitten after a performance one night, Coltrane exclaimed, “Don’t you understand? It’s like a wave!” Whitten translated the idea of a wave of sound into sheets of light. Using a pulley system of his own construction, the artist raised and lowered large frames stretched with a fine mesh netting over canvas, and then pressed layers of acrylic paint through the mesh in a process similar to photographic silkscreening. The resulting cascade of color suggests an effect that Whitten called “planar light,” by which the multidimensionality of jazz is channeled into planes of light and color that appear to burst forth from the two-dimensional canvas.

In 1969, Whitten visited Greece, the homeland of his wife’s parents. After spending time in Athens and the Peloponnese Peninsula, the couple traveled by ship to Crete and arrived at the fishing village of Agia Galini. This dramatic setting, both coastal and mountainous, became a source of artistic inspiration for Whitten as well as the site of his family’s summer home. The annual Mediterranean sojourns would impact the artist’s approach to both woodworking and painting.

In 1970, Whitten created his “Developer,” as he called it—an important new tool that would define his approach to painting for nearly a decade. Maneuvering the wooden device like a rake, Whitten pulled its twelve-foot edge across layers of poured paint in one decisive stroke. Depending on the desired surface effect, he modified the Developer with additional components such as squeegees, serrated combs, and metal blades. In many of the resulting paintings, the blurred and blended paint has the appearance of moving at great speed, a visual lightness that belies the force needed to wield the Developer. At approximately forty pounds, it required control, concentration, and strength to reveal the painterly surprises that lay below.

Whitten with the Developer in his studio at 426 Broome Street, New York, 1974. Photograph: Paul G. Viani

"I JUST WANT A SLAB OF PAINT," Whitten declared in 1972. After turning away from the figures, faces, and gestural brushstrokes of the previous decade, Whitten used paint as raw material for registering a single, mechanical movement. Working horizontally on a platform he constructed in his studio, or "laboratory," as he called it, Whitten built up thick layers of paint. He then swept across the accumulation of acrylic using a large tool he called the Developer (on view in this gallery) in one final stroke. The resulting, richly hued mass of paint recalls the steel mills and mineral ore mines in Whitten's hometown, spurring him to seek a similar palette in later works and writing:

"More earthy colors—darks—rusty—odd blues—rust orange—weird greys—mud—MUD—MUD."

Inspired by his experience in carpentry, Whitten repurposed a twelve-inch hand saw to disperse layers of acrylic paint across the canvas. “It was my first time really digging into the paint,” he recalled of this work, a turning point in his career. Whitten described *Golden Spaces* and similar works as “energy fields,” owing to the glowing optical effects of the paintings’ glossy surfaces and raked, almost sculptural relief. Though *Golden Spaces* may conjure a sunset or a television screen, Whitten maintained that his works were not representational. Instead, he likened his systematic use of the saw to photography and its direct recording of light through an instant, mechanized capture.

Opos Dipote showcases Whitten’s manipulation of multiple layers of acrylic paint through a single, sweeping movement of his Developer tool (on view here). The resulting effect is at once smooth and striated, suggesting both fluidity and speed, and the currents and undercurrents of moving water. A Greek expression meaning “anyway” or “whatever,” the painting’s title conjures a free-flowing, flexible attitude. With its interplay of grays and blues resembling ripples on the surface of the sea, *Opos Dipote* is one of many works and writings in which Whitten explored water and its associations—from Greek mythology to the rivers he swam in as a child in the South, to the waters of the Middle Passage, the routes of the transatlantic slave trade.

Memory Container reflects Whitten's admiration for African carving traditions and the art of ancient Greece. But the work also recalls the form and function of a reliquary, with two compartments at its center, each covered with window-like panels. The personal items and materials inside include photographs of Whitten's friends and family members, leaves, animal bones, and a Greek drachma note. Like the collection of objects that Whitten saved in his studio—from the bones of fish he had cooked for lunch to wine bottles, postcards, and snapshots—this unique sculpture is a cache of mementos from time spent on Crete.

Though he had turned to abstraction in 1970, Whitten continued to explore personal and political subjects through his painterly innovations. This is one of many works he dedicated to the Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. After applying carefully calibrated layers of wet and dry acrylic, Whitten raked thin, curved grooves into the paint's surface to reveal forms that appear to change as one moves around the work. By using an Afro-comb to "rake light" into the paint, Whitten imbued his painting with the tools of everyday Black life. He explained, "I was counting on the perseverance of soul to flavor my formalistic undertakings."

By the end of the 1970s, Whitten began adding vertical sweeps to the horizontal motion characteristic of his earlier works to create grids. He understood the grid as connected to the composition of African sculpture, the warp and weft of textiles, and the pixels and dots of technological images. "The grid," he wrote, is "the DNA of visual perception." In *DNA*, Whitten sought to compress the entire history of art within the work's gridded surface. He layered ultrathin sheets of "acrylic slip"—the artist's own mixture of pigments and powders suspended in an acrylic medium—waiting for each layer to dry before applying the next. The entire picture appears to vibrate with color and depth.

Reflecting on his first visit to Crete in 1969, Whitten wrote, “My first time in blue water with no horizon; I realized that I was in the center of a circle.” Alluding to the Mediterranean Sea in both its title and color palette, *Mirsinaki Blue* suggests flowing currents or breaking waves through the movement of paint. To create the work, Whitten combined acrylic paint with polymer gels to achieve varying consistencies, which allowed for a singular, “blurred” effect following the pass of the Developer tool.
This new technique required unprecedented quantities of paint, which Whitten could not afford at the time. However, he was able to build a relationship with innovative paint manufacturer Leonard Bocour, who sent gallons of Aqua-Tec acrylic to the artist in exchange for a finished painting.

Begun in March 1975, Whitten’s Greek Alphabet works show his realization that “gray is power.” The artist created *Kappa I* using acrylic or graphite “slip,” a thin, translucent medium composed of his own proprietary formulation of pigments and chemicals in an acrylic suspension. After priming and painting the canvas, Whitten painted a white rectangle in the painting’s upper half and allowed it to dry. He then added another white rectangle to the lower half and, while it was still wet, applied a layer of black “slip,” raking it across the canvas with a grooved developer to produce thin horizontal lines. The interaction between wet and dry paints yielded two distinct textures and an oscillating visual field. Writing about this series, Whitten emphasized his goal of defining “a new spatial perception.”

The shapes in *Pink Psyche Queen* seem to rush by: a triangle captured in a blur of acrylic, a river or burst of color. All are the result of Whitten's use of "disruptors," objects that he placed beneath the surface of the canvas—wire, stones, sheet metal—to interrupt the motion of his Developer tool (on view in Gallery 2). When he pulled the large wooden tool across the canvas, the shapes of the disruptors would appear in relief, creating a "continuous surface plane trapping forms in space." By placing weights on the Developer, Whitten could also rupture the top layers of acrylic to reveal pools of vibrant color below and produce a sensation of depth and speed.

Recalling the coal mines where his father worked, *The First Loading Zone* is a reminder of Whitten's early experiences. Because art museums in the South were segregated when he was a child, Whitten and other Black students would tour local steel mills and coal mines instead. The geological surface of this work—created using the Developer and a squeegee to apply thin layers of acrylic paint over thicker, raised layers of already dried paint—evokes the distinctive mass and color of the raw materials embedded in the earth around Bessemer, Alabama.

Whitten made this work at the height of the Cold War. “The painting’s psychological underpinnings are dense and heavy,” he wrote, alluding to the Siberian mines as a site of political imprisonment and exile. The composition reveals the singular motion of the artist’s large Developer tool, fitted with a metal blade, and the unearthing of sediment-like layers of color beneath the dark surface. New conservation analysis shows that Whitten used unusual materials, including crystalline silica and lampblack to create the work’s light-reflecting and light-absorbing properties and aluminum bronzing powders to infuse it with iridescence.

MoMA conservators present new discoveries about the making of this work in the exhibition catalogue. To learn more, visit moma.org/Whitten.

Inspired by jazz musicians’ use of improvisation, Whitten described his own fusion of structure and choice, form and freedom, as a system of “controlled chance.” His risk-taking is evident in *Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, which pays homage to Miles Davis’s 1967 album *Sorcerer*. The painting features Whitten’s dynamic use of “disruptors”—objects he placed on or underneath the canvas to interrupt the pull of his Developer tool across the wet acrylic. A string is embedded in the upper part of the work, its motion as it was dragged across the canvas evident in the layers of blurred paint left in its wake. Though Whitten intentionally placed the string and calibrated his pull with the drying times of the acrylic, he could not control the exact movement of the disruptor, rendering the outcome unpredictable.

In March 1973, Whitten wrote in his studio log that he "had the feeling lately to do something new." Monumental in scale, *The Pariah Way* is a prime example of Whitten's use of what he named "developers"—tools used to "develop" an image by pulling, dragging, or dislodging multiple layers of carefully applied paint. (Whitten dubbed the largest of these tools "the Developer," on view in Gallery 2.) The artist created this work's ghostly shapes and iridescent colors by pressing the unprimed canvas onto a field of various colors of wet paint on the floor. He likely made an initial pass with the large Developer, then built up smaller passages of paint and scrubbed or sliced them away with his tools. As the work's title suggests, Whitten often characterized his singular artistic journey, or "way," as that of an outsider.

Study For Cut Acrylic Series #2 1973
Pastel and dry pigment on paper

J.A.C.S. Collection

In 1974, Whitten participated in an artist's residency at the Xerox Corporation in Rochester, New York. He also received new equipment to work with in his studio, experimenting with the company's innovative printers, cameras, and photocopier and telecopier technologies, which used dry electrostatic and flat plate printing. Dry pigment—or toner powder—needs no binder or emulsion but is set with heat. In some instances, Whitten applied toner directly to paper with a flat scraper blade and used heat lamps to fix the images. His Xerox experiments inspired his Broken Spaces series, abstractions that appear powdery, blurred, and stuttered, resembling photographs of folds, static, or jammed paper feeds. For these, Whitten suspended powdered pigments, charcoal, and inks in acrylic, which he used to "metaphorically suspend time in space."

After painting horizontally on the floor of his studio for ten years, Whitten ”stood up” for the first time in 1980 to create this work. Using handheld developer tools, he made both short rakes and strokes and larger diagrammatic forms that recall the navigational systems from his training as an Air Force ROTC cadet at the Tuskegee Institute. “The title of *Dead Reckoning I* means two things,” he explained. “First, *dead reckoning* in the practical sense . . . a point of navigation when it is no longer profitable for you to turn around and go back.” The other meaning, he wrote, “is the one where you throw your compass away and you deal . . . totally with what’s out there in nature.”

Alpha Group II is among the first works Whitten completed as part of his Greek Alphabet paintings. The series progresses through the alphabet, from alpha to omega, and is largely characterized by a monochromatic color palette of black, white, and gray. By contrast, *Alpha Group II* features washes of blue and vertical lines of red set against a horizontally textured surface. The work’s colorful passages and close-set grooves of acrylic, made using a toothed developer tool, evoke the scan lines of a television screen or computer monitor. The red lines appear to hover, creating an illusion of cast shadows in a three-dimensional space—a “breakthrough” for Whitten, as he wrote in his studio log on view in this gallery.

In *Khee II*, Whitten transforms acrylic paint into a dazzling optical field that is simultaneously mirage-like and tactile. As with other works in his Greek Alphabet series, Whitten created a marked contrast between dark and light pigment by using a notched tool attached to his Developer. In this work, he then applied thin sheets of colored paper directly to the gessoed surface of this canvas, resulting in translucent veils of color. Whitten observed, "The paintings are hard to look at. They are a real optical experience—the change of values twist [and] bend the eye. The surface appears to be flat—but no . . . It could be the beginning of a volumetric surface."

In December 1978, Whitten had a revelation: "By combining a horizontal rake with a vertical rake I arrive at a grid which gives me a complete surface," he wrote. "It means I have a physical structure in which to exercise complete freedom: a structure for the spirit to manifest itself." In his Ascension series, Whitten experimented with imbuing the grid structure with color. Layering washes of saturated hues followed by a thicker overcoat of white paint, he used a small comblike developer tool to rake individual squares, creating the illusion of crisscrossing strips of fabric or basketry. The colorful underlayers glow beneath the veil of sculpted paint, an effect Whitten described as "weaving with light."

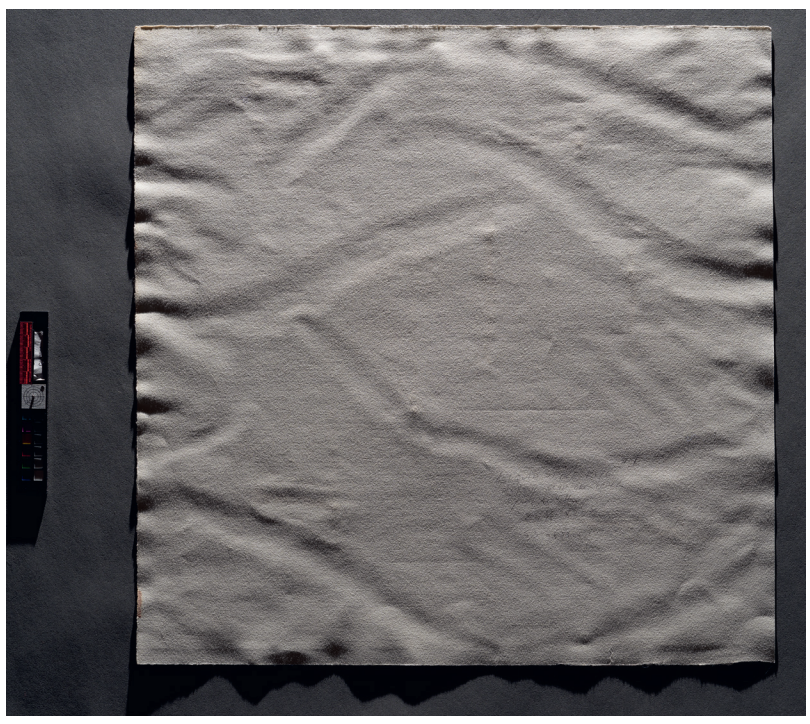
This three-panel work suggests the depth of Whitten's admiration for his mentor and friend, the Abstract Expressionist painter Norman Lewis, who died in 1979. When Whitten met Lewis in 1962, he was one of few role models for a young Black artist—and abstract painter—in New York. Their shared interest in science, technology, and jazz had a lasting influence on Whitten's developing techniques. For this tribute, Whitten pressed a gridded screen into wet acrylic, creating raised square units in relief, then added dabs of colorful oil paint to illuminate the grid. The resulting composition suggests a pixelated screen or an aerial view of city lights.

Norman Lewis. *City Night*. 1949. Oil on wood, 24 × 18" (61 × 45.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis. © 2025 Estate of Norman Lewis; Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

Whitten met the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat in the early 1980s. From his studio window in downtown New York, Whitten could see one of Basquiat's infamous "SAMO" graffiti tags. Following the young artist's untimely death in 1988, Whitten created *For J.M.B*. This small-scale work, its gold frame reminiscent of devotional icons, diverges from the abstract language Whitten developed in the 1980s, reintroducing the representational through collaged images. He described Basquiat's short yet productive career as the embodiment of an "unchecked freedom," characterized by "spontaneous . . . visual poems" that existed "outside of art history."

Inspired by his experiments with Xerox photocopier toner, Whitten mixed his own formulations of dry powders, acrylic paint, and other chemicals to create *Liquid Space I*. Deceptively photographic in appearance, the work contains three-dimensional ripples, folds, and streaks, suggesting a technological image made by scanning or with infrared cameras. Newly conducted analysis by MoMA conservators shows that Whitten submerged the entire piece of paper in water, then dried and flattened it, using actual liquid to create the illusion of flowing waves. Whitten declared: “Paper is alive. . . . Wetness as opposed to dryness expanded my interpretation of space as subject. Space became more fluid, offering the possibility of infinite dimensions.”

MoMA conservators present their analysis of this work in the exhibition catalogue. To learn more, visit moma.org/Whitten.



A photograph taken of the back of *Liquid Space I*, showing how the paper’s wrinkles align with the drawing’s graphic, wavelike image

In 1974, Whitten attended an artist residency at Xerox Corporation, where he learned about their new electrostatic photocopying technologies and the chemical pigment they used, called toner powder. Following the workshop, he used Xerox equipment at his studio to make twelve drawings in succession. *Mary* (1974) echoes the simple structure of the administrative or legal documents that the Xerox flat-plate photocopier was designed to reproduce. Soon after, Whitten began experimenting with the ionized toner powder itself, sprinkling or spreading it onto paper using small scrapers, or developers, or freely etching or rubbing it into the support to create ghostly images by hand that appear machine-made. As the artist remarked, the Xerox material yielded “EVERYTHING I EVER WANTED IN A DRAWING.”

Whitten explains how and why he began making art with the ink toner used in Xerox printers. Enter the number on moma.org/audio or on the free Bloomberg Connects digital guide.

623 English Only

The title of this work honors Romare Bearden's legacy as one of the cofounders of Spiral—a group of Black artists dedicated to artistic experimentation and social activism during the Civil Rights movement. Whitten was not a regular participant but appreciated what the spiral represented—"an ancient symbol of space, a positioning of oneself in the universe." He saw Bearden as a mentor who created spaces for Black artists to connect and exhibit work outside of discriminatory art institutions. Whitten was particularly inspired by the older artist's collages of photographs and Xerox photocopies, writing, "[Bearden's] legacy in painting is collage as narrative. Paint-as-collage is the plastic foundation of my paintings. No one springs from the head of Zeus! My sources are clear to me."

Whitten created this work five years after Malcolm X was assassinated. "It was no longer possible for me to use a full color spectrum: there was nothing left to celebrate," he explained. "Only the soul of Malcolm X was worthy of celebration." For Whitten, the "soul" of the Civil Rights leader might be conveyed through "the classical symbol of the triangle." The artist applied thin washes of acrylic, then built up thicker layers of paint to form the nested triangles. Plucking an Afro-comb from his hair, Whitten raked the tool through the wet acrylic, revealing underlayers of red, black, blue, and green. "That painting had to be dark," he said. "It had to be moody. It had to be deep."

Whitten described *Bessemer Dreamer* as “an abstract biographical narrative: I am the Bessemer Dreamer.” The artist encrusted the surface with acrylic paint impressions made from the streets and surroundings of his adopted home of New York City. He collected stainless steel grates and screens of various patterns, then pushed thick paint through the holes directly onto the canvas to replicate their patterns. With these industrial tools and shapes, Whitten harked back to the steel industry and landscape of his hometown in Bessemer, Alabama—grafting places and histories together, from South to North, nature to industry.

In 1990, Whitten said, “I’m finding that everything I’ve uncovered, everything I’ve discovered leads me back to Africa.” With its reference to Ogun, the Yoruba deity of iron and tools, this small painting invokes West African spirituality and shows Whitten’s scope of cultural sources. The composition demonstrates the artist’s process during the late 1980s and early 1990s of making plaster molds of objects and surfaces found in New York City—from tire treads and tree bark to manhole covers and bubble wrap—into which he cast acrylic paint to shape voluminous forms and textured reliefs. The work’s custom frame is made of welded steel, a direct link to Ogun’s role as a spiritual patron of metalworking.

On November 10, 1998, Whitten noted in his studio log that he had devoted 1,310 hours of labor toward the making of *Flying High For Betty Carter*. He was inspired to create the work after seeing the jazz singer perform at Slug's Saloon in New York's East Village in the 1960s: "I had to do a big painting for Betty Carter. It had to be brassy, celebratory, and over-the-top with a commanding presence. . . . The range of her voice could penetrate the highest emotional pitch imaginable. . . . *Flying High* is a B-52 Stratofortress Bomber piloted by General Betty Carter flying at 50,000 feet."

Whitten intended for these works to embody the spirits of his parents, Mose and Annie Bell Whitten. Mose was a coal miner, and passed away when Whitten was just five years old. Still, Whitten retained the memory of his father's work clothes: "always black, stiff, stinky, slimy from sweat and coal dust." Annie Bell, a seamstress, washed them in a cast iron cauldron in their backyard. Whitten said his first experience of collage came from his mother, seeing her deconstruct secondhand clothes, clean and dye them, then stitch them together into something new. "This had a profound effect upon my thinking and painting," Whitten remembered, introducing him to "the notion of the mosaic, the bits and parts of things that go together to make a whole."

Whitten spent forty years living and working in downtown Manhattan, having moved there in 1962. He watched the construction of the World Trade Center towers—and he was standing outside his studio when they came down, during the attacks of September 11, 2001. After that date, Whitten stopped making art for several years—except for this large-scale painting, composed of thousands of tiles of acrylic paint, to which he devoted five years of study and experimentation. Incorporating other materials such as ash and dust, the work stands as one of the most powerful monuments of our time. “What I saw will haunt me forever,” he said. “The painting is a promise to all those people.”

Detail of *9.11.01*, showing a shoe print and other found materials

Whitten dedicated this work to the memory of fellow artist Julius Tobias. Though Tobias was of a different generation and background, he and Whitten had much in common: Both were New York–based artists working in abstraction; both created paintings as well as sculpture; and both had been in the US Air Force. Tobias had served as a bombardier during World War II, an encounter with violence that echoed Whitten's own experiences during the 1960s. To achieve the deep black-on-black effect of this painting, Whitten used not just acrylic but military-grade, radar-absorbing paint—the same kind said to have been used for the Northrop B-2 Spirit, or "Stealth Bomber" military plane.

Composed of stone-like acrylic tesserae in high relief, this painting is dedicated to Amadou Diallo, a twenty-three-year-old Black Guinean immigrant who was shot and killed by New York City police in 1999. Whitten wrote of the work, "With the deep density of Spinel Black, I constructed a dark totemic elegy in memory of Amadou Diallo." The use of Spinel Black, one of the blackest of all known pigments, creates a kind of memorial, not through likeness but through matter. As Whitten explained, "The subject is found in the memory of experience but the content is coded in paint."

For the first of his Black Monolith series, Whitten made a dedication to the author and Civil Rights activist James Baldwin. Whitten knew Baldwin personally, and admired him for articulating the challenges of, in Baldwin's words, "how we react to this system we are born into." Whitten felt this was a parallel to his own project of "putting the black experience into the paint." The scale and depth of *Black Monolith I*—with its amorphous outline of a head composed of and placed within a field of cast acrylic reliefs from the studio and the street—embodied Baldwin's centrality as a figure within Black American life.

Artist Glenn Ligon wrote about the Black Monoliths in the exhibition catalogue. To learn more, visit moma.org/Whitten.

Whitten identified jazz as one of his greatest inspirations. His brother was a jazz musician, and he had contemplated becoming one himself; he frequented New York's jazz clubs throughout his life and knew legendary musicians like John Coltrane, Art Blakey, and Miles Davis. In the music's experimental qualities, Whitten found a parallel for his art. He wrote, "Sound is a vibration made without two things striking. In painting, sound is produced through the optical . . . the optical exists as the result of color densities. This is my connection to Jazz. Jazz is a vibration that expands consciousness."

Scan the QR code to access the soundtrack of jazz music playing in this gallery.

In 1942, during a time of strict racial segregation, Jacob Lawrence became the first Black artist whose work was acquired by The Museum of Modern Art. His Migration Series (1940–41; featured in Gallery 520), is a vibrant and graphic narrative of the mass movement of African Americans to the North in the twentieth century. After meeting Whitten in 1962, Lawrence became one of his mentors and shaped his growth as a Black artist in New York. Whitten wrote of his friend: "Jake was the true Artist—the one that persevered through years of neglect . . . Jacob Lawrence is Brave and most of ALL a Beautiful person . . . He was a sign post—something permanent a part of History."

The legendary jazz musician Ornette Coleman was a friend of Whitten's—and an inspiration, serving as a model for experimentation, improvisation, and above all, freedom. Channeling Coleman's revolutionary sound of the 1960s and '70s, Whitten constructed this tribute without preliminary drawings, instead building up the surface intuitively until he arrived at this image. "The painting must be allowed to make itself," he explained, connecting improvisation in visual art with its practice in jazz. Whitten's desire to evoke invisible sonic waves through the visual medium of painting is reflected in his complex organization of small tiles made from dried acrylic paint. "I want Ornette to hear his painting . . . he doesn't have to see it. My Brother works with sound!"

Barbara Jordan was a lawyer, scholar, and congressperson from Texas who, in 1972, became the first Black woman elected to Congress from the South. Unwavering in her commitment to equality, Jordan's legislative career was defined by her dedication to Civil Rights and fervent support for the constitutional articles of impeachment that led to the resignation of Richard Nixon. For Whitten, "She was a powerful presence who spoke with moral conviction." The artist sought to manifest that presence through this abstract mosaic of glittering and deeply hued acrylic paint tiles, rather than through a conventional portrait: "I want what that woman is about in her spirit to be in that paint."

The title of Whitten's largest work of art, *Atopolis*, combines Greek words to create a term that means "without place," referencing the ideas of the Martiniquais philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant. "Atopolis is a powerful concept for members of the African diaspora," Whitten wrote. "Black identity has been linked to our not having a 'sense of place.'" Constructed of thousands of acrylic tiles and casts infused with metallic, phosphorescent, and organic materials, from aluminum to anthracite, the work's constellation of forms suggests a new "sense of place." "Atopolis," he wrote, could be "an imaginary city constructed out of elements from anywhere, [a] borderless city built from the uprooted, ungrounded and nomadic destinies of old and new migrants → a fluid identity."

Whitten saw the 2007 release of Apple's iPhone, followed by Barack Obama's presidential election in 2008, as a moment both politically and technologically significant. In his studio log, he noted, "I am very excited about Obama's victory. It could have a huge impact upon me: abstraction can play a role in the political process. The time is ripe for [a] black abstract artist to take the lead." President Obama later awarded Whitten the 2015 National Medal of Arts. Whitten created this painting as if to devise new tools for Obama, and perhaps himself, drawing on ancient mosaic techniques to suggest the icons for apps on a smartphone.

Whitten sourced the materials he used to create *Technological Totem Pole* in Crete. The body of the sculpture is carved from a log of black mulberry; the electronics affixed to the wood came from the storeroom of a local shop; and its marble base—which Whitten called “the charger”—was mined from a nearby quarry. Most of the technologies that Whitten included—circuit boards, flip phones, and disk drives—once stored information or facilitated communication, but have since become obsolete. Atop the pole is a hand-carved form featuring a burned-out hole with the face of a clock below. The artist likened his sculpture to totem poles he had seen from Alaska and British Columbia: “I understood them as computer banks. Information is stored in them, the tribe, the history of the people.”

Following the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X, Whitten immediately began work on *Homage to Malcolm*, a tribute to the slain Civil Rights leader. This sculpture marks the first in Whitten’s lifelong practice of dedicating artworks to historical figures, family, friends, and artists. Unlike traditional Western monuments, the work does not directly reference its subject’s likeness or achievements. Carved from a single piece of American elm wood, then pierced, hammered, polished, and studded with nails and metal elements, Whitten’s homage recalls the structure of African power figures, such as the Kongo peoples’ *Nkisi N’kondi*, which were often intended to heal, protect, or even avenge.

On January 20, 2018, Whitten died at the age of seventy-eight, leaving this final painting dedicated to Arshile Gorky on his studio wall. Gorky was an abstract artist who immigrated to the US in 1919. One of the first works by Gorky that Whitten saw in person was *Garden in Sochi* (1941; on view in Gallery 523), at MoMA, an abstract composition inspired by the artist's childhood memories of his native Armenia. Deeply moved by Gorky's fusion of abstract shapes and surreal forms, myth and personal memory, Whitten began his own Garden series in the 1960s. In the next decade, he likened the gesture of the Developer, sweeping across his multilayered slab paintings, to plowing a field or raking soil. "Thanks to Arshile Gorky's *Garden in Sochi* for giving me a place to grow," Whitten later wrote. "It is a catalyst for everything I am doing today."

Created as part of his Quantum Wall series, this tribute to Gorky channels Whitten's idea, inspired by quantum physics, that "there is no beginning + there is no end. Nothing is static."

Arshile Gorky. *Garden in Sochi*. 1941. Oil on canvas, 44 ¼ × 62 ¼" (112.4 × 158.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase Fund and gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wolfgang S. Schwabacher (by exchange), 1942. © 2025 The Arshile Gorky Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

ON VIEW IN THE ABBY ALDRICH ROCKEFELLER
SCULPTURE GARDEN:

Untitled mosaic 1999–2000
Stone

Private collection