Jack Whitten created visionary beauty from righteous anger. Born in Bessemer, Alabama, amid the violence of the segregated South, he joined the Civil Rights movement, then made his way to New York in 1960. There, he decided to become an artist. Through his exploration of materials and tools—from new paints to Afro-combs and electrostatic printing—Whitten invented art-making techniques that were the first of their kind. Through his confrontation with racial prejudice and technological change, he made art matter in a world in turmoil. This retrospective is the first to span all six decades and every medium of Whitten's innovative practice, and features paintings, sculptures, and works on paper that illuminate his singular artistic journey.

In the 1970s, Whitten experimented with pulling layers of acrylic paint across a floor-bound canvas in a sweeping movement, producing a luminous, quasi-photographic blur. In the 1990s, he cut hardened sheets of acrylic paint into thousands of mosaic tiles to assemble richly textured paintings that suggest pixels or galaxies. For decades, Whitten spent his summers in Greece, constructing sculptures that fused the arts of Africa and the ancient Mediterranean with contemporary technologies. He often dedicated his works to figures in Black history, as if he were a messenger—and his art a way of sending meaning out into the world. "I am a conduit for the spirit," he declared. "It flows through me and manifests in the materiality of paint."

Jack Whitten: The Messenger presents a revelatory history of the artist's exploration of race, technology, jazz, love, and war. From the upheaval of the 1960s to the end of his life in 2018, Whitten faced great pressure to pursue representational art as a form of activism. Yet he dared to invent forms of abstraction—and offered the world a new way to see.

Organized by Michelle Kuo, Chief Curator at Large and Publisher, with Helena Klevorn, Curatorial Assistant to the Chief Curator at Large and Publisher, Dana Liljegren, Curatorial Assistant, and David Sledge, former Mellon-Marron Research Consortium Fellow, Department of Painting and Sculpture. Thanks to JaBrea Patterson-West, Eana Kim, and Kiko Aebi.

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We invite you to explore the accompanying publication, *Jack Whitten: The Messenger*, which is available in the Museum Store.

Who was Jack Whitten? Scan the QR code below to hear from the boundary-breaking artist on the free Bloomberg Connects digital guide.

For related content, programs, and audio, visit moma.org/whitten.

HOPES AND GHOSTS

Everything was forcing me to make up my mind: Who are you, Jack Whitten? What kind of person do you want to be? What sort of world do you want?

In the 1960s, Jack Whitten had an identity crisis. The son of a seamstress and a coal miner, he had been the first person in his family to attend college, studying pre-medicine at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. But in 1959, he abruptly changed course, moving to Louisiana to pursue art. He also began participating in Civil Rights demonstrations. The violent backlash he experienced prompted him to leave the segregated South.

Whitten earned a scholarship to the Cooper Union in New York in 1960. He plunged into a world of artists, writers, dancers, and jazz musicians—from Willem de Kooning to Jacob Lawrence and John Coltrane—becoming fascinated by the gestural brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionism. He soon invented his own ways of making: producing ghostly figures that melt into abstract, filmic shadows; vibrant “gardens” of faces and flora, dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr.; and bursts of color that evoke war, hallucination, or science fiction. Whitten was haunted by his past, by histories of racial violence and the turmoil of the present. But he began creating forms for the future.

PAINTINGS FOR THE FUTURE

Never in my wildest dreams did I think that I would reach thirty years of age without self-destructing. . . . The 1960s were coming to an end; I was still alive and in one piece.

At the start of a new decade, Whitten had a breakthrough. He stopped making figurative art and got rid of his paintbrushes. "1970 was the turning point," he recalled. "The studio became a laboratory designed to experiment with acrylic paint." The medium, a recent innovation made from plastic, offered a vastly expanded range of color, texture, and handling. Seizing the opportunity, Whitten invented tools and techniques that were entirely new to the history of Western art. From an Afro-comb to a twelve-foot-long wooden rake, which he called the "Developer" in reference to photography, novel implements were maneuvered by the artist to pull layers of acrylic paint across canvas laid on his studio floor in one sweeping movement.

With each pull, Whitten revealed carefully calibrated underlayers in startling hues. Some of the resulting works evoke glowing screens or "energy fields," as the artist called them; others look like an almost photographic blur, as if blending painting and technology. Whitten often dedicated these works to specific people, from his daughter to the Civil Rights leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. But his pictures were no longer of faces or figures; he had made the turn to abstraction. In these paintings, he said, "Memory is trapped in the material."

Songs selected from Whitten's record collection play in this gallery. Scan the QR code to listen to the playlist.

TAKING A RISK

When consciousness expands, freedom expands.

Over the course of one extraordinary year, between 1973 and 1974, Whitten accelerated his experiments in preparation for an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. It was his first solo museum show and one of a few afforded to Black artists in New York at the time. He infused increasingly sophisticated and unusual materials into acrylic paint, including chemicals to slow or speed up its drying time or alter its liquidity. He built up many layers of paint in different colors, then dragged his Developer tool across the surface with a single, powerful three-second pull. The effect is one of speed, or the blur of a camera in motion, as the top layer of paint is stretched and smeared to reveal endless, shifting layers below. Whitten could never quite know what would appear after his one shot, his one "photographic" take.

For Whitten, these creative risks, which he called "gambling," upended conventional ways of seeing—and being in—the world. "The more I paint the more I see," he wrote in his studio log in 1973. Whitten's pictures suggest the ways in which struggles for freedom and power could emerge through artistic experimentation. As his fellow artist Melvin Edwards said at the time, "To improvise is the only real and constantly dynamic revolutionary way to be."

BLACK AND WHITE

The paintings have changed. It is impossible for me to control them. Sometimes I wonder who or what is doing the controlling.

In 1975, Whitten made yet another sea change in his art. His colorful “blur” canvases gave way to a new series of paintings named after the letters of the Greek alphabet and inspired by the summers he spent in Crete with his family. The artist had also attended a residency at the Xerox Corporation in 1974, and became fascinated by the heat-sensitive, black powder used for the company’s cutting-edge photocopier technologies. He whittled his palette down to black and white, but from these two colors he produced an explosion of new optical effects. Using his Developer tool and other implements, Whitten continued to innovate with acrylic paint. He found in its plastic qualities a way to achieve novel forms of illusion and relief, gradually reintroducing color to create dazzling, almost holographic surfaces.

Whitten’s works in this period undo any clear distinction between black and white, up and down, forward and backward, color and uncolored, machine and human. By challenging these binary oppositions, Whitten also sought a greater understanding of his own identity: “The psychology of vision deals with being able to dissolve dualities,” he wrote in 1979. “I think that my growing-up black in America gives me an advantage in dealing with the unique psychology of vision. I am a product of the cancellation of opposing races.”

SKINS

Art comes from everywhere. I can be a saint and make art. I can be a stone devil and make art.

Whitten wanted to reimagine the history of art—and to expand its reach. By linking his work to sources such as African sculpture, which he called the "DNA" of all art, he hoped to overturn the traditions of Western culture and create something new. This would be a revolution not through moral commandments or slogans, but by changing perception itself. "My paintings are designed as weapons," the artist said. "Their objective is to penetrate and destroy the Western aesthetic." *Dead Reckoning I* (1980) appears as one such weapon, suggesting both a fighter plane's navigational system and a target sight.

In 1980, Whitten's SoHo studio burned down in a devastating fire. The artist took years to rebuild, and did not make any work until 1983. When he emerged, he began experimenting with a wholly new way of using acrylic paint: creating plaster molds of objects and surfaces found in New York streets, from the ridged bottoms of bottles to manhole covers and metal grates, and then filling them with acrylic paint to cast sculptural reliefs. Whitten called these works "skins," and they served as an index of the hardness and hardships of the city around him. But they also allowed him to find a way to rebuild, to bring the world back into his work.

MOSAIC

To all painters: Let's go where the computer cannot go.

Around 1990, Whitten suddenly invented yet another form of art. He created sheets of dried acrylic paint, spread flat in trays or on tables to dry, and used a razor blade to carve, slice, or shatter the hardened acrylic into small tiles. Each tile could be combined with others to form sprawling, intricately constructed abstract paintings. These puzzles of visual information suggest both ancient Byzantine mosaics and digital images. As the artist noted, "When I break it down into these little bits that I work with, it's like a pixel. Like each tesserae is a piece of light. . . . The message is coded into the process." The tiles also evoke the multipart construction of African sculpture, which Whitten likened to the infinitely combinable bits of digital technology, or a kind of universal code.

Many of these mosaic paintings mark specific lives and events, from the personal to the global, from celebration to catastrophe. *Fifth Gestalt (Coal Miner)* and *Sixth Gestalt (The Seamstress)* (1992) are dedicated to Whitten's parents. *9.11.01* (2006) is a colossal monument to the victims of the attacks of September 11, 2001, which the artist witnessed from his studio in Lower Manhattan. Whitten saw these memorials as a means of confronting history, but also as posing a renewed identity, a new way of being, in a world that continually seemed to be on the verge of breaking down.

BLACK MONOLITHS

I come from a people whose culture was totally cut off.
The prize is to reconstruct the culture.

Whitten began his Black Monoliths in 1988, celebrating influential Black figures throughout history. The series title refers to a monumental rock formation near his house in Greece, which prompted him to create the first of the paintings in honor of James Baldwin, the writer and Civil Rights activist who had died in 1987. Whitten later dedicated works to W. E. B. Du Bois, Maya Angelou, Ornette Coleman, Muhammad Ali, and others.

Rather than depicting a face or likeness, Whitten's Black Monoliths are abstract—the paint infused with materials such as coal dust, pearlescent powder, and octopus ink to evoke or even embody the works' subjects. The kaleidoscopic mosaics and reliefs suggest individual elements or fragments coming together: constellations of stars, glittering gems, waves of sound, or masses of earth.

COSMOS

I believe that there are sounds we have not heard. I believe that there are colors we have not seen. And I believe that there are feelings yet to be felt.

Whitten thought of his art as a “portal” to other worlds. Fascinated by science and technology—even the television series *Star Trek*—he hoped his work might bend space, light, and time to create new sensations. He continued to explore these phenomena in his last decades, constantly revising and renewing his invented form of acrylic mosaics and incorporating ever more far-flung materials and colors into his paintings, sculptures, and drawings.

The works in this gallery suggest subatomic particles jostling with energy, the interface of a smartphone, or gateways to space travel. For Whitten, these forms were not an escape but a reckoning with the effects of technology: “The modern technological society depends upon the fast movement of vast amounts of complex diversified data; this exerts extreme psychological pressures upon each of us. Artists continually invent ways to deal with these pressures as a means of survival. We are society’s pressure gauge.”

RECONSTRUCTION

The search for identity led me to carving wood.

Whitten made sculptures every summer, beginning in the mid-1960s in New York and across his life during annual trips to Crete, Greece. Featured throughout the exhibition and gathered here in a focused group, these works consist of carved and joined wood, often in combination with found materials including bone, marble, paper, glass, nails, fishing line, and computer parts. They were inspired by the arts of Africa and the ancient Mediterranean, and, like his acrylic mosaics, bring together disparate fragments in a new whole.

For Whitten, this process of reconstruction was core to all his art. It was a way of building back from a history of dispossession. As he wrote in his studio log in 2007, “The history of a people, in my personal case, that of the slave: uprooted, torn + dismembered, piece by piece, fragmented, + scattered to various geographical locations . . . adrift in the MIDDLE PASSAGE, abandoned by all known civilized norms of behavior: This too must be addressed.”