MoMA Audio
Jack Whitten: The Messenger
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GALLERY 1

610 King's Garden #4. 1968
Tagline: Hear from the artist on how his upbringing influenced his early work.

Artist, Jack Whitten: I saw myself as an innovator. I'm wanting to experiment in painting. I had to find out what was possible.

Narrator: Welcome to *J*ack Whitten: The Messenger*.* That voice you just heard belongs to the artist. You'll hear archival audio of him throughout this exhibition.

Whitten was born in Bessemer, Alabama in 1939. Over the course of his career, which spanned nearly 60 years, Whitten invented new forms of abstraction. But his earliest works were based on his own history.

Jack Whitten: I grew up in strict segregated apartheid. So I have memories of getting on the bus, there would be empty seats for the white people up front. The Blacks would be standing up in the back. I grew up in a total separate segregated society. Total. Not a little bit. Total.

Narrator: In 1957, Whitten met the Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., following a speech he gave in Montgomery, Alabama.

Jack Whitten: When I met King that time, he left a big mark on me. Man really got under me. He meant a lot. Before King's assassination, I was doing a whole group of paintings for Martin Luther King—*King's Garden, King's Wish, King's Dream*.

Narrator: This drawing, along with several other works hanging nearby, is part of that series.

Jack Whitten: Considering my background, coming out of the South, I'm becoming more and more aware, whether I tell a story or not, just the fact that I'm doing it is political. The act of doing what I'm doing in abstraction makes it political.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

611 Light Sheet I. 1969

Tagline: Hear how jazz musician John Coltrane inspired this painting.

Artist, Jack Whitten: I started playing sax in junior high. In high school, we formed a dance band. But the sounds I heard when I came to New York in the early '60s, I knew that there was no way I could participate. [Laughs] I love it, but my skills as a musician, there's no way. [Laughs]

The music was a way of me defining myself. I couldn't do it with the horn, so I figured I could deal with it in paint.

Narrator: Whitten started college as a premed student at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. In 1960, he moved to New York to study art at the Cooper Union. During this time, Whitten immersed himself in the city's jazz scene, meeting musicians, like the saxophone player John Coltrane.

Jack Whitten: John was playing out in Brooklyn at a club called Coronet, we would go out there like every night. I was speaking with John. He used the word wave, waving his hands. He says, "Well, you know, it's like a wave." And something went off in my head. It identified with what I was feeling in painting. It came directly out of his music—that way of playing that he had. In Coltrane's terminology, it was sheets of sound, and I was working with things in terms of sheets of light.

Narrator: To make his "sheets of light," Whitten built an apparatus for pushing the paint onto the canvas through a fine-mesh screen.

Jack Whitten: I made these huge silk screens. It was so big, I operated it with a pulley from the ceiling, with a rope. I would use the rope on the pulley to raise the screen, put it back down, flat over the canvas, press the paint through it, so the paint is being applied through a silk screen process. Light sheets came directly out of that talk with John Coltrane.

Narrator: You'll hear Coltrane's music throughout the exhibition—along with some of Whitten's other favorite musicians.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

612 NY Battle Ground. 1967

Tagline: The artist explains how he worked through questions of identity after moving from Birmingham, Alabama to New York City.

Artist, Jack Whitten: I knew that if stayed in the South, somebody was gonna kill me or I was gonna kill somebody, so I left. I took a Greyhound bus to New York.

The 1960s was what I call my autobiographical period. It was Jack Whitten putting Jack Whitten on the couch. You have to pick yourself apart—sexually, politically, aesthetically. That's the basic thing in being human: know thyself.

What's driving it though is what was happening in society at that time. We got the height of the Vietnam War, we have the height of the Civil Rights Movement. We've had three, four political assassinations. To be a young man here in New York, and to be a young Black man on top of it—you had a lot of shit to deal with. There was a lot on your plate.

This had an effect on us as painters. I'm doing political-inspired paintings. I'm doing savagery, New York battleground, right? In the air are like helicopters you'll see in Vietnam. Horrible, horrible nightmares.

Narrator: Whitten was under pressure to comment on social and political struggles by creating art that depicted the real world. Instead, he began exploring those themes using abstraction.

Jack Whitten: I was an abstract figurative expressionist. Figurative based, but loose. They were bright, intensity, expressive quality, color, extremely emotional. That's the best way to describe it.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

613 Homage to Malcolm. 1965

Tagline: Whitten reflects on how this sculpture represents the complexity of the leader to whom it's dedicated.

Narrator: Whitten made this sculpture in 1965, just a few months after the Civil Rights leader Malcolm X was assassinated.

Artist, Jack Whitten: The hatred and growing up in Alabama. The experiences I had with the civil right marches that we did. People attacking you with sticks and throwing rocks at you. I had to deal with all of that in the 1960s.

Narrator: Whitten reflected on this sculpture more than 50 years after he made it, in an interview from 2017.

Jack Whitten: It's stained for Blackness. You see the back with all of the stuck-in pieces there? That's rough stuff. Very rough stuff. The horn section smooths out, becomes very smooth. That middle section is built that way that it provides a middle ground. It has different stages of touch in it. So it's an instrument of time, built in three sections—sort of connects the past with the present. That's what that piece is.

Malcolm was not as one-dimensional as people try to make him be. Man had many stages to his personality. It's another example of white folks trying to squeeze Black people into one-dimensional people. But we're not that.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

GALLERY 2

614 Golden Spaces. 1971
Tagline: "I make a painting not paint a painting," Whitten once said. Explore what he meant by this.

Artist, Jack Whitten: You should make your own tool. Don't just depend upon the brush. That's why I don't even use the word to "paint" anymore. I say, I "make" a painting. I've changed the verb from "to paint" and I've changed it "to make."

Narrator: In 1970, Whitten began inventing tools to experiment with different ways of applying paint to the canvas.

Jack Whitten: In those days I had a big Afro, natural cut, and the practice was you keep the Afro comb in your hair. [Laughs] So I'm looking at this comb over there, I said, "My God, that's a beautiful tool!" So I started combing through the paint, and there's a series of those paintings.

Narrator: The triangle-shaped painting nearby, *Homage to Malcolm*, was made with an Afro comb.

Jack Whitten: Then it went to a carpenter's saw. Cut the handle off a carpenter's saw, mounted the saw onto a straight piece of wood and I'm pulling it across, down on my knees. My background in cabinet making and carpentry—tools and tool-making has always been a part of the process.

Narrator: To make the ridges in *Golden Spaces*, Whitten used a saw.

Jack Whitten: When I started combing through the paint, the light came through and revealed what was down underneath. I liked that.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

615 Testing (Slab). 1972

Tagline: Hear from the artist on how this painting represents a decade of experimentation.

Artist, Jack Whitten: After surviving the 1960s with all the emotional turmoil and stuff I went through, I saw that I had to find out something else about painting—what we call the materiality of paint. The studio became more of a laboratory.

Narrator: Whitten constructed a platform on the floor of his studio, which he called a drawing board.

Jack Whitten: It was about 12 feet by about 24 feet, very firmly built, meaning that I could walk across it. Built with plywood, laid out absolutely level. On top was a layer of industrial linoleum, so I could clean properly. The canvas was tacked to the top of that drawing board. What was started here with this big drawing board was a whole series of experimentations that lasted for 10 years: 1970 to 1980. So all of those years I was down on the floor.

Narrator: This is one of Whitten's "Slab" paintings. To make them, he pulled paint across the canvas using a large, rake-like tool he called "the Developer." These works also required a new kind of paint.

Jack Whitten: All through the '60s I worked primarily with oil paint, but in the '70s, I made a big switch to acrylic paint. I'm starting to work fairly large scale—and thick. I was using huge amounts of paint. I mean gallons. The acrylic moves faster. You can pour it and you can flow it out. There's no way in hell you could do that with oil paint.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

616 Developer Tool. 1970s

Tagline: Learn about one of Whitten's unique artmaking tools.

Narrator: Whitten called this tool the "Developer."

Artist, Jack Whitten: This tool allowed me to sweep the paint across the surface of the canvas. One horizontal sweep. At first, that gadget was just a 2 x 4 piece of wood and then I attached a piece of neoprene rubber to the 2 x 4, made it into a giant squeegee. The next stage was a slab of sheet metal attached. By 1977, I'm cutting notches, and I'm doing a lot of experimentations in terms of increments.

I had to find out what I could do with acrylic paint as a medium. I'm after innovation. I could get something different from neoprene rubber that I can get from wood that I could get from sheet metal.

Narrator: Pulling the Developer across the canvas instantly created an image. Whitten compared it to the way a camera works.

Jack Whitten: I knew what was influencing me the most was how photography operates. That small little aperture, little light comes in, you capture light, put it onto a sensitive film. I wanted something like that, but in painting. Not photographic processes, but using photography as analogy.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

GALLERY 3

617 Asa's Palace. 1973

Tagline: Hear from Whitten about his first "paint as collage" works.

Narrator: In 1973, Whitten began a series of works he described as "paint as collage." He started by building up layers of paint in different colors.

Artist, Jack Whitten: Mounds of acrylic paint, thick—three-quarters of an inch was built up. Then the squeegee pulling very liquid acrylic on top of those mounds of dried paint. When that was left to dry, I would take my carpenter's blade, a little jack plane, extremely sharp, and I would cut through the layers of acrylic.

You can see the different colors in there, within each little sliver of paint, you could see it. And it was a very surprising way to work, because when I build up those mounds of paint, you would forget what's under there. So every time you hit it with your jack plane, you would be surprised. It's sort of archaeological, really. The more you do, you start realizing what's the potential of it.

The battle cry was to make acrylic do anything possible, show all the possibilities of it, and I continue to explore it. So when I saw that paint could be used as this collage, I immediately recognized, this is a fantastic breakthrough with a lot of potential.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

618 Pink Psyche Queen. 1973
Tagline: Hear how Whitten devised a new way of making paintings with “one horizontal swoop.”

Narrator: For works like this, Whitten developed a technique of layering the paint on the canvas, and then using the tool he called his “Developer” to finish the image.

Artist, Jack Whitten: This tool allowed me to sweep the paint across the surface of the canvas. It's literally, shoop! As fast as you can get across there. One horizontal sweep.

Narrator: If Whitten was unhappy with the way the image looked, he had to react quickly.

Jack Whitten: This was a big studio. The ceiling height was over 14 feet. I had created a crow's nest with a ladder to go to the top of the studio, because that's the only way I could see. So I had to go up the ladder to the crow's nest to make a decision, run back down, re-pull, recalculate. So the decisions had to be made very split second, while it's wet. You're working wet into wet. And then if it's not what I want and it's struggling, I would wipe it out. Or sometimes I would leave it down, say the hell with it, let it dry out. Come back and start the whole thing over. But the important thing was the one gesture. That was what's most important to me.

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619 Prime Mover. 1974

Tagline: Whitten explains how works like these were made by using three-dimensional objects he called “disruptors.”

Narrator: In some works, Whitten placed objects he called “disruptors” beneath the canvas. When he raked his "Developer" tool over the wet paint on top, they left an imprint.

Artist, Jack Whitten: Whatever I’m placing beneath the canvas is strategically placed accordingly to the drawings that I’ve already tried this with. I’m using these stones underneath. I’m using a piece of wire, like a coat hanger.

Also, I’m using pressure as an element. I had metal bars, each one carrying different weight. Let’s say I would try 40 pounds of weight, 50 pounds of weight—so depending upon the weight, I could control the image. You’re talking systemic, conceptualized abstraction. Purely process.

That was severe in the sense that you couldn't get no action, either from the Black community or the white community. The idea of a Black abstract artist—nobody paid attention to you. The white community, they would just say, ah, they're aping white artists. And from the Black community, oh, they're not doing Black art with Black people, so why bother?

So, politically, you're caught between a rock and a hard place, as we say. So once you realize that, you have to develop your own agenda about who you are and what you're doing. My agenda right from the beginning is to change the course of painting through innovation. That's my agenda.

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GALLERY 4

620 Gamma Group I. 1975
Tagline: Hear how Whitten's work on this series reflects his perception of color.

Artist, Jack Whitten: My wife, Mary, being of Greek background, she wants to go to Greece. So I said, "Well, damn right, let's go. I'm interested." I've always read Greek philosophy. Summer of 1969, we planned this trip.

Narrator: Later on, Whitten began studying the Greek language.

Jack Whitten: And the first thing, we were taught: the alphabet. And then, it occurred to me that I had been looking for something to attach myself to without having to deal with titles and storytelling. I did a painting for each letter in the Greek alphabet, sometimes two, three paintings.

All of that was a limited palette—just black and white. I eliminated all spectrum color. And I did that purposely. Red, yellow, blue, green—it carries a lot of psychological meaning, and I wanted to avoid that. To my surprise, I found that, in working with black and white, it expanded my sense of spectrum color. If you stand before those paintings and allow yourself to go into them, you can sense the spectrum. You would sense it in your brain.

Narrator: For Whitten, these abstract paintings contain what he calls "compression."

Jack Whitten: I say to people, "Take everything you have ever felt, everything you have ever smelled, every sound you have ever heard, every sensation you have ever had that you have felt through your fingertips. Take all of that and compress it." You would get an understanding of abstraction.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

621 Dead Reckoning I. 1980

Tagline: This painting represents “the first time I stood up to do a painting in 10 years.”

Artist, Jack Whitten: In 1980, starting with *Dead Reckoning*, it was the first time I stood up to do a painting in ten years. It felt good. It felt good to come up off the floor and stand straight. Using a lot of retarders and thickeners, which allow me to lay down a slab of paint vertically, without it moving—no gravity pulling it.

Narrator: Whitten developed new handheld tools to incise the surface of the canvas. The diagram of circles and lines recalls the navigational systems he learned about during his training at the Tuskegee Institute.

Jack Whitten: Dead Reckoning is a term I had first heard when I was at Tuskegee, when I was with the Air Force ROTC. It deals with navigation. I remember the instructor explaining, at a certain point, as he put it, “If some shit happens,” [laughs] he says, “you have to make a decision.” Which is your best chance for survival? Do you continue on your present course? Or do you turn around and go back? That was the first time I’d heard that term, “dead reckoning.”

Another version is that you throw away all your navigational tools. Get rid of all your tools. Learn to plot, to navigate, no tools. Just go by your heart, go by your feeling. It’s a rich term.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art’s exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

622 Bessemer Dreamer. 1986

Tagline: Hear why Whitten referred to works like these as “constructions.”

Narrator: In the 1980s, Whitten began using plaster of Paris to make molds from everyday objects.

Artist, Jack Whitten: I'm doing things like making molds of manhole covers, molds taken from the sidewalk, from a tree in Central Park, molds made from my running shoes, from bubble wrap, supermarket packages. I'd run down to Canal Street to the fish market, take plaster of Paris, pour right directly on the fish, get a mold of it, take the fish, and have it for lunch.

Narrator: Whitten filled the molds with acrylic paint to make reliefs that he would attach to the surface of his canvases.

Jack Whitten: The idea of the paint as collage was really taking hold. Heavy acrylic surfaces. The paintings are being constructed—laminating, carving, sanding, gluing—that's what's happening in the paint.

For the first time in abstraction, I'm using referential material. I can go out in the street, get the sidewalk, bring it into the canvas. If I take a mold and I present it to you in a painting, your first feeling would be, “Oh, it's a found object.” But it's not a found object. So your mind is like, “What's illusion, what's not illusion here?” It's a great tension between them, very great tension.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art’s exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

6230 Bush Woman
Tagline: Why did Whitten begin making sculptures?

Narrator: In 1969, Whitten and his wife Mary visited Greece for the first time.

Artist, Jack Whitten: So we planned a trip to Greece. Two nights before leaving, I had this powerful dream. I saw a tree rooted in the earth in an isolated space. And the dream was a command. When you go to Greece, you are to find this tree. And when you find it, you're supposed to do a wood carving. So I went to Greece looking for this damn tree.

People advised us to go to Crete. We get on this bus, goes across the island, through the mountains. The bus goes all the way down to the seaside, and it pulled into this little village on the harbor and through the windows of the bus, I saw this tree, just as I saw it in my dream. I point it out to Mary, “Look, there's the tree. There's the tree! You see it?”

Narrator: This sculpture, *Bush Woman*, shows the influence of West African wooden sculpture on Whitten’s practice. The figure's exaggerated proportions also suggest ancient figurines Whitten saw in Greece.

Artist, Jack Whitten: I was interested in wood carving, because I had been introduced to African sculpture. In my naive mind, I figured, well, if I start wood carving, getting my hands on those shapes, maybe I can learn more than what I'm learning from the books. So I started carving wood. I figured it was the best practical way of understanding.

That became a very important part of what I do, going to Greece. I carve wood there in the summer months. I don't paint in the summer. I carve wood.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art’s exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

623 Xerox Project. 1974

Tagline: Whitten explains how and why he began making art using the ink toner found in Xerox printers.

Narrator: Whitten made this work using the toner from early photocopying machines made by Xerox.

Artist, Jack Whitten: Xerox Corporation gave myself and, I think, four other artists grant money, and all they wanted from us is to interact with their engineers and play with their equipment. That's all they told us. They brought us up to Rochester, and we stayed up there for like a day or so. After that, they said, "Whatever you want to take back home, equipment, feel free." So I jumped on the chance. I brought a ton of stuff back, and in particular, the toner, which is a dry powder.

Narrator: Whitten applied toner directly to the paper with a flat scraper blade. The loose powder was so sensitive that even the slightest movement could scatter it, producing random marks and stains. Through experimentation, Whitten discovered he could fix his powder drawings using heat lamps, mirroring the mechanical process of a photocopier.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

GALLERY 5

624 The Afro American Thunderbolt. 1983/1984

Tagline: Hear how this sculpture responds to histories of ancient art.

Narrator: The tall base of this work is inspired by a sculpture of Zeus that Whitten saw at the National Museum in Athens. In Greek mythology, Zeus is the god of sky and thunder. He is often depicted holding a javelin or lightning bolt.

Artist, Jack Whitten: Javelins are built to kill, that's what they're about, as a weapon, and as a hunting implement. But what's different with this javelin, it's heavy, takes a lot of effort.

Narrator: Whitten's use of metal conductors like copper and twisted nails suggests electricity. They also recall a type of Central African sculpture called an *Nkisi nkondi*, or "power figures." Nkisi are often studded with nails and believed to possess healing properties.

Jack Whitten: All of this stuff was inspired by those figures. All of it. That's where it starts. That's the source. So that piece got both Greek, African, in terms of its source material.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

625 The Dark Mirror: For Roy L. 1997

Tagline: Whitten explains how the 1990s marked an “evolution” in his style of painting.

Artist, Jack Whitten: The ‘90s were a big change. From the ‘90s on, I work with a dry palette. I don’t work with a wet palette anymore.

Narrator: Whitten began constructing work from paint that he had dried and cut into pieces.

Jack Whitten: I start off with pouring layers of paint and I get to the thickness that I want—very thin, paper thin, up to three, seven inches thick. Some of them are even thicker. That’s when I discovered that I could cut the paint into tesserae, a little cube of paint, that I would laminate down to a prepared canvas surface.

Narrator: Whitten experimented with different techniques for making the tesserae and for constructing paintings from them.

Jack Whitten: When you’re working this way, a lot of scrap is left over. Now I have found ways to take that scrap, reincorporate it back into the system. Techniques like freezing it, putting it in a large mortar pestle, grinding the hell out of it, throwing it back into the medium, that kind of a thing. No waste.

The canvas was tacked directly to the wall and I could make it any shape I wanted it. I no longer was bound by the rectangular or the square. I put the tesserae right to the edge, so you got a definitive edge, but a shaped canvas.

Narrator: For Whitten, these new techniques led to paintings that were three-dimensional.

Jack Whitten: They have a very physical presence about them. I’m interested in multi-dimensional space, and this is my way of extending the dimensionality. When the light hits that tesserae, it kicks it back out in multiple dimensions.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art’s exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

626 9.11.01. 2006

Tagline: The artist describes making this painting using materials like ash and blood.

Artist, Jack Whitten: Each painting comes out of specific experience, with a specific narrative built into it.

Narrator: For 40 years, Whitten lived in Tribeca, just north of the World Trade Center. He witnessed the Twin Towers being built in the late 1960s. And he was there when the buildings were attacked on September 11, 2001.

Jack Whitten: I was in the street that morning. This plane came right overhead, and when that sound came overhead, you could feel your flesh crawling, I mean, seriously, rippling. We looked up, this plane was right on top of us. At first you didn't see any flame, any smoke. You just saw this big gap and hole, and the sky was filled with a chandelier of glass. It was later you saw the smoke and the flames. My gut feeling told me that that was not an accident. This is what I call the particularities of violence—close to 3,000 people were murdered in my neighborhood. People were screaming, crying.

Narrator: After that experience, Whitten stopped making art for several years — except for this work, which took him five years to complete. It's composed of thousands of tiles of acrylic paint infused with materials like ash, dust, and blood.

Jack Whitten: I wanted that painting to be more raw and visceral. A lot of emotional stuff in there. I've had people that stand before that painting and cry.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

627 The Death of Fishing. 2007

Tagline: Hear how this sculpture was inspired by the artist's travels to the Mediterranean.

Artist, Jack Whitten: I'm a scuba diver. After years of spearfishing, crawling into caves and shit, the kind of light you see, space, sometimes I find walking out here on land quite boring. I'd rather be underwater.

Narrator: During his summers in Greece, Whitten spent lots of time swimming and fishing in the sea.

Jack Whitten: After so many years, I came to the realization that the Mediterranean is dead. There's no more fish. The fishermen have been reduced to subsistence living.

So that's what that piece is about. It's carved as a hanging piece, an effigy, like a lynching, really. Open body carved out, lot of fishing paraphernalia from the sea, fishing nets, lures, hooks, lot of bones from a lot of different fish. All hand carved.

You don't know what you're looking at. Mixed metaphor: boat, body, some sort of ancient artifact. Often in sculpture, I do things that deal with inside-outside. How the outside affect the inside and vice versa.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

GALLERY 6

628 Black Monolith III (For Barbara Jordan). 1998
Tagline: Whitten explains how the materials used for his work are unique to each subject.

Artist, Jack Whitten: When I'm building the tesserae, it's always unique to subject. The subject is built into the paint.

Narrator: Whitten created a new set of mosaic tiles, or “tesserae,” for each painting, mixing colored pigments, metals, and other materials into an acrylic medium. Once dried and cut, he dropped these tiles into a bucket, and one-by-one, attached them to the canvas.

Jack Whitten: I was building the Barbara Jordan painting—that's when I pointed to the bucket, you know, “You see that bucket of paint over there? Barbara Jordan is in that bucket.” [laughs]

Narrator: Whitten dedicated this painting to Barbara Jordan, a lawyer and professor from Texas. In 1972, she became the first Black woman from the South to be elected to the United States Congress. Jordan was a powerful speaker and voice of conscience for the nation, a presence Whitten evokes here in the richly colored tiles.

He felt that subject matter, ideas, and emotions could be infused into the material.

Jack Whitten: Anything you want can be compressed into the paint. I can tell a story with it. I can build a narrative into it. It's not an illustration of something. It's within the thing itself.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art’s exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

629 Black Monolith IV (For Jacob Lawrence). 2001
Tagline: Hear from the artist on how his Black Monolith series first began.

Artist, Jack Whitten: The monoliths—it's about a person in the Black community, someone who has made amazing contributions, someone who has made a difference, important people in society.

Narrator: Whitten came up with the concept for this series in Greece.

Jack Whitten: At my house in Crete, we got a fantastic monolith, a bulge of rock coming up out of the earth that stands over 300 feet or more. It's so impressive. So my mind, symbolic, is thinking, Black Monolith, that kind of a presence. All of those Black Monoliths had this massive presence about them.

Narrator: This one is dedicated to the painter Jacob Lawrence, whose work chronicled the African American experience. Whitten first met Lawrence as a young art student, when one of his teachers, Robert Blackburn, introduced him to several Black artists from an earlier generation.

Jack Whitten: Robert Blackburn took me under his wing. Immediately introduced me to a bunch of people in the community. He was like, grabbing me, "You've got to go meet Romare Bearden." He calls up Romare, "Hey man, we got a Black student here at the Cooper. You gotta meet him." [Laughs] So he takes me to Romare Bearden. And then Romare says, "You gotta meet Jacob Lawrence," so he sends me to Jacob Lawrence. Those were my first great mentors.

Narrator: Whitten worked on the series over the course of more than two decades.

Jack Whitten: The Black community, we got so many important people to celebrate, I could do Black Monoliths the rest of my life. It's a memorial. It's a dedication. It's an act of thanking you for what you have done, what you've given me, what I've learned from you. It's an act of reverence.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

630 Black Monolith, IX (Open Circle for Ornette Coleman). 2015
Tagline: This painting captures the boundary-breaking spirit of jazz and Whitten's artistic practice.

Artist, Jack Whitten: In the early '60s, I was spending all my free time hanging out in the jazz clubs. I actually knew Miles Davis, knew Thelonious Monk. I had come from a musical background playing the horn. When I had made the commitment to go totally into painting, it was only natural that music would be the major influence.

Narrator: This work honors Ornette Coleman, a trumpeter and saxophonist who Whitten heard many times at a club called the Five Spot. Coleman was a founder of "free jazz," which broke away from traditional chord sequences and time structures. The loose, open arrangement of the tiles here suggests that sense of freedom.

Jack Whitten: Jazz is the expansion of freedom. That's what it's about. This is what attracts people to it, all over the world. This is what attracts artists to it. Spontaneity—extremely important ingredient.

Narrator: For Whitten, working with acrylic mosaic tiles encouraged that spontaneity.

Jack Whitten: I have hundreds of them that are just sitting for use. When I'm building those paintings, it's all this material I got over the whole studio floor. Brief, conceptualized in how you lay it out, but beyond that, pure intuition, which gave me a fantastic freedom to work.

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GALLERY 7

631 Atopolis: For Édouard Glissant. 2014

Tagline: Hear how Whitten's "tessera" works combine techniques of painting and collage making.

Narrator: *Atopolis* is Whitten's largest painting—eight panels covered in glittering tiles and molds. It means "without place." For Whitten, it's an idea that's linked to the transatlantic slave trade when millions of African peoples were displaced from their homelands and forced to labor in the Americas.

Whitten described Atopolis as a "borderless city," where all relationships are "thoroughly interconnected and egalitarian."

Jack Whitten: Coming out of Alabama and what I experienced, It would be foolish of me to say that bitterness does not exist. But I realized that I had to make a choice of what I wanted to do with my life, what kind of person I wanted to be. So I made a pact. I signed a contract with the universe that I was not gonna hate. It's a contract between spirit and matter.

Narrator: Over time, Whitten has embraced an ever-expanding view of the universe.

Jack Whitten: What I've been working with for the last 50 years became more, I like to use the word profound. The tesserae, not only can I work it as a little unit like that but I can work is as a wave. It continues to expand. When freedom expands, consciousness expands.

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632 Technological Totem Pole. 2013

Tagline: What is the role of technology in this sculpture?

Artist, Jack Whitten: I'm being affected a lot by modern technology and how data flows and operates. Information, codes, coding—the word we use, bits, which is a storage of information.

Narrator: Whitten conceived of this sculpture's marble base as a "charger," giving energy to a technological totem pole. The curve of the sculpture retains the shape of the log he carved it from. Whitten studded it with circuit boards, flip phones, and disk drives, devices used to communicate and store information.

Jack Whitten: When I first went to the Brooklyn Museum, when I saw the big totems up there, from Alaska, British Columbia. Later, I understood them as computer banks. Information is stored about the tribe, the history of the people. So when I use modern technology, it's a way of connecting the present to the past.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art's exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

633 Escalation II (x2 + y2 = 1) for Alexander Grothendieck. 2014
Tagline: Hear how Whitten found freedom through his explorations of math and science.

Artist, Jack Whitten: I read a lot. A lot of my reading is in terms of science and in terms of philosophy.

Narrator: This painting is dedicated to the French mathematician Alexander Grothendieck, a leading figure in the creation of modern algebraic geometry.

Jack Whitten: Grothendieck—great mathematician working with a set of equations that I have deep interest in. I've used the circle a lot. The source of the circle came from nature—earlier people took it from the sun. They took it from the moon. But when I started reading about what this man was doing, he says, “it's just an equation. It's a set of numbers.” That released me from relying upon the circle as something that was derived from nature. And it opened up my mind to all other kinds of possibilities.

Narrator: Whitten's study of math and science led him to new ways of seeing the world.

Jack Whitten: Early on it was psychological, political stuff, clashing of the races, violence, that kind of stuff. Now I deal with structures purely in terms of geometry. It eased my head a little bit and it gave me more freedom.

Archival audio courtesy of The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, and the Baltimore Museum of Art’s exhibition *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*

PLATFORM

634 Lichnos. 2008
Tagline: Whitten explains how he made this work.

Narrator: This sculpture was inspired by a fish found in Crete.

Artist, Jack Whitten: This fish was the symbol that I started with. It's called Lichnos. Usually we catch them in nets, because they're deep. But you have to be extremely careful when you catch them. They have spines that come out on the sides. And if ever one of those things penetrate your skin, you got big problems.

Narrator: He used two kinds of wood. There's a bit of red where they join.

Jack Whitten: That's a piece of black mulberry that's inserted into carupia. The carupia wood, the hardwood, is red. That wood is not stained. That red comes out of the natural wood. Tough, stringy, strong—very difficult wood to work with. I found that after a major fire. The whole inside is burnt out. I left that.

Narrator: The whitewash on the cinder blocks is the same kind that's traditionally used on the exterior of houses in Crete.

Jack Whitten: It's a gorgeous white.It keeps its brilliance, but you have to keep doing it over the years.

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635 Quantum Wall, VIII (For Arshile Gorky, My First Love In Painting). 2017
Tagline: Whitten reflects on his life and legacy as an artist.

Artist, Jack Whitten: There is a joy in what I do. I'm an artist who believes that when you go to the studio, if you're not having fun, you shouldn't go.

Narration: When Whitten died in 2018 at the age of 78, this painting still hung on his studio wall. Here he is reflecting on his legacy.

Jack Whitten: I think I'll go down in history as an innovative artist, you know, someone who's expanded the possibility of abstract painting. I'm a child of the 60s, you know? Our motto was "keep on trucking." Seriously, keep on trucking. That was the motto.

There is a sedimentary stone that I work with on Crete. Every time you take that chisel and cut that stone and opens it up, do you realize you are the first person that have seen something that took place 40, 50 million years ago, some cases 100 million years ago? You're the first person to see it. Painting is that way. When you get to that point, and you know it's complete, you realize, I'm the first motherfucker to have seen this. [Laughs] So there's a fantastic joy to that.

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