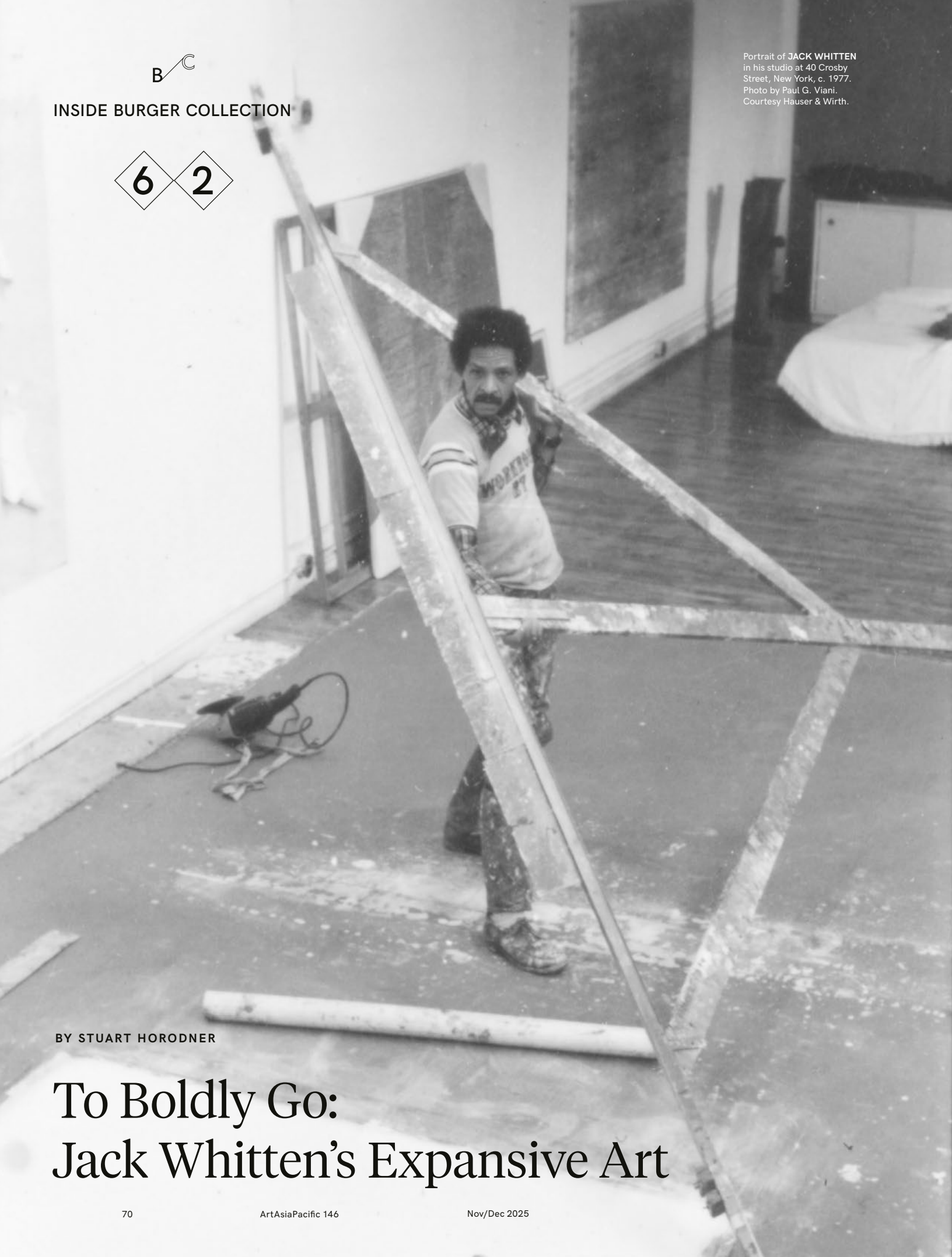


Portrait of **JACK WHITTEN** in his studio at 40 Crosby Street, New York, c. 1977. Photo by Paul G. Viani. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

BY STUART HORODNER

# To Boldly Go: Jack Whitten's Expansive Art

For six decades, Jack Whitten used his art as a platform for experimentation, finding the appropriate materials and formats to express his feelings about indelible experiences and diverse subject matter.

Born in 1939 in Bessemer, Alabama, Whitten grew up in the segregated American South, which he often referred to as "American apartheid." As a boy, he enjoyed hunting and fishing and learning domestic skills, even as he confronted the severe limitations and pressures of racism. Participating in Sunday services and funerals at the Church of God instilled in him a sense of ritual and the value of bearing witness to joys and sorrows. His college studies at Tuskegee Institute expanded his interests in botany, biology, and zoology; and at Southern University, he engaged in non-violent protests influenced by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Coming to New York in 1960 to attend art school at the Cooper Union, he established meaningful dialogues with Black artists, including Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Norman Lewis; while getting encouragement from painters Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, and others that he met at the Cedar Bar and Lower East Side social spaces. From this period on, Whitten became part of a community of cultural movers and shakers—poets, critics, jazz musicians, and fellow artists—whose works would come to define the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. He was privileged to have close contact with the likes of LeRoi Jones, Allen Ginsberg, Kate Millett, Miles Davis, Cecil Taylor, Bob Thompson, and many others.

Whitten always insisted on developing a rigorous mode of making that was alert to present conditions and developments (Minimalism, Conceptual art, Color Field) while being grounded in historical methods such as Old Master painting techniques, African wood carving, and Greek and Roman mosaics. An avid reader, he mined texts by philosophers and social theorists like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gaston Bachelard, George Kubler, Thomas Dewey, and Édouard Glissant, looking for connections to his own thinking about art, sociopolitical realities, and epiphanies of the everyday.

Each decade of his career saw Whitten using the studio as a lab where he could manipulate oil paints, acrylics, polymer mediums, pigments, various inks, and papers. Figuration, Euclidean geometry, fractals, compression, dispersal, serendipity, and more—each was tested and assessed. In sympathy with Richard Serra's *Verb List* from 1967, Whitten performed "actions to relate to oneself, material, place, and process."[1]

As a young man in the turbulent 1960s, he sought his own creative identity and acknowledged—like many of his peers—a debt to the Abstract Expressionists in general, and the powerful influence of de Kooning's paintings in particular. A tenor saxophone player in his teenage years, Whitten attended jazz concerts regularly at the Five Spot Café and Birdland, talking to musicians whenever he could.

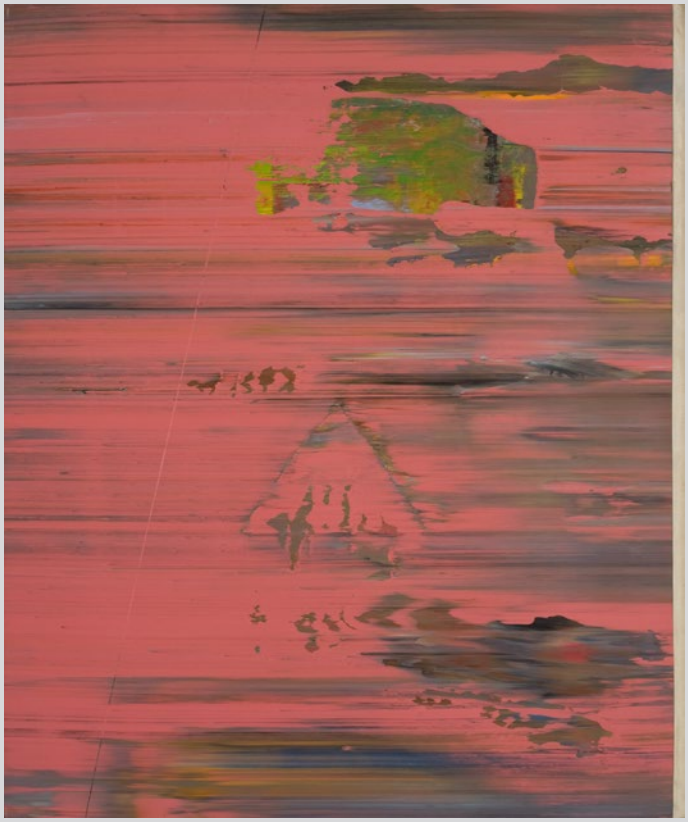
In his oil-on-canvas *NY Battle Ground* (1967), frenetic streaks assault a central form. These scribbles evoke plumes of bloody red and gray, which further resemble swarming insects or helicopters. It is an apocalyptic scene that could be lifted from the nightly news, with reports of bombings and casualties in Vietnam or brutal beatings during civil rights marches.

A series of gestural landscapes from 1968 demonstrate his understanding and appreciation for Arshile Gorky's formal vocabulary and material sensitivity. *Garden in Bessemer VI* and *Martin Luther King's Garden*, for example, incorporate fluid brushwork and organic shapes that coalesce into dense foliage and grimacing faces.

The 1970s established Whitten as an "artist's artist," someone whose endeavors are held in high regard by peers who know the many philosophical and practical challenges involved. Affirming the primacy of the studio, Whitten got on his hands and knees and used carbon sticks and paper to make a series of rubbings of his floor, documenting the accumulated drips, bumps, depressions, and staples that resided there.

It was during this decade that he put down his brushes and oil paints (with their associations to the easel and expressivity) and began to conceive of *making* paintings as opposed to *painting* them. He poured "slabs" of acrylic, measured to specific thicknesses, and created what he called "developers"—various T-shaped tools in rubber and metal that allowed him to manipulate gallons of paint in different ways. He used his carpenter's plane to carve through layers; he raked the staged pours using Afro combs and notched blades. A conversation with John Coltrane clarified his paintings as "sheets of light," connected to the musician's flow of continuous sound.


**JACK WHITTEN**, *NY Battle Ground*, 1967, oil on canvas, 152×213 cm, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase and gift of Sandra and Tony Tamer, Agnes Gund, Marlene Hess, James D. Zirin, and Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida. Photo by Jonathan Muzikar. Copyright Jack Whitten Estate. Digital image copyright 2025 The Museum of Modern Art.



**JACK WHITTEN**, *Pink Psyche Queen*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 180×152cm. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Mary and Earle Ludgin by exchange, 2012.14. Photo by John Berens. Copyright Jack Whitten Estate. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

*Pink Psyche Queen* (1973) and other canvases such as *Prime Mover*, *Chinese Doorway*, and *Lapsang* (all 1974), possess unforgettable conditions of color, speed, energy, and interruption, made possible by Whitten's precise calculations and his acceptance of serendipitous occurrences. Several of these works were featured in the artist's 1974 solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, curated by Marcia Tucker. That same year, he participated in a residency at the Xerox Corporation, which allowed him to use their dry black toner and machinery for his own purposes. Such opportunities confirmed his commitment to exploring unconventional materials and methods, and made clear that his painterly explorations were linked to photographic and scanning processes.

Whitten's response to the 1980s had him in the street, making moulds of city surfaces and objects—manhole covers, diamond plates, metal screens, tire treads. Back in the studio, he would use these to cast an inventory of acrylic skins with optical patterns and mottled textures. He would then collage them onto canvas, composing topographies that owe something to Hans Hofmann's notion of "push-pull," with their overlapping shapes and emerging or receding planes. Whitten's cultivation of paint as "skin" gave him an infinite range of elements to work with and an evocative allusion to the politicized body.

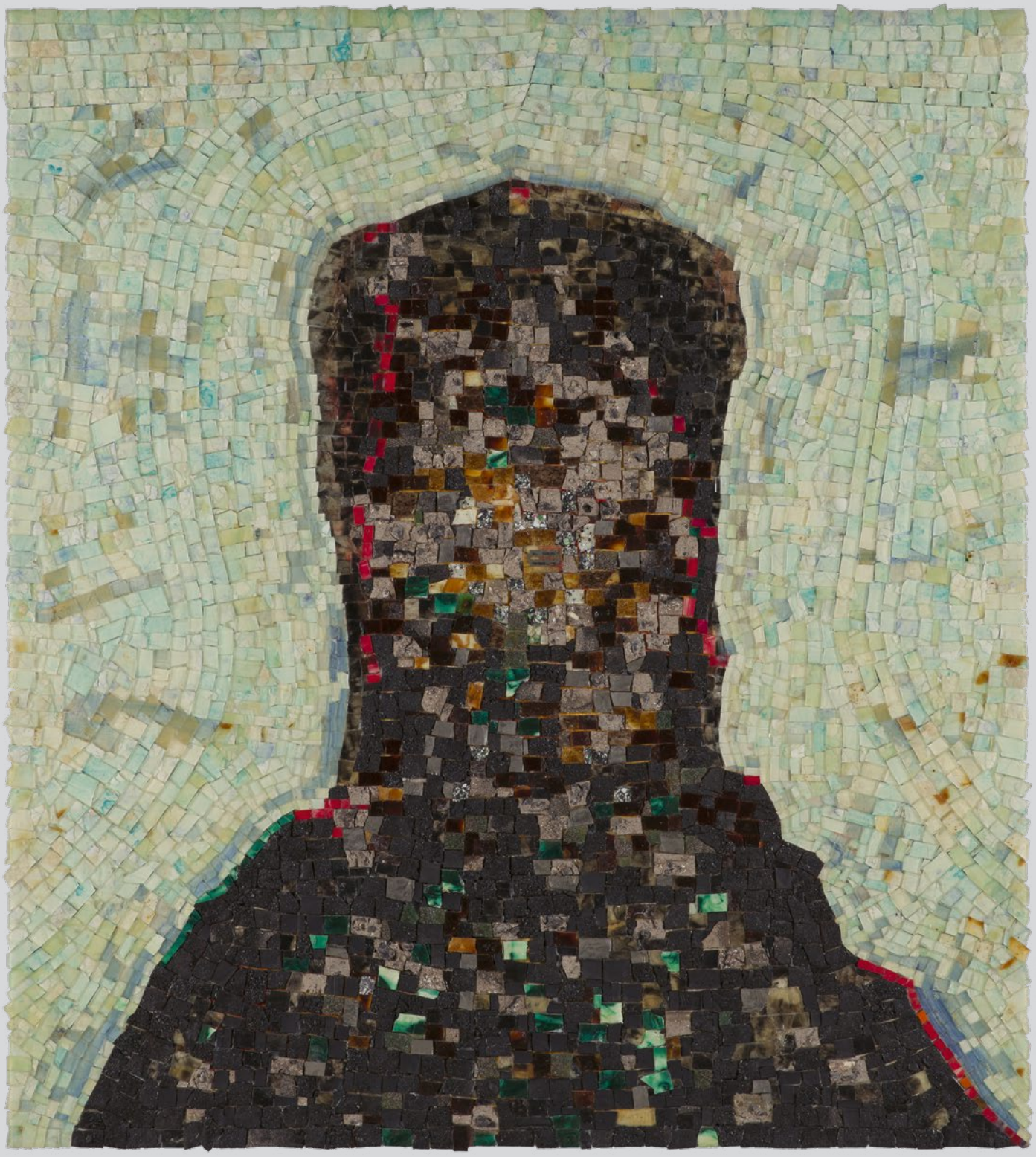
Many of the paintings made using this technique have a sense of confinement and contention, as Whitten establishes borders, off-kilter grids, and eroded forms. Several of them are tributary in nature, memorials for individuals that Whitten knew or felt a connection to. They include the underknown as well as the widely celebrated: artists Porfirio DiDonna and Christopher Wilmarth, critic Clement Greenberg, and writers James Baldwin and Joseph Campbell, among others. One example is *Willi Meets The Keeper (for Willi Smith)* (1987), dedicated to the influential designer whose accessible and affordable clothing helped democratize fashion. He is widely considered the inventor of "streetwear," something that Whitten certainly would have valued as he went about gathering his own urban data.

In the 1990s, Whitten took his acrylic skins and collage methods to a next phase—a three-part process he described as "construct, deconstruct, reconstruct." He would cast layers of paint onto sheets of commercial plastic, and once dry, cut them into small squares that reminded him of tesserae—the blocks of stone, tile, or glass used to create mosaics. With these units, Whitten could model a form and establish fluctuating spatial depth. He told critic and educator Jeanne Siegel at the time: "My acrylic paint tesserae represent the evolution of Cézanne's brushstroke, Seurat's dot, Picasso's cube, Malevich and Mondrian's square, de Kooning's gesture, Pollock's line."[2]

In *Black Monolith II: Homage to Ralph Ellison The Invisible Man* (1994), Whitten pays tribute to the author of the 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, incorporating a range of materials embedded in acrylic—including molasses, copper, salt, ash, onion skin, eggshell, a razor blade. More overtly figurative than most of the artist's paintings, it exemplifies what would become Whitten's increasing freedom to use anything to align object matter with subject matter, less an issue of illustration and more a sense of conjuring. Writing about Whitten's methods, curator and critic Saul Ostrow posited: "He has continued to press his practice to the extreme, not only to intensify his work but also to avoid the entropy repetition and stasis that is endemic to abstract painting."[3]

As he moved into the first decades of the 21st century, Whitten's years of knowledge through experimentation and his inventory of cast and cut acrylic skins were combined to address any possible source of inspiration—downloadable electronic stamps, a newspaper ad, elementary school shootings, and the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The artist witnessed that horrific event from the front of his Tribeca

**JACK WHITTEN**, *Black Monolith II, Homage To Ralph Ellison The Invisible Man*, 1994, acrylic, molasses, copper, salt, coal, ash, chocolate, onion, herbs, rust, eggshell, razor blade on canvas, 149 × 133 × 4 cm. Copyright Jack Whitten Estate. Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum, William K. Jacobs, Jr. Fund, 2014.65.



**JACK WHITTEN**, *Black Monolith X, Birth of Muhammad Ali*, 2016, acrylic on canvas. 213 × 160 cm. Collection of Pamela Joyner. Photo by John Berens. Copyright Jack Whitten Estate. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

home studio and would later state: "To think that close to 3,000 people were murdered in my neighborhood—nobody gets over that, you really don't. So I made a vow to do something about it."[4]

In 2006, almost 40 years after he painted *NY Battle Ground*, Whitten constructed *9.11.01*, a monumental act of remembrance that features a churning mound of debris and viscera at the base of a charred black-and-brown pyramid, pierced by four sharp projectiles. Outlines of the two towers can be glimpsed in the crystalline blue-gray sky. Aware that this work was poised between abstraction and illustration, the artist said: "It has such a fierce insistence as object that it arrives at autonomy. My buddy Henry Geldzahler used to call this the 'Mt. Everest factor.'"[5]

In *Apps for Obama* (2011), Whitten used an iPhone screen as his starting point, deploying an arrangement of colorful circles and lozenge shapes set within a luminous field of blue and white tesserae. The work is a fine example of Whitten's understanding of technological realities and cultural shifts, and his belief that painting (a medium whose viability was challenged throughout his lifetime) is capable of addressing such conditions. In 2015, Whitten received a National Medal of Arts, given to him by then US president Barack Obama in a ceremony at the White House. The award recognized the artist's inventive techniques, but it just as easily celebrated his conceptual linking of ancient mosaic patterns with the data storage and code of mobile personal computers.

Whitten's *Black Monolith, X (The Birth of Muhammad Ali)* (2016) is a tribute to the professional boxer and activist, known around the world as "The Greatest." Ali's pugilistic skills and verbal acuity are legendary, and his refusal to be drafted into the American war in Vietnam—owing to his religious beliefs as a Muslim—made him a symbol of antiwar sentiment. In Whitten's canvas, a celestial event seems to be taking place, as rounded forms of different sizes exert a gravitational pull on each other. It is as if Ali's birth is connected to the Big Bang theory or black holes formed by the collapse of giant stars.

As a fan of *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966–69), Whitten was familiar with the television show's opening narration by Captain Kirk (actor William Shatner): "Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before." In an unpublished statement from 2015, titled "Beyond Abstraction," Whitten wrote, "To go where no one has ever gone before is my goal in painting."[6] In his consistent expansion of painting's mutability and its relationship to aesthetics, materiality, science, and technology, it is clear that Whitten achieved this.

Since Whitten's death in 2018, prominent exhibitions have chronicled the depth and richness of his varied output, including the presentation of his visually hypnotic canvases from the *Greek Alphabet Paintings* (1975–78) at Dia Beacon in 2022–23; an overview of his relatively unknown sculptures and their influence on his pictorial strategies in "Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963-2017," at The Baltimore Museum of Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2018; and his most recent retrospective this year, "Jack Whitten: The Messenger," at the Museum of Modern Art. These surveys, along with numerous publications about his work, such as *Notes from the Woodshed* (transcriptions of his studio notes between 1962 and 2017), confirm Whitten's legacy as a permission-giving artist whose precision, curiosity, and fearlessness created options for others.

1 Richard Serra, *Verb List*, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/152793
2 "Jack Whitten: An African-American and Pollock," interview with Jeanne Siegel in *After Pollock: Structures of Influence*, OPA (Overseas Publishing Association), part of Gordon and Breach Publishing Group, 1999, pp. 143–144.
3 Saul Ostrow, "Fluid Effects at the Outer Limits: The Paintings of Jack Whitten," exhibition brochure for Paintings from the Seventies at Daniel Newburg Gallery, Inc/Recent Paintings at Horodner Romley Gallery, p.4.
4 From "In Conversation: Jack Whitten with Robert Storr,' *Brooklyn Rail*, September 2007, https://brooklynrail.org/2007/09/art/whitten/
5 Jack Whitten, interview with the author, November 2, 2007
6 Jack Whitten, unpublished statement, "Beyond Abstraction," 2015, quoted in Richard Schiff, *Jack Whitten: Cosmic Soul*, 2022, Hauser & Wirth Publishers, p. 207.

**JACK WHITTEN**, *Apps for Obama*, 2011, acrylic on hollow core door, 213 × 231 cm. Photo by John Berens. Copyright Jack Whitten Estate. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

**Jack Whitten** was born in Bessemer, Alabama, in 1939. He moved to Manhattan in 1960 to pursue a BFA in painting from the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and lived in the city for the rest of his life. After his first trip to Greece in 1969, he regularly spent summers on the island of Crete, where he carved wood and made assemblage sculptures. Whitten's work has been championed by many curators, including Kelly Baum, Henry Geldzahler, Kellie Jones, Kathryn Kanjo, Katy Siegel, Courtney J. Martin, Robert Storr, and Marcia Tucker, among others. His work has been exhibited at the Baltimore Museum of Art; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Whitten died in New York in 2018.

**Stuart Horodner** is director of the University of Kentucky Art Museum. He has held curatorial positions at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Georgia; Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Oregon; and Bucknell University Art Gallery, Pennsylvania. In 2008, he curated "Jack Whitten: Memorial Paintings," a survey of the artist's tributary works; and lectured on Whitten's 1974 painting, *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, as part of the "99 Objects" series at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2015.