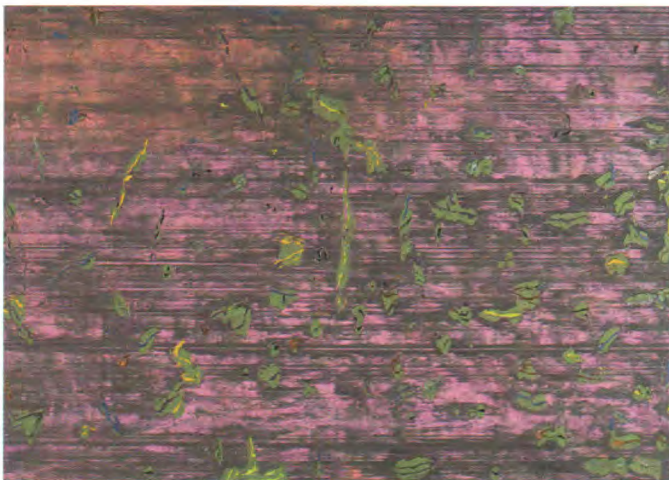


WALTHAM, MA

Jack Whitten

ROSE ART MUSEUM, BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

A visible presence among New York painters since the mid-1960s, Jack Whitten has recently received a surge of attention. Within the past couple of years, his work has been featured in multiple solo gallery shows and major group exhibitions such as “The Encyclopedic Palace” in Venice and “Blues for Smoke” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—not to mention on the cover of this magazine in February 2012—and a retrospective, scheduled for the fall of 2014, is currently in preparation at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. The theme of rediscovery continues at the Rose Art Museum’s small but eye-opening show curated by Katy Siegel, where moments of acquaintance occur for both the public and the artist himself: The exhibition focuses on the years 1971–73, during which Whitten launched unprecedented investigations into the material possibilities of acrylic and pigment. Most of these works had never been exhibited, having been promptly rolled up and stored in the artist’s studio for four decades, seemingly forgotten; Whitten himself had never before seen the show’s



Jack Whitten,
Asa's Palace, 1973,
 acrylic on canvas,
 8' 11½" x 12' 10½"

two largest paintings—*The Pariah Way* and *Asa's Palace*, both 1973—stretched and hung on the wall.

In addition to this particular act of unveiling, the Rose exhibition furthers Siegel's advocacy of the early '70s as a watershed moment for, rather than a lull in, the history of painting—an argument that she developed in the 2006 exhibition "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975," which included Whitten. The Rose displays five paintings, a series of remarkable paint collages on canvas, and several works on paper, all of which testify to Whitten's oft-stated drive to overturn dominant postwar attitudes toward process and material. For his paintings from this period, the artist employed innovative devices such as rakes, combs, and, in a brash move to negate the autographic gesture of the Abstract Expressionists (Whitten has spoken of wanting to paint "faster than Bill de Kooning"), a twelve-foot-long squeegee—dubbed "the developer"—that allowed for the rapid dragging of paint across the canvas as it lay on a low, specially constructed table on the floor of his studio. In Whitten's work, Jackson Pollock's dance of dripping and slinging around and over the support turns into a single leveling, methodical movement from one end of the canvas to the other, producing the paintings' smooth yet pitted faces. The cement-like surface of *Third Testing (Slab)*, 1972, for example, is shallow and pocked, gouged and tweaked—a result of Whitten's pouring a layer of acrylic and shaving off the top with a two-by-four.

Similar intimations of space are seen in the six works included from the series "Acrylic Collages," 1973, in which Whitten affixed curls of dry or semidry paint sliced from his other compositions to untreated linen, using acrylic as a kind of binder, creating images that loosely resemble notation or punctuation and attest to his exploratory play with the language of his medium. Acrylic also forms a thin layer onto which Whitten dropped and smeared dry pigment in two sets of works on paper, "Dispersal 'B,'" 1971, and "Cut Acrylic Series," 1973, both of which suggest movement into as well as across the plane. Critics often point out that Whitten's squeegee paintings predate those of Gerhard Richter, but the variety of surface textures that Whitten achieved and his investigative mode of continual experimentation further distinguish his practice. In *Asa's Palace*, the most visually stunning work in the show, pink and lavender base colors stretch across the canvas but are broken up by irregular, jagged shapes where gray underpainting is glimpsed. These shallow craters also expose blobs and streaks of yellow, purple, blue, and brown, all of which pop and vibrate to counter the first impression of smoothness, compelling the viewer to look more closely, and find instances of depth.

—Gregory Williams