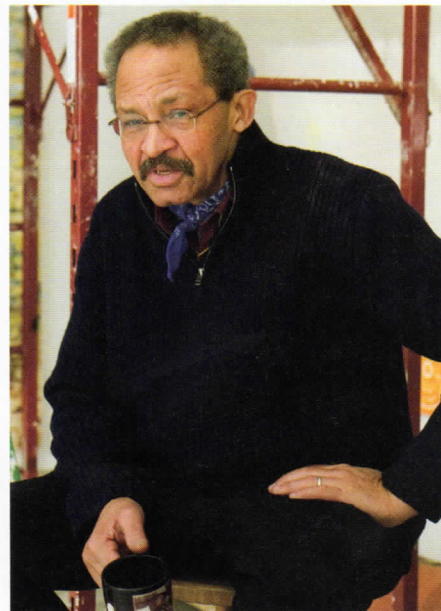
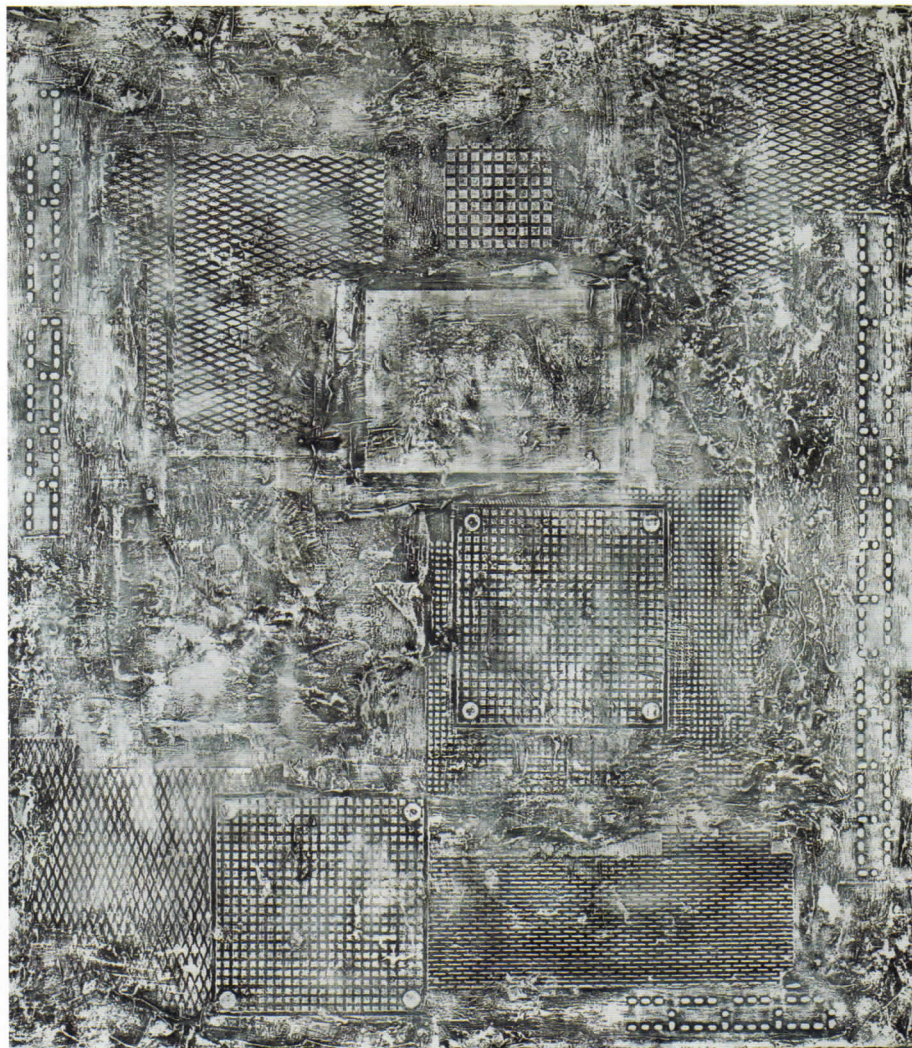


# The Maker

**JACK WHITTEN CAN MAKE ACRYLIC DO THINGS NO ONE ELSE HAS IMAGINED, BUT HE PREFERS NOT TO BE CALLED A PAINTER.** BY REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN



**JACK WHITTEN IS** an artist visibly in love with paint. Over a 40-year career he has made luscious abstract works, at first in oil and later in acrylic. And yet he is quick to point out that he does not consider himself a painter but rather someone who makes artworks with paint.

As a young man in New York in the early 1960s, Whitten's paintings were rooted in the highly gestural Abstract Expressionism then prevalent. Eventually, he felt a

need to forge his own style and so, like his contemporaries who experimented with different versions of color-field painting, Whitten strove to take his hand out of the work. To achieve this goal he built a massive rake with which he could spread paint across a canvas on the floor. "I conceived the whole plane as a single gesture," he explains.

A tall, lean figure with bright eyes, Whitten has a generous and inquisitive nature. He describes his studio as a labo-

ratory, and throughout the '70s, he conducted many different investigations with his rake. He added a strip of rubber to its edge and created glorious squeegee paintings that predate Gerhard Richter by 10 years. Later he replaced the rubber with a strip of steel notched in various increments and combed the surface of the canvas. In the '80s he moved the canvas off the floor and back onto the easel. Still avoiding the brush, he applied thick layers of acrylic to the surface and, as it dried, cut through the skin to reveal the wet paint underneath. In another series he imprinted found objects such as metal screens and the heel of his boot into the wet surface to create geometric patterns.

Experimentation with paint actually directed many of Whitten's choices. He discovered a source that would sell 55-gallon drums of different acrylic polymers and he set out to explore their variances in viscosity, clarity, brilliance and elasticity. To create color he added all kinds of different materials: iron oxide, dry pigments, crushed Mylar,

From left: *Garden in Bessemer*, 1986, acrylic on canvas; Jack Whitten in his studio, which he calls his "laboratory."



Though primarily abstract, Whitten's compositions are inspired by family members, artists, writers, musicians, politicians and occasionally events that have affected his life.

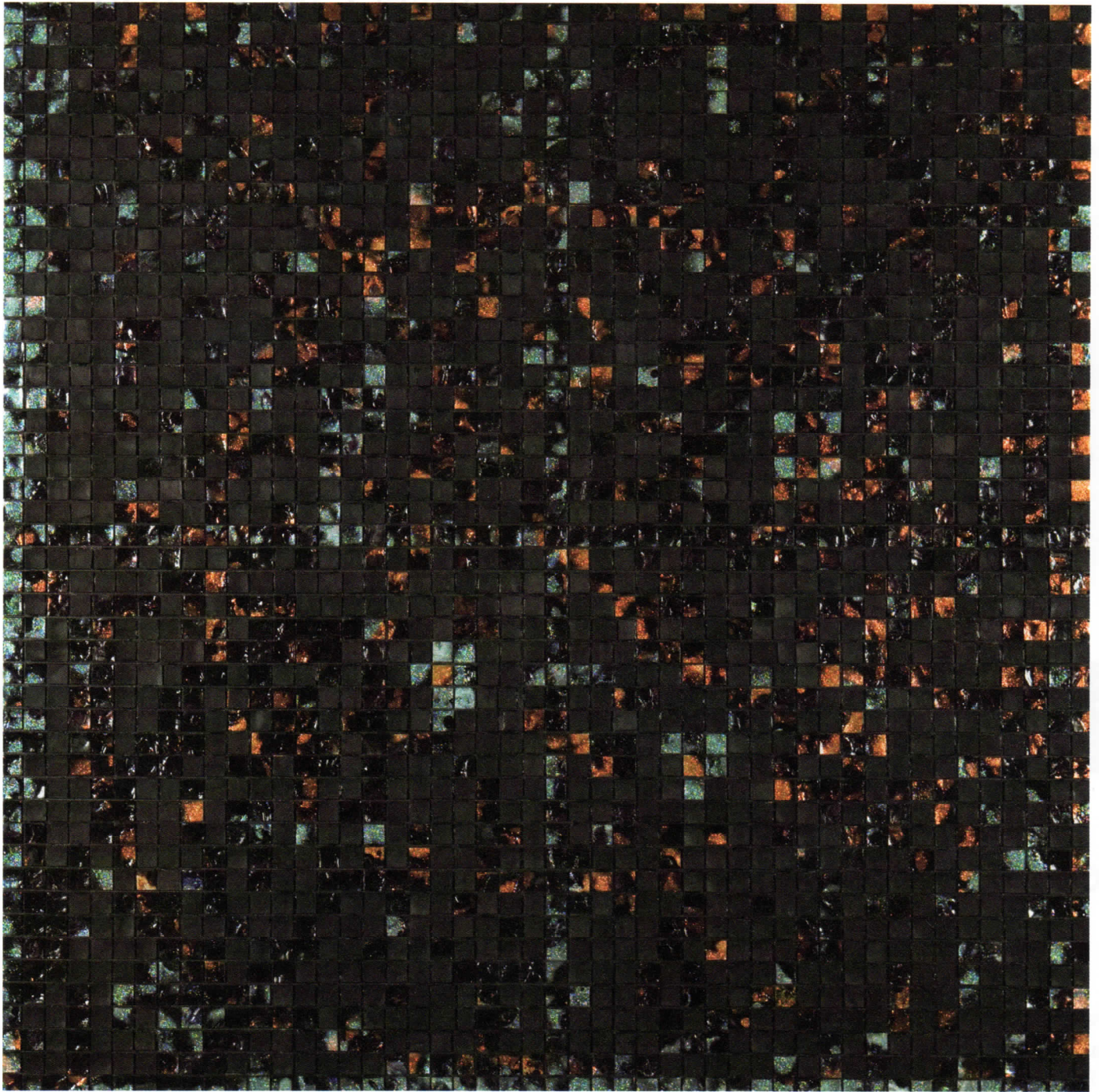
ash, bone, even blood. "Through experimentation with acrylic," Whitten explains, "I found out that I could lift that paint up off the canvas and hold it in my hand, which made it more of a physical fact. Then, of course, I realized that I could use it as collage. Paint as collage: making, not painting."

This discovery eventually led to the mosaic-style paintings that have occupied Whitten for the past 15 years. The artist spends every summer on the island of Crete, and on his various travels throughout Greece has always admired the Byzantine mosaics. In 1990 he began to fabricate his own version of tesserae, the small squares from which mosaics are made. He poured the acrylic polymer into a shallow tray and allowed it to harden. To make the squares more precise, he used a large guillotine-like blade. For more recent works he's created more random shapes by freezing the sheets and shattering them with a hammer. These are the building blocks from which Whitten laboriously builds his paintings, piece by piece.

Though primarily abstract, his compositions are inspired by family members, artists, writers, musicians, politicians and occasionally events that have affected his life. Born in Bessemer, Ala., in 1939, he is the son of a coal worker and a seamstress. He grew up in the segregated South, and in the late '50s he moved to New York, where he has lived ever since.

At the Cooper Union Whitten studied for the first time with white students and became an active member of the artistic community. His brother was a jazz saxophonist, and Whitten frequented all the clubs, becoming friends with some of the greats of the day. He was also befriended by the writer LeRoi Jones (later known as

*Chinese Doorway*, 1974, acrylic on canvas.



Amiri Baraka), as well as the artists Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, who took the young painter under their wings.

But unlike them, Whitten was not engaged in a form of painting that was recognizably “black” or that dealt directly with racial issues. After early recognition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974 and at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1983, Whitten found that his abstract paintings were being overlooked by an art world

focused on artists who were engaged in topics relating to race, ethnicity or gender.

Whitten’s lack of rancor about the past makes his current reappraisal all the more gratifying. He was included in the much-lauded traveling show *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–75*, which ran from 2006–08; and during the past two years he has had solo exhibitions at MoMA’s outpost P.S.1 in Long Island City, the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center and Alexander

Gray Associates, a gallery in New York. Galerie Kienzle & Gmeiner in Berlin will have an exhibition of his work this fall.

While Whitten admits he’s grateful to receive the recognition, he’s made a career of continually working through the good and the bad. As he casually fingers his Greek worry beads and breaks into his contented smile, it’s clear that no matter what comes, he’ll be back in the studio tomorrow to continue his love affair with paint. **A**

*E-Stamp II (The Black Butterfly: For Bobby Short)*, 2007, acrylic on canvas.