

Jack Whitten

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Jack Whitten, *Apps for Obama*, 2011, acrylic on hollow core door, 84 x 91".

Jack Whitten is a painter who lives and works in New York. Here, he reflects on how he developed as an artist, his cross-generational exchanges, and three paintings from very different moments in his life, all on the occasion of his retrospective "Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting," which was organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, traveled to the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, and is currently on view at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis until January 24, 2016.

SUN RA WAS RIGHT ON THE MONEY; humans came here from outer space as minerals and chemicals. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, everyone began looking for their roots. This was when Afrocentrism was blossoming; I was just getting started as a painter with an interest in our intergalactic roots. I wanted to activate human perception, both from the micro and macro dimensions, with paint as a means to transmit the content. I wanted a narrative, but one that was built into the materiality of paint. When I was an art student at Cooper Union, the world was in chaos. In 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis, the atmosphere was intense. My early paintings came out of such heightened experiences surrounded by the politics of race, territorial geography, surveillance, and technology.

My heroes were artists Norman Lewis and Willem de Kooning, who were dealing with gesture. Norman took me under his wing, and as a student I got an invite from a friend to a party at Bill de Kooning's studio. I had to get around these artists because their influence was so great; it forced me to get rid of the brush. In 1970, I started making paintings with Afro combs and serrated tools. That was effective, so I built larger versions. The concept was pure systemic painting where the plane was compressed into a single gesture. After several experiments, I built what I called the Developer, an analogy to photography, which was meant to rebuke the notion of touch. At first it was a piece of two-by-four wood and later I attached a piece of thick neoprene rubber, which made it operate like a big squeegee, after which came a piece of sixteen-gauge sheet metal. When it got to be over twelve feet wide, I rigged it with wheels. Then with additional five- to ten-pound weighted metal rods, I could calculate pressure and figure out how much paint I wanted to remove. An early important painting in the show, *Prime Mover*, 1974, was made with the Developer. The marks in this work came from objects or pieces of wire, which I tacked beneath the canvas. When the Developer came across the surface of the canvas, it revealed the drawing underneath, very much like a wet frottage. The paintings from this period and before I called my slab paintings, which referred not only to the way they were made but also to the fact that the skein of paint measured 1/4 to 3/8 of an inch thick.

Slab could also have topographical connotations. My first trip to Crete was in 1969, and I met a young French geologist who explained the rock formations in the surrounding hills of my village. One can see the temporality of human existence in the rocks and the soil: fossils that came from the sea ending up in the mountains, for instance. Those kinds of experiences led me to the idea of molecular perception in art, and they also spurred my reading of philosophy: the writings of Husserl, Hegel, Heidegger, and more recently Édouard Glissant. The narrative, meaning, content, subject matter, and location of symbols are all compressed into my paintings.

Black Monolith III for Barbara Jordan, 1998, which is also in the show, is from my "Black Monolith" series—my way of saying thank you to black artists, writers, thinkers, and poets. It is a way to honor our own and to grieve our own. When you look at the surface of *Black Monolith III*, it is not by accident that the tessellation looks topographical. The painting is the reproduction of a concept. It appears to be Xeroxed or scanned from a satellite photograph, but it is all acrylic paint. In the paint there is the suggestion of mica, ore, iridescent rock, and mineral deposits: things that have been dug up from the ground or spun off from a meteorite. Geologic remains are like that, artifacts, which carry with them the psychic and physical data of our existence.

In our world, capitalism is in a cannibalistic cycle, which can lead to the loss of hope. In Crete they have a local word for this, φάωλα or *fataoula*, to "eat it all," which is from the verb φάω or *na fao*, which means "to eat." Capitalism is an extreme form of greediness, because it works by eating and digesting everything. In Greece now, people have lost hope, and that is a scary thing. I still think about technology, about fracture, and about racial politics. My *Apps for Obama*, 2011, is a bright and cheerful painting that nonetheless features the debris of our age as attractive on a digital screen: an interface that fluctuates between imaging and materiality, but above all else is paint.

— *As told to Andrianna Campbell*

View Whitten's 2012 portfolio for Artforum [here](#).