

# WALKER

## Jack Whitten and the Philosophy of Jazz

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CATEGORIES

[Commentary](#)  
[Exhibitions](#)  
[Now on view](#)

Installation view of *Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting* at the Walker Art Center

“The person who got me trapped in all of this was John Coltrane.” By *this* artist Jack Whitten refers to his fifty-year commitment to exploring the possibilities of paint, as demonstrated in *Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting* at the Walker. An artist who has steadfastly held onto canvas and acrylic paint for most of his career, Whitten falls into the art historical narrative following Abstract Expressionist painters Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman (whom he met at the Cedar Bar in Greenwich Village), and African American artists Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Norman Lewis (whose studios he visited uptown). However, it was the jazz musicians (take a look at Whitten’s all-time favorite jazz records below) and the conceptual underpinnings of their sound, or what he calls the “philosophy of jazz,” that had a direct influence on the development of his distinct visual style.

As a young art student entering New York City’s Cooper Union in the fall of 1960, Whitten quickly became entrenched in the city’s jazz scene. On KFAI’s “Mostly Jazz” he recently shared his recollections:

My introduction to New York was Birdland uptown on 52nd Street, the Five Spot downtown on Bowery, the Jazz Gallery on St. Mark's Place, the Half Note, the Village Vanguard, the Village Gate, and later Slugs' Saloon—anybody from New York in the '60s will remember the Slugs. Within the history of jazz in New York City, Slugs' Saloon was the place to be. A lot of great people played there, including Sun Ra. Sun Ra was a staple there. Down on the lower east side in Manhattan—hell of a place.

During the 1960s, Whitten struggled with his desire to simultaneously embrace and reject the vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism—in particular, the aggressive and gestural application of paint that had come to signify the canvases of de Kooning (“Following a devastating critique by an older Abstract Expressionist painter who said, ‘Kid, you got some good de Koonings here!’ I knew I had to make a move in my work,” he says).



Jack Whitten, *NY Battle Ground*, 1964. Courtesy the artist; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp; © Jack Whitten/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

It was at the turn of the 1970s that Whitten, informed by the cool jazz sensibility of Miles Davis and others, began to cool off and slow down. The feverish intensity that dominates the surfaces of his earlier works gives way to a more meditative approach in his so-called Drag paintings that seems to indulge in and explore the material and expansive qualities of paint.

In a nod to Coltrane, whose cascading notes were famously dubbed “sheets of sound,” Whitten began to experiment with what he calls “planes of light.” Pouring layer upon layer of paint to form an acrylic “slab” often up to a half inch thick, followed by dragging a 12-foot long T-shaped tool across the surface in a single motion, Whitten established a process akin to the way in which jazz musicians of the day seamlessly moved between composition and

improvisation—the composition remaining essentially unchanged from performance to performance, and the improvisation, specific to a particular time and place. Take *Chinese Sincerity* (1974): the pooling of gallons of paint to create the acrylic slab, or foundation, can be seen as the compositional aspect of Whitten's process, and the act of pulling the tool across the canvas, the instance of improvisation. In fact, the spontaneous gesture that ruptures the surface, revealing the multitudinous layers of color underneath, produces a certain musicality, or optical vibrations in the acrylic medium—according to the artist, it is precisely in this moment of the three-second gesture, that the painting is made.



Jack Whitten, *Chinese Sincerity*, 1974. Courtesy the artist; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp; © Jack Whitten/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

This willingness to experiment with different conceptual and technical modes of expression,

or the aesthetics of jazz, informs Whitten's visual practice from the Drag series of the 1970s on. As you walk through the galleries, take note of the use of "disruptors" (found objects such as a piece of string or a bent wire placed beneath the canvas) that create peculiar dissonances in the poured and leveled paint, evoking the jarring sounds of Thelonious Monk and the other jazz musicians.

**Listen to Whitten's all-time favorite jazz records:**

Miles Davis

*Kind of Blue*

*Miles Davis Live at the Plugged Nickel (Chicago)*

*Bitches Brew*

John Coltrane

*Blue Train*

*Giant Steps*

*Traneing In*

Ornette Coleman

*The Shape of Jazz to Come*

Cecil Taylor

*Unit Structures*

Charlie Parker

*The Essential Charlie Parker*

Thelonious Monk

*Mysterioso*

Sun Ra

*Visions*