

HAUSER & WIRTH

Press Release

Jack Whitten

Hauser & Wirth Zurich, Limmatstrasse
10 June – 20 August 2022



Celebrated for his innovative transfiguration of paint, Jack Whitten (1939 – 2018) holds a unique place in the narrative of post-war American abstract art. This June, Hauser & Wirth Zurich, Limmatstrasse presents Whitten's first solo exhibition in Switzerland, coinciding with Zurich Art Weekend and Art Basel. 'Jack Whitten' features paintings and works on paper created during the late 1960s, many of which have never been exhibited before. During this decade, Whitten bridged themes of gestural abstraction and process art to work toward a nuanced language of painting that employs deeply personal expression. A time of self-reflection and search for identity, Whitten asked himself in his studio logs from this period, 'Who are you Jack Whitten? What kind of person do you want to be? What sort of world do you want?'. Following on from the presentation in Zurich, an exhibition dedicated to Whitten's works from the 1970s will open at Dia Beacon in New York this November.

Jack Whitten, born in 1939 in Bessemer, Alabama, came to New York in 1960 to study at the Cooper Union. At the time, abstract expressionism dominated the art world; the work of Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline was at the forefront of Whitten's mind. Whitten lived amongst many creatives during this period and was able to meet New York artists, such as Philip Guston, Barnett Newman, Jacob Lawrence and Norman Lewis – many of whom would leave a long-lasting impression on the young artist. After graduating in 1964, he began creating colourful, gestural paintings in response to the abstract expressionist movement. The works on view present his inventive juxtaposition of abstraction with surreal figurative imagery.

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Whitten's artistic production of the late 1960s serves as a reflection of his experiences of living in a socially and creatively charged era, shaped by the events that constituted its tumultuous political landscape. Produced against a backdrop of struggle and hostility, from the Civil Rights protests to the Vietnam War, Whitten employed clashing colours, aggressive brush strokes and uncanny imagery in works such as 'T.V. Space' (1967), 'Guardian Of The Field I' (1967) and 'Guardian Of The Field II' (1968). The dark painted frames are reminiscent of television screens and the way in which people were increasingly watching violence unfold. The turbulent imagery also mirrored Whitten's own mental conflict, and he confessed it was difficult to convince himself of the value of art whilst the war was going on. In 'NY Battle Ground' (1967), the painterly depiction of military aircraft and missiles allude to the turmoil that was witnessed through the media. A product of this intense period, the expressive mark-making and organic shapes of Whitten's paintings reveal the strong and emotive presence of the artist's hand.



As Whitten would demonstrate throughout his career, his instinct was to respond to his time and the sociopolitical climate that defined it. Amongst some of his first works to address memorialisation, 'King's Wish (Martin Luther's Dream)' (1968) and 'USA Oracle (Assassination of M.L. King)' (1968) pay homage to the activist Martin Luther King Jr, whom Whitten met in Montgomery in 1957, and the Civil Rights Movement. Combined with his experiences of growing up in the South and having adopted Martin Luther King Jr's call for non-violence before arriving in New York, Whitten's creative output was his attempt to make sense of the world and express his role within it.

This period of experimentation and the works that emerged from it led to an awakening by the end of the decade. 'Satori' (1969) derives its title from a Japanese Buddhist term for enlightenment and exhibits Whitten's growing interest in geometries through the confluence of surreal landscapes and a hard-edge shape. Concluding this significant chapter of the artist's constantly evolving practice, the painting's distinctive style indicates Whitten's success in forging his own path as an abstractionist. Despite the lack of institutional support that he received as a Black artist in New York, he remained committed to his painterly endeavours and effectively reconfigured the discipline of painting. As the artist stated, 'Experimentation expands consciousness. When consciousness expands freedom expands.'

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Hauser & Wirth at Zurich Art Weekend

Coinciding with this exhibition at Limmatstrasse, 'Frank Bowling. Penumbral Light' will display recent abstract paintings made by the artist mostly during the London lockdown in 2020. Whitten and Bowling were friends during Bowling's time in New York in the 1960s and 70s, both at the forefront of abstract painting. At the gallery's space at Bahnhofstrasse 1, 'Facing Infinity. Alberto Giacometti & Pablo Picasso', curated by Dr. Dieter Buchhart is on view until 27 August.

About the Artist

Jack Whitten was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement before moving north to New York City in the early 1960s and enrolling at the Cooper Union Advancement of Science and Art. He mingled downtown with the Abstract Expressionists while engaging uptown with Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden. But Whitten would soon prioritize his own distinctly experimental vision, engineering breakthrough after breakthrough with techniques and materials, articulating new pathways between artworks and their inspirations. At times he has pursued quickly applied gestural techniques akin to photography or printmaking. At other times, the deliberative and constructive hand is evident. From his series of small Ghost canvases of the 1960s and subsequent pulled Slabs and dragged canvases of the 1970s, Whitten moved on to collaged acrylic Skins of the 1980s and eventually to his more recent tessellated constructions – paintings that look like mosaics but are actually composed of dried-acrylic paint chips as tesserae unevenly set into acrylic medium.

Jack Whitten's work has been the subject of numerous solo museum exhibitions, including 'Jack Whitten. Jack's Jacks' at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, in 2019 and 'Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963 – 2017,' which opened April 2018 at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore MD and travelled to The Met Breuer, New York NY in September 2018 and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston TX in 2019. A major retrospective, 'Jack Whitten. Five Decades of Painting', was organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego CA (2014) and travelled to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis MN and the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus OH (2015). Additional institutional exhibitions include: 'Jack Whitten,' MoMA PS1, Long Island City NY (2007); 'Jack Whitten. Ten Years, 1970 – 1980,' The Studio Museum in Harlem, Harlem NY (1983); and 'Jack Whitten. Paintings,' Whitney Museum of American Art, New York NY (1974).

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Whitten's work is included in prestigious public and private collections around the globe, including the permanent collections of New York's Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Whitney Museum of American Art; National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; and Tate, London, England. Whitten has received numerous grants and fellowships throughout his career, including the John Hay Whitney Fellowship (1964), Individual Artist's Fellowship from the National Endowments for the Arts (1973) and the Guggenheim Fellowship (1976). In 2014, he received an Honorary Doctorate from the San Francisco Art Institute. Brandeis University awarded Whitten an Honorary Doctorate in May 2016 and in September of the same year he received the 2015 National Medal of Arts in recognition of his major contribution to the cultural legacy of the US.



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Opening hours:

Tue – Fri, 11 am – 6pm
Sat, 11 am – 5 pm

www.hauserwirth.com

Caption and courtesy information:

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Jack Whitten
Satori
1969
Acrylic on canvas
266.7 x 276.9 cm / 105 x 109 in
Photo: Jeff McLane

Jack Whitten
NY Battle Ground
1967
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 213.1 cm / 60 x 83 7/8 in
Photo: John Berens

Jack Whitten
King's Wish (Martin Luther's Dream)
1968
Oil on canvas
172.4 x 131.4 cm / 67 7/8 x 51 3/4 in
Photo: John Berens

Jack Whitten
Light Sheet I
1969
Acrylic on canvas
285.8 x 289.6 cm / 112 1/2 x 114 in
Photo: Genevieve Hanson

Jack Whitten, 1964