

The Evolutionary Soul of Jack Whitten (b.1939): *April's Shark* (1974)



Michael Salcman, MD
Osher Institute, Towson University
Baltimore, Maryland

The soul is that ineffable emanation of a person's inner being that remains with us after they walk out of a room or after the last notes of music or a life have died away. Often identified with the practice of flamenco dancers and jazz musicians, soul has no cultural bias; it is precisely that which the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca called "duende," a term for the obscure power and penetrating inspiration of art.¹ The most soulful African American artists of the post-war modernist period, Horace Pippin, Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden, generally retained a realist or figurative style, one in which political and cultural issues were directly addressed through an assemblage of bright colors and sharp-edged shapes into shards of recognizable subject matter. They were greatly influenced by the writers and thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance and in their turn contributed to the Black Arts Movement at the middle of the last century. In their response to the wider culture, the work of these pioneering figures shared a number of subjects with the white American Social Realists of the 1930s and used a scaffolding of formal elements based on European cubism including, in the case of Bearden, extensive use of collage. After the Second World War, societal changes for the first time, including the G.I. Bill and the accelerating Civil Rights movement, greatly increased the number of professionally trained black artists and facilitated the rise of an entire generation free to adopt other types of subjects and a variety of alternative artistic strategies.² Nevertheless, opportunities for gallery representation, museum exhibitions, critical reviews, and sales to important collectors remained sharply constrained for black artists in comparison to the rest of the burgeoning art world, even in New York. African American artists interested in abstraction or conceptual art faced additional difficulties. Black audiences expected their artists to use their art in the service of social action and the largely white art market, conditioned to some degree by the older generation of Lawrence and Bearden, expected "black art" to remain essentially figurative. Some African Americans referred to abstraction by black artists as "white art in blackface."² As a result, the remarkable contributions of non-figurative black artists to the evolution of contemporary art since the era of Abstract Expressionism, has been largely scanted in museum surveys and critical writing.

Black artists are not the only disadvantaged social group to experience marginalization in historical surveys of Western art. This situation began to change with the advent of Feminist art movements and identity art in the 1970s, heralded by Linda Nochlin's³ provocatively titled 1971 essay in *ARTnews*. Further corrections arrived with the special recognition accorded to art created in response to the HIV epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s and a growing interest in contemporary art produced in other parts of the world, including Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia. By disadvantaged groups, I mean populations who, because of cultural, economic, or political circumstances, could not afford or were not allowed to obtain the resources required to create the sort of cultural objects found in non-anthropological museums, ie, paintings, sculptures, and photographs. This definition specifically excludes, no matter how beautiful, the traditional weavings of housebound women, the religious carvings of African and Oceanic peoples or metalwork produced for the synagogue prior to the Napoleonic emancipation. It is only with access to apprenticeships and academies in the nineteenth century that significant numbers of Western women and Jews appear in art history. Even then, the reception of such work did not often accord with its quality and the reason was prejudice. Camille Pissarro, a Caribbean Jew, was beloved by most of the Impressionists except for Degas, who shared the polite anti-Semitism of his caste, and as late as the mid-twentieth century, important artists such as Mark Rothko and Morris Louis felt the

need to change their names so as to ease the way to successful careers. The increased educational opportunities for black artists after the Second World War did not mean that they could escape the pervasive prejudice of American society.

After World War II, American Abstract Expressionism, the art movement headed by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko, among others, succeeded in moving the capital of world art from Paris to New York. In the eyes of Alfred Barr, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, and Clement Greenberg, America's most prominent art critic, the abstract paintings produced by these artists appeared to be the culminating act in a succession of art movements that defined Modernism, a period style of continuous invention from 1860 to 1970, in which the perfection of form over content, beginning with Manet and Cézanne, gave us the Fauvism of Matisse, the Cubism of Braque and Picasso, and the abstract art of Kandinsky and Mondrian. In a manner analogous to experimental science, Modernist painting progressively eliminated narrative and figuration in an attempt to fully explore the properties of its constituent materials, the flat surface of the canvas and the optical properties of paint, without reference to philosophical or religious elements external to art. In the hands of the Abstract Expressionists, the psychodrama of the artist's struggle to make the painting, the visible evidence of his muscular and psychic exertion, became a powerful new subject for art. Subsequently, the Color Field painting of Louis and Noland, a style in which pigment was stained into the fabric of the canvas in order to further emphasize the optical properties of color and eliminate almost all evidence of the artist's hand, was anointed by Greenberg as the successor movement to Abstract Expressionism. The generation of black artists that came to maturity in the 1960s wished to participate in this great Modernist adventure of invention and progressive purification. Some of them, like Sam Gilliam (b.1933) and Alma Thomas (1891-1976), became critical links between Color Field painting and subsequent movements in the 1970s like post-Minimalist and process art. In this regard, no African American artist proved to be more consistently inventive in changing the procedures and purposes of painting than Jack Whitten (b.1939). His belated recognition and technical eminence were painfully achieved.

Whitten was born in Bessemer, Alabama. He was the son of a seamstress, twice widowed; his father, a coal-miner, died while Whitten was a child. The artist originally planned to be an army doctor and entered pre-medical studies at the Tuskegee Institute where he took some pilot training and became inspired by George Washington Carver's legacy as scientist, inventor, and artist. Whitten⁴ has retained an interest in the interaction of art and science, particularly in fractal geometry and particle physics. From his earliest years, Whitten also was politically engaged. He traveled to nearby Montgomery, Alabama to hear Martin Luther King Jr speak during the Bus Boycott and was deeply moved by King's vision for a changed America. Whitten was involved in Civil Rights demonstrations during his undergraduate years at Southern University in Baton Rouge, where he also began studying art. Angered by the violent resistance to change he experienced in Louisiana, Whitten became convinced that his prospects as an artist would remain circumscribed in the South. So he moved to New York City in 1960, where he often visited the Cedar Bar, the favorite haunt of the Abstract Expressionists, where he met de Kooning, Kline, Newman, and Rothko. Whitten enrolled at The Cooper Union, graduating with a bachelor's degree in fine art in 1964. That year, in response to recent turmoil in the American South, Whitten produced his first masterwork, *Birmingham* (1964, collection of the artist, 16 5/8" × 16"), a collage of aluminum foil, newsprint, stocking and oil on plywood, in which the opening in the blackened foil, its leaves everted like a malevolent flower or a metal target struck by a bullet, partially exposes a newspaper photograph of a violent confrontation during a Civil Rights demonstration in the eponymous city. Whitten described his semi-figurative work of the 1960s as a means of managing a psychological necessity, "the pressure of being a black in America. . .you have to work with it. You work with it or it works with you."²

Like many of his young contemporaries, Whitten's paintings of the late 1960s were strongly influenced by Abstract Expressionism, especially the work of Willem de Kooning, then a dominating force in the art world. Whitten was also exposed to the ferment of a decade that roiled with new art movements in theoretical opposition to Ab-Ex: Minimalism and Pop Art, Color Field painting and Conceptual Art, Post-Minimalism, and Process Art. Almost all of these stylistic currents would have direct or indirect effects on both the content of Whitten's art and the mechanics of its making. Of equal importance in his development was the opportunity to meet pioneering African American artists in New York. Not surprisingly, his earliest mature works, those appearing in the late 1960s, combine political reference with a nascent interest in Color Field painting, multiple small portraits of Dr King sometimes afloat in an engulfing sea of emptied-out blood-red paint. After the 1960s, Whitten stopped using slow-drying oil paint and began to work almost exclusively with acrylic. His progressive movement towards completely abstract work must have surprised many of his friends but, in retrospect, appears inevitable. He realized that he needed to escape the influence of de Kooning and reject the autographic gestural mark making of the older artist if he was ever to become his own man, especially since Whitten saw abstraction as "an expansion of freedom."⁵ Thereafter, he became critically engaged with "horizontalism as an extension of gesture"⁴ and "quickly understood that gesture, like graffiti, was a personal signature. It defined the meaning of the soul."^{4,6} In this way, Whitten moved from ordinary gestures on canvas to a concept of the painting as a slab of plastic material.

Sometime around 1970, Whitten made the conscious decision to let go of the brush and remove the marks of the hand from the canvas.² This "hands-free" method of creating paintings would place his work in the tradition of many of the most important figures in the history of twentieth century art: Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Sam Gilliam, Andy Warhol, and Gerhard Richter, all of whom employed gravity, spray guns, non-artistic tools, and photomechanical processes to manipulate paint. Whitten started teaching at Cooper Union and became known for his process-oriented experimentalism; by 1972 he was featured in the Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and in 1974 The Whitney mounted a solo exhibition of his work. By then, he was applying paint in quick, broad gestures using mechanical techniques of his own invention; some of his methods were inspired by photography and printmaking. Like many painters of his time, Whitten felt challenged by the growing importance of photography to contemporary painted images; he wrote on the wall of his studio, "The image is photographic; therefore, I must photograph my thoughts."² In concert with the influence of photography on his thinking, Whitten called his long-handled tools "the developer." Whitten's invention of new tools and implements naturally extended to the creation of work in which the method of its making remains visible, ie, a type of process art; Whitten has said "the painting is more about the journey than the destination."² Like Jackson Pollock,^{7,8} who painted with jazz on his phonograph, Whitten often made his paintings on the floor. But instead of throwing or dripping paint, he raked the canvas in a trough on a specially-built platform, a 12 by 24 foot "drawing board," with a variety of long-handled tools or developers, including some derived from African hair combs and others resembling the squeegees of window-cleaners, a technique independently and somewhat later employed by the German painter Gerhard Richter.⁹ The large, flat and absolutely level plywood board prevented any arbitrary or expressionistic gestures in the flow of paint. Whitten's tools made it possible to scrape away the outer layer of acrylic paint and fractionally reveal brushstrokes and colors in deeper strata; in a sense, the paintings of Jack Whitten could be said to "develop" like scratched and manipulated photographs in the dark room or the use of acid baths and engraving tools in the production of intaglio prints. The image would rise up from below. Whitten likened his fields of painted matter to the "sheets of sound" produced by jazz musicians. He described one of his most formative experiences as follows: "I had

a conversation with John Coltrane, in 1965, at the Club Coronet in Brooklyn. . .for about 2 weeks straight I was going out there every night to hear him. Coltrane told me how he equated his sound to sheets: the sound you hear in his music comes at you in waves. . .I think that in plastic terms, translating from sound, I was sensing sheets, waves of light. A sheet of light passing, that's how I was seeing light. That's why I refer to these paintings as energy fields. I often thought of them as two poles that create a magnetic field in which light is trapped. That's the energy."¹⁰

One of the earliest examples of Whitten's new style is *Slip Zone* from 1971 (Dallas Museum of Art, 39" × 39"), a relatively modestly-scaled painting in which the many narrow horizontal bands of color zip and snap and crackle across its surface like an interference pattern on an old television set. Later works would recall radar screens and oscilloscopes because great abstract paintings naturally give the viewer mental space in which to form such associations; Willem de Kooning gave viewers of his own paintings permission to "see" things in his work by generously saying there was no painting so abstract it didn't contain a resemblance. Like Pollock with his psychodrama and the muscle memory of his "throws," Whitten has filled his abstract paintings with personal associations and reminiscence. Not incidentally, the first two objects he used to drag through pools of liquid acrylic were the afore-mentioned Afro-comb, a sign of cultural identity, and a carpenter's saw, the latter a symbol of manual labor and the construction trade in which he worked when he came to New York. As a result, the "images" in the new paintings call to mind both natural and man-made references. Some areas resemble the exposed wooden lathes, plaster, and brickwork of the many architectural walls in disrepair that Whitten would have encountered in his SoHo environment. Others, with their interlacing bands of flame-shaped colors, superficially resemble geologic layers similar to those seen in the pioneering abstract expressionistic works of Clyfford Still but are clearly the result of a mechanical process rather than autographic brushwork. For reasons already discussed, Whitten became something of an artist's artist; only in recent years have major American museums regularly placed his paintings from the 1970s on exhibition. Often produced in a large vertical format, paintings like *Siberian Salt Grinder* (1974, MoMA, 6'8" × 50") and *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1974, Whitney, 88.25" × 51") ape both the methodology and the size and scale of classic Abstract Expressionist work. A particularly beautiful example from this period is *April's Shark* (on the cover, 1974, 72" × 52") in which the artist's single sweeping motion across the blue painted surface has something of the speed and mystery of the eponymous creature, lurking perhaps in the white streak exposed beneath the ultramarine. Whitten's paintings at this time resemble those of the abstract expressionists, but the absence of the paintbrush and its autographic touch allies Whitten's artistic program with conceptually-oriented Minimalists like Judd and Flavin, who used professional fabricators to build their objects according to written instructions and drawings. Whitten's flatbed-working surface on the floor also calls to mind the horizontal perceptual orientation ascribed by art historian Leo Steinberg to Robert Rauschenberg's contemporary experiments,¹¹ a property especially true of the next series of paintings Whitten produced.

In the 1970s, Whitten's experimental intelligence rapidly led him from one stylistic discovery to the next and new ways to manipulate paint. The control of light within his work was always a primary concern; he likes to quote Hans Hofmann who told him that "the only light you've got is in that tube [of pigment]."⁴ Working collaboratively with paint manufacturers, Whitten explored the horizontal extension of his gestures by dragging toothed implements through thick trays of rapidly drying acrylic to produce paintings that are more properly described as objects hung on a wall. Whitten has long-owned a vacation home on Crete and in 1976 began producing an important series of more than 40 works based on the rationality of Western civilization. The surfaces of *The Greek Alphabet Series* are exceedingly tactile, their alternating horizontal bands of projecting rills and receding valleys made through layering and cutting back into the thickened surfaces of the plastic medium. Predominantly painted in black, gray, and

white tones, subtle hues of blue and yellow flicker beneath the incised surfaces. In some, clear acrylic has been spread over old Japanese papers; the pigments leach out and the papers dissolve. The gradations of black and white values reference the racial politics of the period. There is an exquisite painterly cuisine to these mechanically produced works that inherently appeals to the neuronal machinery in our brains that joins visual delectation with tactile stimulus. *Sphinx's Alley III* (1975, 73" × 84") contains a phantasmagoric yellow square centered between two narrow bands of white like a fugitive vision of a classic *Homage to the Square* by Josef Albers; each geometric component is transfixed by oscillating horizontal lines of black and gray. One can easily imagine loading the rills and valleys of a painting like *Beta Group* (1976, 40" × 67.5") with printer's ink and producing an original engraving on paper with the painting used as a printing plate. Here and there the implicit grid is invaded by a diagonal line similar to the marks used by printmakers to "cancel" a plate so as to make impossible the creation of further impressions of the original print. To the right of center Whitten has suspended an "object" resembling a hinge, two vertical black bands on either side of a narrow void. These experiments coincided with his fellowship at Xerox Corporation in 1974 where he had free access to flat-plate photocopy equipment. Whitten developed a drawing technique in which dry carbon pigment or toner was used to create art works with a distinct layering of images, a process in which the development of layers was analogous to that in his paintings. No wonder Whitten's first major museum show was devoted to the work of this exciting decade and that one of the era's artistic impresarios supplied the introductory essay.¹⁰

In the 1980s, Whitten started to cast acrylic paint in such a way that his paintings more closely approximated sculpture and collage. This reached an apogee in the 1990s when Whitten began transforming solidified paint into slabs or tiles and his paintings into mosaics. The tiles or blocks Whitten inserts at slightly different angles act as miniature projectors for the light beams that emerge from the paintings. He also uses blocks of acrylic paint fabricated in molds made from a wide variety of casual and natural objects like clam shells, hearing-aid packages, and orange drink cartons. These ghostly reminders of societal detritus are cast with transparent acrylic and colored with less than 1% pigment. When these shapes are inserted like tesserae into a surrounding ground of paint, the surfaces of the paintings seem jewel-encrusted and more object-like than any he has produced before. Some of the new paintings are more decorative than those created earlier in his career. Conversely, Whitten has been using his newest works to memorialize friends and colleagues; these paintings also allude to architecture and ancient murals, perhaps another influence of his life on Crete. Understandably, Whitten has looked upon collage as a keystone of modernist thought, and his use of acrylic blocks affixed to an acrylic ground is, in effect, the removal of paint from painting, "the essence of the notion of *making a painting* as opposed to *painting a painting*."¹² Of these works, Whitten has said, "I cut paint, I laminate paint, I grind paint, I freeze paint, I boil paint," but he almost never brushes paint. Many of these techniques are sculptural in nature and not a part of a painter's normal armamentarium; not surprisingly, during his summers on Crete, Whitten carves wood with chisels, axes, hatchets, saws and grinders, but does no painting. When the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center occurred, Whitten was at his studio in Tribeca watching the first plane hit. It took him 2 years to construct a suitably monumental, elegiac and emotion-filled panel, later exhibited at the Venice Biennale (2013), with ashes and gallons of blood embedded into the acrylic, as a suitable memorial to the victims. This painting was included in his first career-length retrospective, an exhibition organized by The Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego. The show traveled to the Wexner Center for the Arts in Ohio and subsequently to the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis in 2015. One of many surprises in this show are a series of abstract heads from the 1960s painted in oils and distressed by a mesh of nylons or gauze that look like black and white photographs of ghosts. Seen for the first time ever in public, the heads make a perfect closure with Whitten's most recent mosaic elegies for departed friends and heroes. "In my end is my

beginning” Eliot famously said in *The Four Quartets*. For 50 years, Jack Whitten’s evolutionary soul has traveled a perfect circle and rung changes on a single melody fearlessly played on a constantly changing cast of instruments.

REFERENCES

1. Hirsch E. *A Poet’s Glossary*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 2014:185.
2. Jones K. *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964-1980*. New York, NY: The Studio Museum in Harlem; 2006.
3. Nochlin L. Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? *ARTnews*. 1971:22-39, 67-71.
4. Whitten J. Artist’s Statement in Siegel’s *High Times, Hard Times*, p. 101; and Conversations With Michael Salcman, September 11-13, 2015.
5. Battaglia A. Committing abstract thoughts to canvas. *Wall Street Journal*. February 3, 2013, p. A22.
6. Siegel K. *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975*. Independent Curators International (ICI); 2006:101.
7. Salcman M. Composition with Pouring II by Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). *Neurosurgery*. 2001;50(4):921-922.
8. Salcman M. *Number 8, 1949* by Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). *Neurosurgery*. 2002;51(3):838-839.
9. Salcman M. *Sea-Sea (1970)* by Gerhard Richter (b.1932). *Neurosurgery*. 2011;68(5):1161-1163.
10. Geldzahler H. *Jack Whitten: Ten Years 1970-1980*. New York, NY: The Studio Museum in Harlem; 1982.
11. Steinberg L. *Other Criteria, Confrontations With Twentieth-Century Art*. New York, NY: Oxford; 1972:55-91.
12. Indrisek S. Portfolio Jack Whitten. *Modern Painters*. 2013:21-23.