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By ANDY BATTAGLIA



Stephen Yang for The Wall Street Journal

Painter Jack Whitten in his Queens studio with a pan of acrylic molds in the shape of cupcakes.

Jack Whitten has been working with paint since he moved to New York in 1959 to study art at Cooper Union. He started showing in galleries in the '60s, commencing a career that would acquaint him well with many exquisite and elusive elements of abstraction. After decades of both high-profile exhibitions and spells of relative inattention, he's now an important figure in the city's history of pioneering African-American art, as well as in the story of painting since the rise of Abstract Expressionism.

At age 73, Mr. Whitten is currently in the midst of a New York moment. His 1974 painting "Black Table Setting (Homage to Duke Ellington)" features prominently in the group exhibition "Blues for Smoke," opening Thursday at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Next week, more of his work will be on display in the New Museum show "NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star."

From his studio in Queens, in a splattered white coat and sneakers painted shiny silver, Mr. Whitten spoke with The Wall Street Journal about choosing abstraction, finding his way in New York and learning to love "north light."

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Jack Whitten

Mr. Whitten's 1974 painting 'Black Table Setting (Homage to Duke Ellington),' which will be on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The painting there was originally shown at the Whitney in a show I did in 1975, so that painting's come back home. It's neat to see a painting come full-circle back. I'm originally from Alabama, and it's owned now by a museum in Birmingham. For the Birmingham Museum of Art to buy that painting was fantastic because when I was a kid, I could not go there. For them to buy a painting of mine and put it in the museum—that's kind of heavy.

In your catalog essay, you wrote that "abstraction is a matter of choice." What guided your choice?

The black community has a narrative tradition. Black folks are storytellers. The blues, for example, is stories about people's sorrows, people's joys. I came in at a time in my generation when I realized I didn't have to follow the narrative tradition just because it was a given. But a funny thing happened on the way to abstraction: Now I'm finding that there's such a thing as an abstract narrative!

Do you mean we see stories in abstraction?

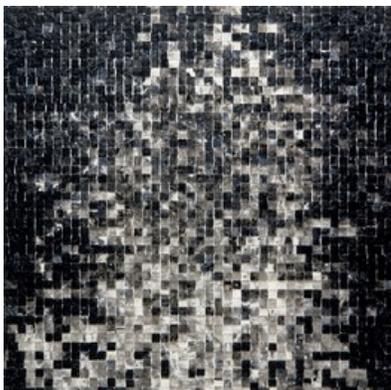
You can look at anything and immediately your mind will recognize a pattern and you'll say, "Oh, that is like..." We all do that. An older painter once said to me, ridiculously, about a black-and-white painting by Robert Motherwell, "It's just Holstein cattle." The mind wants to find a pattern that is familiar.

How did you develop your painting style?

My paintings are not painting in the traditional sense of painting a painting. I "make" a painting. They're all done through process, as opposed to painting with a brush. That came out of sculpture: When you're carving wood, you're "making"—cutting, chiseling, grinding, sanding, laminating. All those practices figure into the painting process for me.

What inspired that process?

When I moved to New York, I would leave class at Cooper Union and make a beeline for the Cedar Tavern. That's where the action was. Some of the first people I met in New York were Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, John Chamberlain, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko. Before coming to New York, I didn't know what art was. I knew how to draw and how to do some things, but building a larger philosophical notion of the meaning of art never occurred to me. But seeing how they lived, I thought, "If this is what art is, then this is what I want to do."



Jack Whitten/Alexander Gray Associates, New York

What attracted you to them most?

Those guys could be crazy. But being there as a young black kid from the South, with all white people, I never felt from any of them what I felt down south. I could talk to them and they'd ask, "Hey kid, what's happening? Did you get any work done today?" It was the notion of freedom. When I came to New York and discovered abstraction, I immediately saw it as an expansion of freedom.



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1993's 'Fifth Gestalt (The Coal Miner),' which will show at the New Museum.

Was the rest of the art world as open then?

No. For painters in the generation before me, when it came to the commercial gallery scene, there was very little representation. In my generation it was none. For black artists doing abstract painting, there was no support whatsoever. Even through the early '70s, nobody reached out. There was a great divide there.

You mentioned de Kooning as being helpful. What did you learn from him?

I was a young art student asking him questions and following him around like a puppy. He was useful in a lot of ways. I came in one night after a horrific critique when one of my professors put me down for concentrating too much on process. That was not a word used much then, in 1961. He said I accepted too many accidents. I spoke to de Kooning, and he said to me, "There's no such thing as accidents in painting! F— him." That was very helpful to me. Here was a master of Abstract Expressionism who was using a lot of process techniques. He used to mix mayonnaise with oil paint and beat it to emulsify it.

What do you make of the New York art scene now?

The good thing is that New York as an art center still has an amazing amount of energy and variety. Every sensibility known to man is here. When we speak of pluralism, New York is where it's at. I do sense, though, a huge void out there now, a void in abstract painting, and young people are not capable of filling it because it's gotten to a point where it's too complex. A young person doesn't have enough information. But I have a lot of information. I see an opening, and I have to take advantage of it.

Your shoes are pretty abstract.

In the '60s, we painted our shoes. They're like my [similarly silver] work hat. When I'm working, I have to have something to break the light. When I was in TriBeCa, I had a whole window of north light. In Manhattan the north light is the best, but I get some north light here too.

What is "north light"?

It's the best light for painters' use. In New York, they all want north light. North light is more polarized—it's bright but it has a softness to it. South light is harsh, very harsh.

A version of this article appeared February 7, 2013, on page A22 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Committing Abstract Thoughts to Canvas.

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