

Jack Whitten

September 13 – October 20, 2007



E-Stamp IV (Five Spirals: For Al Loving), 2007
Acrylic on canvas, 48" x 48"



U.S.A. Oracle, 1986
Acrylic on canvas, 84" x 72"

New York-based artist Jack Whitten's experiments with painting date to the 1960s, when, inspired by Abstract Expressionism, he created dynamic works noted for their raucous colors and density of gesture, combined with topical content—emotionally complex meditations on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War. In the 1970s, Whitten's experimentation turned towards abstraction, when he developed a method of painting that he related to photographic technology and printmaking traditions. In this work, hand-made gesture and brushstroke were abandoned; rather, paint and canvas were “processed”, through an inventive technique using large troughs to hold paint, and dragging canvas across these pools, with sticks, rakes, and Afro-combs used to create surface texture, line, and voids. The 1980s saw further experimentation with paint as a metaphor for skin, with Whitten “casting” surfaces and textures with acrylic paints and compounds. Whitten's ongoing concerns about the human condition and natural science remained at the core of his work, at a time when narrative-based and politically-oriented content were *de rigueur* for Black artists. In the 1990s, Whitten's experiments with paint as a medium moved further towards sculpture, as paint compounds were transformed into mosaic-like tiles and were applied to canvases, referencing ancient architecture and murals. In this work, and into the current work, memorial and persona became sources for content, as works paid homage to celebrated figures and close friends of the artist.

In this exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates, Whitten presents a selection of recent and historical works, including a group of 1970s works on paper made during one of the first Xerox artist-in residencies. Also on view is a rare 1970s painting, one of Whitten's process-based approach to abstraction, and a companion to works in the permanent collections of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. These works have been read as visual metaphors of Vietnam-era war images broadcast on television, and references early experimental video practices of the 1970s, with its dynamic black and white horizontal lines and ghosted movement. Whitten's 1980s explorations of surface and relief are in evidence with *USA Oracle* (1986), a monochrome made of a single cast surface of silver acrylic paint, creating a densely textured topography of screens, meshes, imprints, and gesture. Recent works in the show are highlights from Whitten's ongoing memorial series. A series of uniformly square paintings are constructed out of mosaics of cast acrylic paint, creating pixilated designs honoring Whitten's late friends and colleagues, including Al Loving, Al Held, Bobby Short, and Marcia Tucker.

Whitten's work was the subject of solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974, a mid-career survey show at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1983, and a solo exhibition at the Newark Museum in 1990. He was included in the 1969 and 1972 Whitney Museum of American Art's *Annals*, the landmark 1980 exhibition, *Afro-American Abstraction, an Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture by Nineteen Black American Artists* at the Institute for Art and Urban Resources/P.S.1, *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980* at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2006); and *High Times Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*, organized by Independent Curators International (2006). In Summer/Fall 2007, P.S.1/MoMA Center for Contemporary Art presented a solo exhibition, combining Whitten's epic 2006 painting, *9.11.01* with paintings from the 1960s; The Atlanta Center for Contemporary Art is organizing an exhibition of Whitten's memorial works for Spring 2008.

Alexander Gray Associates is a contemporary art gallery and advising firm based in New York. Our exhibition program focuses on mid-career visual artists who emerged in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Through consulting and collection advising, we provide expertise and educational experiences for our individual and corporate clients. Our ultimate goal is to provide a direct experience with Modern and contemporary art that encourages discourse around art's role in the advancement of culture. Gallery hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 11:00 AM–6:00 PM