

In 2 Shows, a Strong Tactile Quality

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

AT the Newark Museum, the spotlight is on the shows by Jack Whitten and Tyrone Mitchell. The two men are not far apart in age (51 and 46, respectively), both come from the South — Mr. Whitten from Alabama, Mr. Mitchell from Georgia — and although one is a painter and the other a sculptor, both produce art with a strong tactile quality.

In all other respects the artists are poles apart. Mr. Whitten has been the more conspicuous on the Manhattan scene and is more influenced by its traditions, notably Cubism and Pop.

His predominantly black, gray and white canvases, which gleam silver as if seen by moonlight, are of the city and make use of its materials — wire mesh, patterned tin sheeting, steel plates with treads, corrugated surfaces — you name it. Yet these seldom come firsthand, for since 1985 the artist has cast his found materials, usually by laying acrylic paint thick on their surfaces.

These acrylic skins lie low on the canvas — the artist calls them “keloids,” but they are less like random scar tissue than cicatrices, the tribal marks that are the result of cutting flesh and filling the incisions with wood ash. In any case, the technique more or less coincides with the ephiphanies recently experienced by the artist.

In an interview with Beryl Wright,

the museum's acting curator of painting and sculpture and the organizer of the two shows, Mr. Whitten speaks of his intellectual development. This began years ago with reading Jung, Nietzsche, Heidegger and other German philosophers and continued with his interest in Zen and the writings of contemporaries like James Baldwin and Joseph Campbell.

On the esthetic side, there has been the influence of technology — a period in Rochester on a Xerox grant, working with Xerox equipment — many summers spent in Crete and, finally, the realization that “culture itself is organic and has an equivalent to DNA.” A circuitous route, it has led the artist through the barrier separating the literal and literate West from Africa, with its still imperfectly understood animism and the art that has come out of it.

Mr. Whitten's show covers the last 15 years and includes images like unfocused television screens (“Alpha Group III,” of 1975) as well as “Norman Lewis Triptych” of 1983, in which three circles drawn in fine turquoise lines are suspended in fields of Jasper Johns-like impasto. Still, beneath these hip surfaces there lurks, more often than not, unhip emotion. It is unlikely that the artist will ever slough off his Western skin completely — or would want to.

After all, his conditioning has nourished him, and the recent “keloid” work that looks like cities seen through mesh — their surfaces are masses of studs arranged in rows, some painted, some left white — rep-

resent both a climax and the start of something new.

At the Art Students League, Tyrone Mitchell studied stone carving with José de Creeft. Later, he switched to wood, possibly under the influence of a sculptor from Antigua, Arnold Prince. The strange thing is that while Mr. Mitchell is now a master woodcarver, he seems always to be modeling his material.

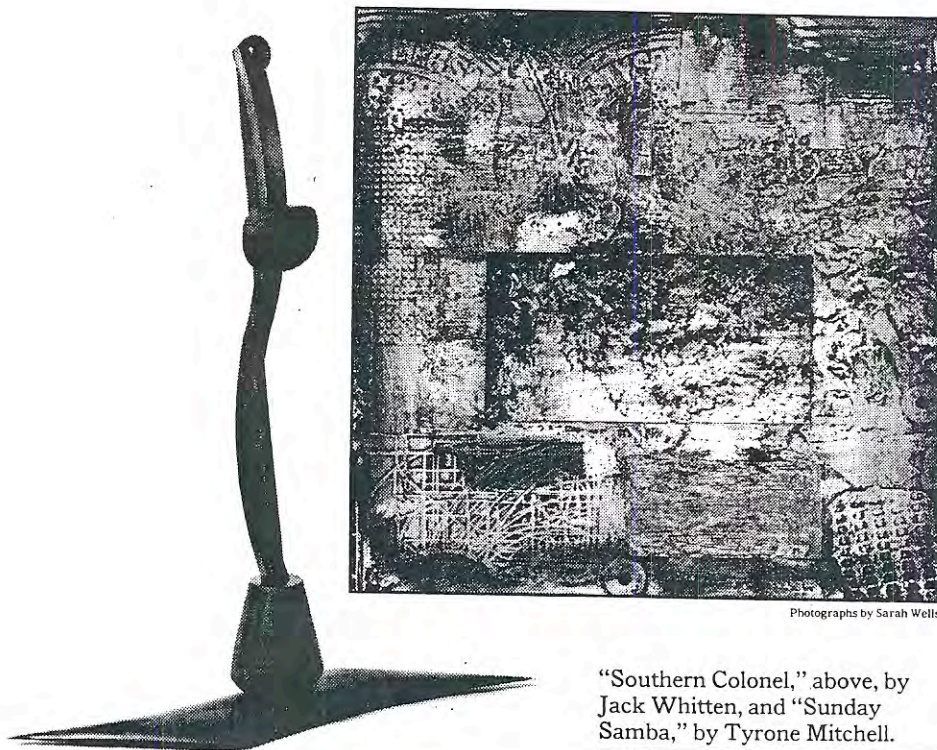
These 20 or so pieces occupying the museum's main lobby are an exercise in controlled sensuality. No doubt the sculptor uses conventional tools, but the end product emerges as if it had grown organically — and when it incorporates the odd branch and gourd, it has.

One example is “Sunday Samba” (1988), where two-inch beams are laminated into a single gracefully curving vertical that is rooted in a spinning-top shape and is accented along the way with two smaller rounded forms.

Another is “Timepiece for Nelson” of the same year, a small relief that looks like a chance accumulation of large mussel and clam shells except that there is nothing automatist about the way the artist has brought out the grain of the wood as if it were brocade.

He does the same in another relief, “Dark Nebula” (1990), where the elements are a shape that evokes a human shoulder and something resembling a bobbin and the surfaces are stained yellow merging into dark green and a rich brown-purple.

The viewer is aware of the African



Photographs by Sarah Wells

“Southern Colonel,” above, by Jack Whitten, and “Sunday Samba,” by Tyrone Mitchell.

influence long before learning from the interview with Ms. Wright that Mr. Mitchell knows Senegal and Mali and has studied the Dogon culture. But his strength is in his ability to appreciate the oneness of art and religion in Africa and in his appreciation of the way the African artist exists (or has existed) at the center

of his culture rather than fancying himself on the outside, as happens in the West.

Mr. Mitchell feels that the emphasis has been on slavery “as the prime identifier” for the black presence in this country, when the energy could have been better used to “reactivate and redefine” the original culture.

There is no artist who does this better than Mr. Mitchell himself, and it is hard to figure why he has made only two solo appearances in Manhattan in 16 years.

Both shows run through Feb. 28. Hours are noon to 5 P.M. Wednesday through Sunday. The museum is at 49 Washington Street.