

Jack Whitten

Jack Whitten's new paintings are about matter (*physis*) and identity. Images are embedded in the paint texture, seemingly in the process of emerging or, vice versa, of being trapped under the surface. They have irregular, indefinable edges like continental contours, like fractal imagery. This applies to a variety of subjects — each of which has a unique pattern that is specific to the experience out of which it came. For example, *First Gestalt* reveals a face but it is not identifiable, not a particular person. It represents the space that exists between people — a confrontation between black and white, between any degree of the Other. It is a changing space, a spectral imagery where you sense the energy that is being formed. Another interpretation: it is like television's scrambled squares that mask a face. The heads hide in the grid where paradoxically, given its characteristic location on the plane surface, there is assumed to be no room to hide. Whitten is dedicated to activating this space. This is in contrast to Chuck Close's portraits, which are also based on the grid but are identifiable and illustrational. Close bases his works on photographs, while Whitten's evolve out of material itself.

Dark Horizon is brownish and mot-

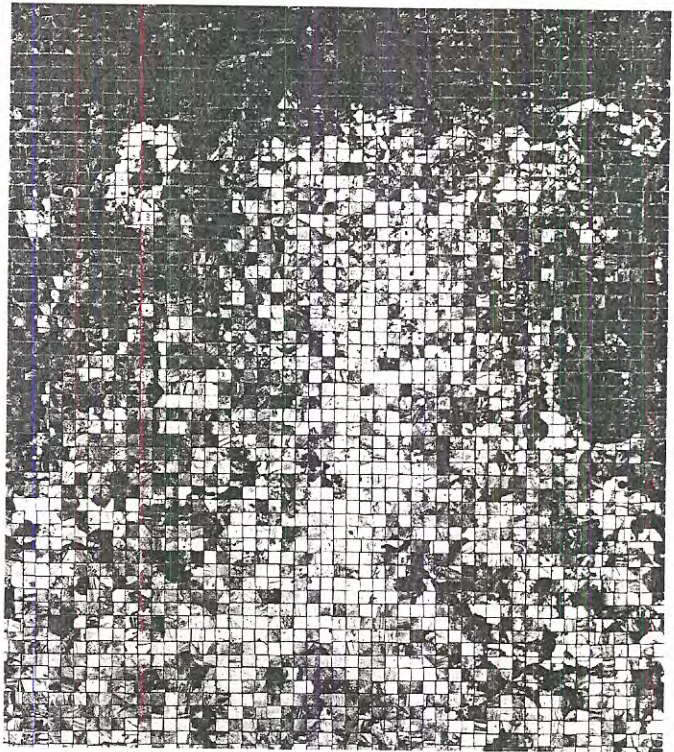
tled; the pattern is more organic. The changes are rich, more fluid and translucent. This is the result of using watercolor suspended in the acrylic paint. The subject came out of the recent rioting in Los Angeles and is pessimistic prophecy, relating to themes the artist dealt with in the '60s in figurative works that addressed savage race riots.

Now abstract, the single form churns and scatters at the edges.

The use of the grid strikes one immediately in the exhibition. This has been the consistent structural foundation for Whitten's work — earlier it came out of pushing paint through screens, with found materials from the street such as gratings or manhole covers used as stencils, thus cover-

ing the entire surface with systematically packed dots. Now the grid has become more material, formed by first pouring and painting fluid layers of black and white acrylic in thin sheets, which the artist then cuts into small squares like tesserae, traditionally made from stone or glass. In Whitten's world the associations run from the atom to the computer chip.

The paintings are full of contradictions: they are tight-

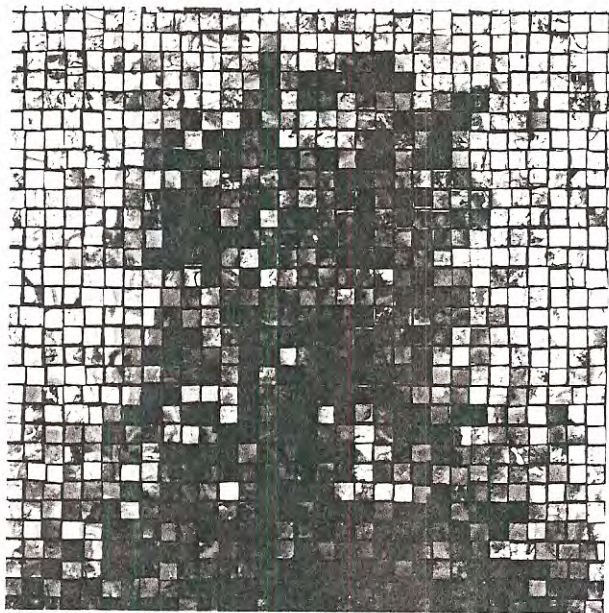


Jack Whitten, *Dark Horizon*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 58x52 in.

ly ordered by the grid that repeats obsessively but at the same time have a fluidity due to the play of paint and tones as well as a peculiar luminosity — a shimmering light that results from these factors. Whitten's palette, limited mostly to whites, blacks, and grays, speaks of night light and the galactic, granite, liquidity of water. As a near-monochromist, the artist aligns himself with New York aesthetics and modernist history. On a more personal level, ten years' concentration on black and white developed out of a focus on opposites; he is attracted to the density of black (his father was a coal miner) and to light. The same connection to his own history exists in his use of the grid. His mother's quilt-making involved the recycling of materials and also the use of obsessional, grid-like patterns, fetishistic in their repetition. Whitten is a multi-cultural phenomenon — African-American with a lot of Indian blood and Greek by adoption: he has spent his summers for over twenty years in Greece, absorbing the language and philosophy. He prefers and seeks out a plurality of cultures, which are embedded in his work.

Jeanne Siegel

At Horodner Romley Gallery, New York □



Jack Whitten, *First Gestalt*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 16x16 in.