

Retrospective illuminates Jack Whitten's genius

Distinguished artist gets his due at MCASD

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Artist Jack Whitten at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. — *Eduardo Contreras*

Having lived in New York for more than five decades, artist Jack Whitten knew many of the 20th century's great jazz musicians, including John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Kenny Dorham and especially Miles Davis.

Like Davis, Whitten didn't like to stand still; he was intent on trying new things. But when the young African-American artist gained attention in the mid-'70s after the Whitney Museum of American Art held a solo exhibition of his art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art added his paintings to their permanent collections, art dealers started encouraging him to stay with what was selling.

"It's unfortunate for a lot of artists," said Whitten at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego as an exhibit devoted to his work took shape around him. "Dealer comes up and says, 'Hey, man, you know, we sold those paintings at \$200,000 apiece; you give me 10 more like that, we can sell them for \$300,000 apiece.' It poses a dilemma when money gets involved."

Whitten still remembers Davis' advice: "Miles told me, 'I don't do that (stuff) anymore.'"

Neither does Whitten, although you get the feeling talking with him that he didn't really need Davis to tell him to be true to himself.

He views his studio as a laboratory and his painting as an ongoing experiment. And once one experiment is completed, his seemingly boundless curiosity and his quest to make a difference take him to something else.

But perhaps because he has been so restless, and his ever-evolving work so challenging to pin down, his name isn't in the public consciousness as much as some of his more famous mentors and contemporaries who have become brands as much as artists.

The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's chief curator, Kathryn Kanjo, is doing what she can to change that. She originated and curated the first major retrospective of his art, "Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting." On view at MCASD in La Jolla through Jan. 4, and scheduled to tour nationally with a scholarly catalog, it's a revelation.

Whitten's art is intensely personal, which is perhaps inevitable given his involvement in the civil rights movement and his force of character. But with his rare visual intelligence, humanistic sensibility, political consciousness, historical awareness and mastery of the medium, he also transcends the personal and approaches something more universal.

"I'm know what I'm in the game for; I know what I want; and what I want is a world view," said Whitten, who is fed up with self-righteous, narrowly focused people.

"I think I can truly say, not only for myself but for most people: Most people are tired of the (garbage). You hear me? Most people are tired of the (garbage). Politically, religiously, we're tired of it."

Speaking out

Whitten is not shy about speaking and painting what he thinks. Even as a student at the Tuskegee Institute, where he was a pre-med major (he remains fascinated with science and credits his experimental nature in part to the training he received at Tuskegee) and an Air Force ROTC cadet, he couldn't help himself.

He was in the middle of an ROTC class in target selection when he suddenly stood up.

"It was the damnedest thing," said Whitten. "All I remember is jumping up out of my seat and I mumbled, 'What the (heck) am I doing here?' You've heard of Tuskegee, right? The Tuskegee Airmen? Air Force ROTC at Tuskegee was serious stuff."

He remembers the officer addressing him as Cadet Whitten, calling him to attention and ordering him to sit down.

"I repeated it: 'What the (heck) am I doing here?' They finally managed to get me to sit down.

"I didn't understand what had happened, but I knew I had to leave Tuskegee. That's the best explanation I have."

A talented and accomplished musician and artist while attending high school in Bessemer, Ala., Whitten left Tuskegee for Southern University in Baton Rouge, La., where he studied art and was doing just fine before he became associated with the civil rights movement. Several violent confrontations persuaded him in 1960 to board a bus in New Orleans and head for Cooper Union in New York. He passed the entrance exam and has lived and worked in New York ever since.

"It was like landing on the moon," said Whitten of his early days at the prestigious art school. "I had never sat in a class with white kids before. Seriously. I came from a strict, Jim Crow, segregated society. I'm one of the people who truly experienced American apartheid. That's what it was. Total separation. Total. Schools, transportation, jobs, housing, everything — that's my background.

"And here I am in New York, it was a shocker-roo, big time. But I got with the groove and I met some good people."

Moving on

Among the people he met were a who's who of abstract expressionist painters, who became mentors and influential friends. People still associate Whitten's art with abstract expressionism, although he knew by 1970 that it was time to move on.

"I was very close to Bill de Kooning as an art student," said Whitten. "And Franz Kline, which was very good for me. But my hand had become so trained in the de Kooning gesture that by 1970 I realized I had to do something to get around Bill de Kooning. I had to do something to break the habit."

That's when he transformed his studio into a laboratory, started the experiments that still continue, and began in earnest listening to himself and his paintings. The most valuable tool in his studio is his rocking chair, he said, where he sits, contemplates and finds himself having an exchange with his work before even picking up a brush.

And what do his paintings tell him?

"These paintings started off as black and white paintings," he said, pointing to a selection of particularly striking abstract works from the '70s that fill one of MCASD's central galleries. "So what they taught me was, I hate binary structures; I hate fundamentalist thought. I mean it's a bore and it causes all kinds of problems. In truth, we don't need it.

"I prefer neither-nor; that's what these paintings taught me. Much better. I hate it when people try to develop these absolute binary things. It's got to be this; it's got to be that.

"Oh my God, stay away from me; I want nothing to do with it."

Or, to quote Miles Davis: "I don't do that (stuff) anymore."