



Tyrone Mitchell, *Dark Nebula*, 1990, Osage, ligam vitae, pigment, 17" x 9-1/2" x 9". Collection of the artist. Courtesy The Newark Museum.



Jack Whitten, *Charka VI: ANJA (Dedicated to the Memory of Porfirio Di Donna)*, 1988, Acrylic on canvas, 96" x 82". Collection of the artist. Courtesy The Newark Museum.

Tyrone Mitchell/ Jack Whitten

Jack Whitten began his gallery talk at the Newark Museum by outlining his preoccupation with the difficulties in, as he put it, "the aesthetics of reconstruction." In his view, the reinvestment of affirmative meaning—a meaning that to me is contingent upon a locating of self-worth in the not-so-necessarily progressive context of the lineages along which one defines oneself—into artistic production must immediately follow any act of construction (in the modern sense) or deconstruction (in the recent sense). As is firmly established in these exhibitions of Whitten's paintings and Tyrone Mitchell's sculptures, which focused primarily on their more recent outputs, both artists have the capability, energy, and patience to conduct significant investigations into such a problem. It is a reproach to art criticism and history that the 20 to 25 years of work produced by each of these artists is underknown at this time, and curator Beryl J. Wright deserves our appreciation for her own reconstructive accomplishment. To quote Wright: "Despite difference in sources, both artists wish to re-

connect themselves to an African tradition of philosophy and art and to use that reconnection as the basis for a revitalized form of contemporary American art." Using minimalist-inspired formality to anchor their respective contents, Mitchell and Whitten each make work that often satisfies that desire.

Mitchell's sculptures, unlike Whitten's paintings, readily display the impact of African sculpture (its influence upon Whitten is more apparent in the carved-wood sculptures that he has been doing since the '60s). Many of the pieces in Mitchell's exhibition—*Horn for Wilfredo* (1987) or *Bell for Cheena Ireli* (1990), for example—have totemic qualities that are often directly based upon such things as Ashanti goldweights in the shape of functional bells. An earlier piece, *Requiem* (1980), has two L-shaped components that are as minimalist as the signature images of early Robert Morris or Sol LeWitt, but in this case their structural capabilities are already enhanced with a narrative spirit that emerges more fully in the most recent work. *Dark Nebula* (1990) is unashamedly beautiful, a

head-sized wall sculpture seemingly infused with luminescent colors, with a shape based on the reproductive parts of plants, while *Portrait of an Ex-Southern Archetype* (1988), indicates the artist's interest in the African-American systems of, equally, narration, representation, and aesthetics. In Mitchell's work, while everything "fits" in the minimalist sense, it doesn't fall apart when it supports a story.

Whitten's development was similar to Mitchell's; he also moved from making paintings that more strictly observe the conventions of the minimalist tradition to work that more directly saturates minimalist structure with highly concentrated narratives (he considers his most recent paintings to be "compressions"). *Annunciation 14* (1979) is a small vibrating grid of thin acrylic washes that displays Whitten's use of "developers," comb-like tools that he constructed for each individual painting. Following a series of works (including *Norman Lewis Triptych [3rd Set]*, from 1983) reminiscent of Johns's crosshatch paintings, Whitten began making "site" paintings, accumulated collages of acrylic casts from molds that he makes on-site from things on the street. Close up, *Charka VI: ANJA (Dedicated to the Memory of Porfirio Di Donna)* (1986), reveals its sources of disparate textures found in New York, but everything is kept within the rigid control of the painting's grid. Giving the painting a certain spirit by permeating the reproductions of material objects that have been transposed into thick plastic paint with light and color, Whitten makes reference to his understanding of the concepts of animism that he learned from his own upbringing in a southern black fundamentalist church. Rebuilding Minimalism in a manner that remains true to each of the traditions that are important to them, and integrating them in a worthwhile fashion, both artists demonstrate that painting and sculpture have not yet done it all. (*The Newark Museum, November 17–February 28*) Terry R. Myers