

Coming up at the Contemporary

April 18 – June 14, 2008

Artists' Reception, Friday, April 18, 7 - 9 pm

Main & Left Galleries - Jack Whitten, *Memorial Paintings*

Gallery Four - Sincerely, John Head, *Boxed Set*

Round Gallery - Michael Gibson, *We are selling mainly to Americans*



Jack Whitten,  
*Black Table Setting (Homage to Duke Ellington)*,  
1974



Jack Whitten,

**Main & Left Galleries**

**Jack Whitten, *Memorial Paintings***

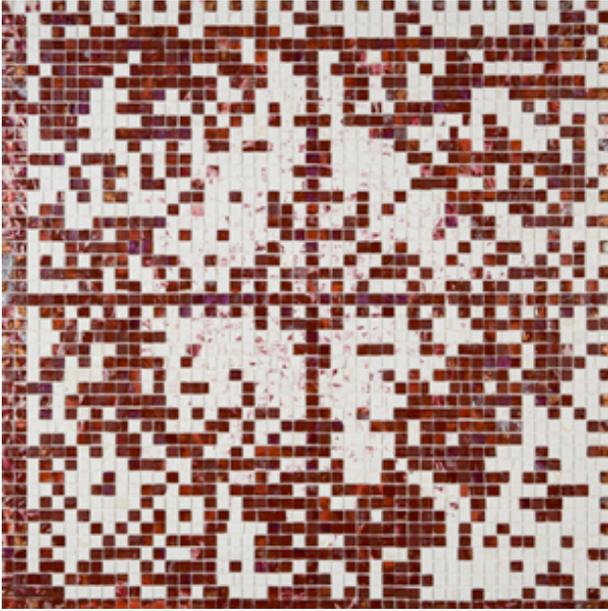
For the past 40 years, Jack Whitten has utilized abstraction as a rich territory for expression, experimentation, and problem solving. His paintings possess an uncommon energy and physicality, informed by the techniques he mastered working in construction trades of cabinet making and home building. His cultivation of precise and idiosyncratic studio procedures has resulted in the understanding that Whitten makes paintings rather than paints them. Within each decade of his career, he has produced works whose inspiration and finished look have been motivated by a memorializing impulse: to pay tribute or bear witness to the family members, cultural and historical figures (artists, musicians, politicians, writers), and tragic events that have shaped his life. This exhibition of paintings is the first survey of the artist's canvases in the South, and includes works from 1968 to the present.

Born in Bessemer, Alabama, in 1939, Whitten was deeply influenced by the injustices of segregation; sermons at the Southern Church of God; the joys of fishing and hunting; and the resourcefulness of his parents. As a young artist in New York in the 1960s, he established a dialogue with key African-American artists (Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis) and many of the first generation of Abstract Expressionist painters (Willem De Kooning, Franz Kline, Philip Guston). The engagement with collage, storytelling, and gesture, as practiced by these modern masters, would inform Whitten in profound ways. Critic Harold Rosenberg's infamous remark that "what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event"<sup>1</sup> certainly appealed to his sensibilities. Most important was his own testing of materials and ideas in proximity to peers in the evolution of Color Field, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art. Since the 1970s, the artist has found it necessary to create his own tools and techniques for use in constructing process-driven paintings: fashioning numerous variations on the Afro-comb, squeegee, rake, and trowel; making moulds of various street surfaces and casting them in acrylic; imbuing paint with gels, powders, and organic matter.

Whitten has said, "In Greek the word for artist is zographos, a combination of zo, 'of life,' and graphos, 'to write.' An old man said to me one day, as I was telling him about what I do, 'Zograpois, writer of life. This is your job, you do this.' When I dedicate paintings it is my way of acknowledging that certain people existed as a spirit and energy. I take material and present it in a way to say that these spirits are here. David Budd, Miles Davis, Norman Lewis, Chris Wilmarth, Romare Bearden. These people existed. I spoke to them, I knew them.

*Black Table Setting (Homage to Duke Ellington)*, 1974, was made on a horizontal platform using a large squeegee that could move quantities of liquid acrylic across the canvas in a single gesture. It is dedicated to the composer, pianist, and band leader who was one of the most influential figures in the history of jazz. As a tenor sax player in his youth and a lifetime lover of rigorous improvisational music, Whitten has a deep understanding of structure and saturation as they pertain to both music and visual art. This elegant painting features a rich palette of deep violet, crimson, gray, and black, that seems to have been swept at breakneck speed. It conjures the sophisticated and smooth songs of Ellington in the 1930's, including Mood Indigo and It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing).

*Black Monolith (for Ralph Waldo Ellison)*, 1994, is an example of Whitten's use



Jack Whitten,  
*E-Stamp III (Red Velvet: For Marcia Tucker)*,  
2007

of acrylic tesserae, small, mosaic-like units, which he has used to construct paintings since the early 1990's. The painting honors Ellison, whose 1947 novel, *Invisible Man*, features a protagonist who attempts to make sense of his formative experiences and socially invisible position in American society. Ellison writes that "truth is the light and light is the truth,"<sup>3</sup> a phrase that undoubtedly reverberated with Whitten who has spoken of light and space as "the painter's tools." The canvas is one of several that the artist calls "black monoliths" because of their strong, central figurative shape. This one is built with dirt and debris-filled acrylic, set within a luminous field of whites, blues and creams, a clear reference to the narrator who lives in "a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century."

*E-Stamp III (Red Velvet: For Marcia Tucker)*, 2007, is a recent work dedicated to the founding director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Tucker, who died in 2006, was curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art from 1969 to 1977, during which time she organized Whitten's first solo museum exhibition. Beloved by many, Tucker was a staunch feminist who consistently supported a wide range of artistic sensibilities, with a focus on political and socially oriented work made by women and people of color. This painting derives its design from electronic stamps that can be downloaded from the internet and printed onto envelopes, an invention that appeals to Whitten's interest in technology, tracking devices, and scanning systems. The palette of rich browns and reds was inspired by Red Velvet cake, a classic southern dessert that the artist imagined as a gift for his dear friend. In the 20th and 21st centuries, artists (and others), have taken their roles as witnesses very seriously. This applies as much to remembering acts of war, genocide, natural disaster, and terrorism, as it does to recognizing instances of bravery and lives of vision. Whitten has made a significant contribution to the history of honoring the dead with memorial paintings that offer a powerful merger of abstraction and representation, spirit and matter. Jack Whitten has shown his work in solo and group exhibitions at museums and galleries including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Newark Museum, New Jersey; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

[Saul Ostrow article on Jack Whitten in \*Art in America\* \(PDF\)](#)



Sincerely, John Head, *Boxed Set*, 2006

#### **Gallery Four Sincerely, John Head, *Boxed Set***

Sincerely, John Head was formed in 2001 when Pacific Northwest College of Art students Nat Andreini and Scott Porter met and discovered a common interest in photography, memorabilia, and collections. Since then, they have worked collaboratively on a series of celebratory works that examine the distinct cultures of music, art, sports, and celebrity, and commonalities between them. Choosing to use a moniker that evokes a written closing one might find on a form letter, they align themselves with musicians whose individuality is subsumed by their contribution to a band.

A particular focus of Sincerely, John Head's installations and objects is Foghat LIVE, the 1977 classic rock album which sold over two million copies. The artists made a significant step in their investigations by purchasing a Ford Ranchero from that same year, nicknaming it "Babette," and using it as a touring vehicle and iconic image. The car is bright orange with white detailing, and has been used to "tailgate" various events including an arts festival, a university theory and practice class, and a birthday party. The duo arrive in parking lots and driveways armed with beer, grills, munchies, and recorded music, creating instant communities of enthusiastic fans.

Other Foghat-related projects have included the creation of a storefront recording studio in Portland, Oregon where passersby could sing new interpretations of the album's six songs; printed uncut proofs of trading cards that combine historical images of the band with recent photographs of the artists and their car; and made paintings of tires made with motor oil. DVD Translation