

## Jack Whitten

ATLANTA CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

It is fitting that one of the works in this group of Jack Whitten's memorial paintings is dedicated to the art critic and ideologue Clement Greenberg, for the problematic that Greenberg judged to be central to modernist painting is palpable in Whitten's work. Greenberg famously posited modernism as the progressive purification of each art to its essential formal characteristics; in the case of painting, this meant eschewing representation in favor of abstraction. For more than forty years, Whitten, in producing elegies to various individuals, including many African-American cultural luminaries, has returned again and again to the question of how a painting can simultaneously serve both the basic human impulse to memorialize and the tenets of modernist abstraction.

It is clear that Whitten's memorials are largely subject-driven, as his style varies with the person represented. Least successful are the most literal or denotative works, where the connection between person and image seems obvious. Far more compelling are those in which the connections are less apparent, or in which there is tension between the subject and the formal means.

For example, Whitten celebrates the cabaret singer Bobby Short in *E Stamp II (The Black Butterfly: For Bobby Short)*, 2007, a painting whose patterns derive from those that appear on downloadable postage stamps. The work is at once a painting and a mosaic, resulting as it does from a technique Whitten has employed since the early 1990s, in which he uses small squares of hardened acrylic paint as tesserae. The primarily velvety black composition is inflected with light blue and sparkling gold tiles, with which Whitten has formed a circle and two lines dividing the square work into quadrants. While the representation of Bobby Short, the epitome of smooth cabaret elegance, in rich black and gold is certainly apt, it also feels a bit obvious.

*Black Table Setting (Homage to Duke Ellington)*, 1974, is a similarly elegant composition of sweeping horizontal lines of black paint streaked with ocher, deep red, and light gray. While the palette and refinement of the image may express Ellington's persona, the way the painting was created is arguably at odds with Ellington's musical approach. Whitten produced the work by making a single stroke with a squeegee across a canvas loaded with paint. This bravura gesture, planned but open to accident, suggests an artistic sensibility quite different from that which led Ellington to compose and arrange music so meticulously. The contrast between the subject and the means makes the work more provocative than a conventional homage.

It is enjoyable to imagine that Greenberg, who apparently was favorably impressed with some of Whitten's early work, would have hated *The Space Is Clement (for Clem Greenberg)*, 1994. The image is abstract: A line made up of blue and green tesserae snakes through a lighter blue field. But Greenberg surely would have thought that Whitten intended his acrylic paint chips, which are hard and often shiny, to resemble traditional ceramic or glass mosaic tiles. Such illusionistic representation, and the presence of hair and other detritus on the surface of the work, indeed the whole concept of "mixed media," flies in the face of Greenbergian purism. What more appropriate memorial to the cantankerous art critic than an equally cantankerous rejoinder from an artist?

—Philip Auslander

Jack Whitten, *The Space Is Clement (for Clem Greenberg)*, 1994, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 42 x 42".

