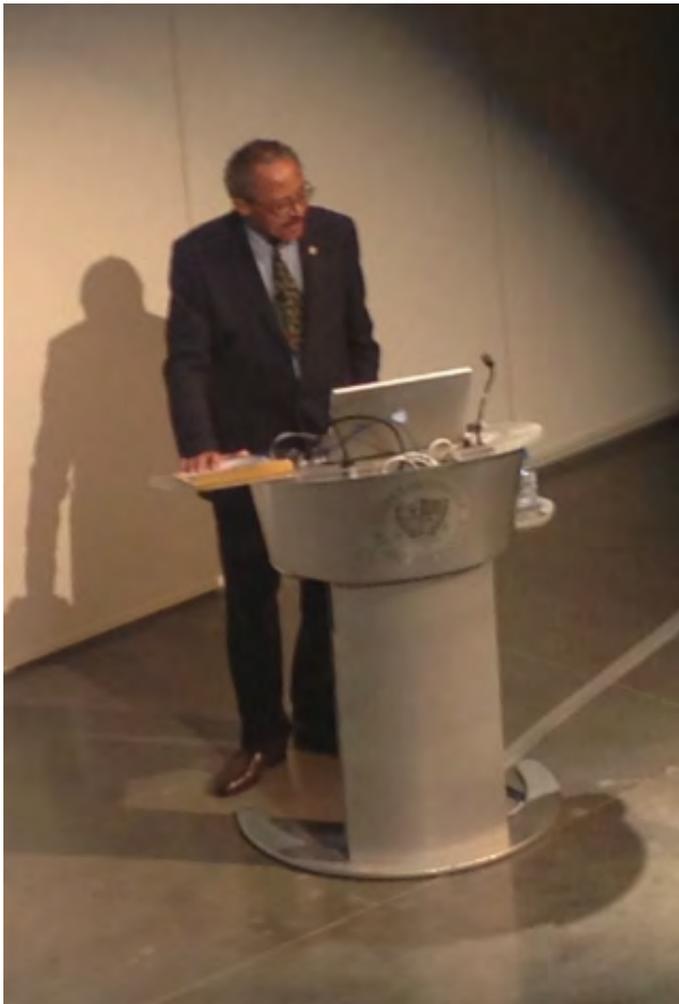


HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

“In Painting We Discover Demons; If We Don’t Exorcise Them They Devour Your Ass!”

by [Kyle Chayka](#) on February 20, 2013



Jack Whitten lecturing at SCAD (All photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

SAVANNAH, Georgia — Traditionally, art history is contained on objects — the artifacts that artists leave behind and populate our museums and galleries, offering aesthetic arguments, disagreements, and manifestos. But the messier, less packaged-up side of art history is hidden in the people who lived it. That much was certainly clear from a lecture at Savannah College of Art and Design’s 2013 [deFINE Art conference](#).

Born in Alabama in 1939, Whitten is a pioneering modernist abstract painter who is also African American, a rarity among the white straight male club of the New York School. In his lecture, marking an exhibition of his painting and printmaking at the SCAD Museum of Art, he described having an early interest in science and medicine, which led him to the [Tuskegee Institute](#), an African-American school oriented toward the military. After chafing under the strict rules and hierarchy of the Institute, Whitten left behind his interest in science (though it would resurface in his art) and moved toward visual art.

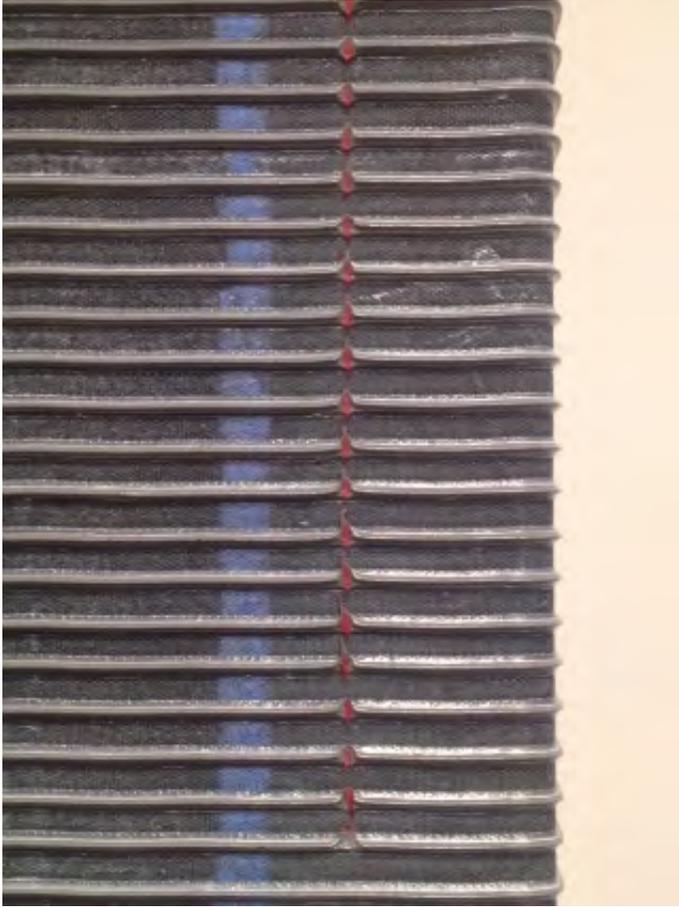
He attended Southern University in Louisiana, where he became involved in the Civil Rights movement, and then decamped for New York, arriving just in time for an interview at Cooper Union, which he aced. Going to Cooper Union was “the first time I had stepped into a classroom with white people,” he said. Through his time at the school, he also encountered major African American artists like Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, not to mention Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman, who were core members of the abstract painting movement in the city.



Installation shot of Jack Whitten at SCAD Museum of Art

New York became Whitten’s crucible, a radical departure from the segregation of his youth. “Being able to meet all races in New York was really important,” he said. The artistic community provided a sounding board and a support group. More than once, Whitten described pulling a larger-than-life art historical figure — Newman, for example — into his studio to show off a recent painting. Yet it wasn’t all rosy. Whitten’s father was an alcoholic, and in the New York scene, he encountered problems with substance abuse. “Drinking and drugs were pervasive on the Lower East Side in the ‘60s,” he described. “By ‘68 I

thought I was losing it.”



Detail of Jack Whitten's "Alpha Group III" (1975)

During the lecture, he said that at times he took large doses of LSD to get away from the mental conflicts of studio work. For Whitten, art making is a taxing spiritual endeavor that has a lot in common with religion — including the darker side. In what was likely the quote of the night, he proclaimed, “In painting we discover demons; if we don't exorcise them they devour your ass!”

New York's frenetic milieu allowed Whitten to refine his practice, moving from derivative Abstract Expressionism to an automatic form of painting informed by manufacturing, speed, and minimalism. He adopted a physical materiality from African sculpture and focused on questioning the faith in gesture of the New York School. “I stopped using the word 'to paint,' and said 'to make,'" he explained, showing images of canvases he created by dragging saw-toothed planks across expanses of pooled paint.

These paintings, which saw Whitten reduce his work down to a single gesture, are currently on view at the elegantly renovated SCAD Museum of Art. In contrast to some Abstract Expressionism, the work still feels fresh, largely due to its mechanical clarity. Whitten described that he thought of these paintings as having the qualities of a single line — a discrete piece of visual information.



Installation view of Jack Whitten at SCAD Museum of Art

Whether soft, thick grids of viscous paint lines or bare scratches in thin washes, Whitten's work is defiantly crisp. What makes him compelling as an artist as well as a person is that despite the success of this series, he has never been content to stay in one place. His acrylic mosaics can be seen at the New Museum's ongoing [New York 1993](#) exhibition and his latest work shows a roving interest in the visual vocabulary of technology. Bridging the heyday of New York painting with its contemporary threads, Jack Whitten is human art history.

[Jack Whitten: Erasures](#) runs at SCAD Museum of Art (601 Turner Boulevard, Savannah, Georgia) through March 31.