

ART IN REVIEW

Jack Whitten



Alexander Gray Associates, New York

"Nine Cosmic CDs: For the Firespitter (Jayne Cortez)," 2013, in Jack Whitten's show at Alexander Gray Associates.

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Alexander Gray Associates

508 West 26th Street, Room 215,
Chelsea

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With a career grazing the 50-year mark, Jack Whitten is still making work that looks like no one else's, which is saying something, given the flood of abstract painting in New York in the past few years. He invented new forms of abstraction and standards of beauty to match them. Even more to his credit, he's still restless enough to make every picture a complex one-off formal event. And he's stayed invested enough in art as an intimate medium to make those events personal.

Several of the new pieces in his current solo show commemorate people who have been important to him. A beautiful painting dedicated to the artist Alan Shields (1944-2005) is a little ocean of cresting waves with a thin, multicolor necklace of paint, of a sort Shields might have used to adorn his cloth sculptures, floating over it. A tribute to Jayne Cortez (1934-2012) — poet, performer and wife of the sculptor Melvin Edwards — is a smoldering red and black paint field implanted with circular forms that suggest both CDs — Ms. Cortez recorded with a band called the Firespitters — and life preservers.

Ms. Cortez was an artist-activist; in a quieter way, Mr. Whitten always has been, too. Some of his very early work, like that seen in a survey called "Light Years: Jack Whitten 1971-73," at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University through Dec. 15, emerged from the civil rights movement. And a new painting like the 2013 "Remote Control" at Gray is alert to politics right now. A sheet of darkness studded with gears and knobs like watching eyes, it says a lot of what abstraction can say about limitless surveillance and push-button annihilation.