

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jack Whitten

Overview of the Collection

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Whitten, Jack, 1939-2018 |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, |
| Dates: | October 27, 2016 and October 3, 2016 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2016 |
| Physical Description: | 11 uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:19:10). |
| Abstract: | Painter Jack Whitten (1939 - 2018) created abstract paintings for over half a century, exhibiting at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, among others. Whitten was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 27, 2016 and October 3, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2016_033 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Visual artist Jack Whitten was born on December 5, 1939 in Bessemer, Alabama to Annie B. Cross Whitten and Mose Whitten. He was a pre-med student at Tuskegee Institute before leaving the university in 1959. He then studied art at Southern University in Baton Rouge briefly, before moving to New York City and enrolling at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in 1960, where he earned his B.F.A. degree.

In New York, Whitten became influenced by artists such as Willem de Kooning

and Norman Lewis, as well as jazz musicians such as John Coltrane and Miles Davis. Whitten had his first group exhibition in 1965 at Allan Stone Gallery in New York, which also hosted his first solo exhibition in 1968. In the late 1960s, he became an art professor at The Cooper Union and School of Visual Arts. He later taught at Manhattan Community College. Beginning in the 1970s, Whitten broke away from abstract expressionist influences and began to experiment with tools he created to apply paint to canvas, such as a twelve foot rake that he called the “developer.” In 1974, he participated in a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1983, a solo exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem celebrated his paintings from 1970 to 1980. In the 1980s, Whitten became interested in using paint as the base of a collage; and in the 1990s and the 2000s, he experimented with the casting of acrylic paint from molds and the construction of paintings as mosaics made from acrylic tesserae. His work was installed in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among others. His work was also featured in a fifty year retrospective exhibition in 2014. With Hauser & Wirth and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp as his representation, Whitten has shown his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, Savannah College of Art and Design, Zeno X Gallery in Antwerp, Belgium, Art Basel in Switzerland, Walker Art Center, Alexander Gray Associates, and Atlanta Contemporary Art Center.

Whitten has been awarded the 2015 National Medal of Arts, John Hay Whitney Fellowship, an Individual Artist’s Fellowship from the National Endowments for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Fellowship. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from the San Francisco Art Institute and Brandeis University in 2014 and 2016, respectively.

Whitten passed away on January 20, 2018 at age 78.

Jack Whitten was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 3, 2016 and October 27, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jack Whitten was conducted by Harriette Cole on October 27, 2016 and October 3, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 11 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Painter Jack Whitten (1939 - 2018) created abstract paintings for over half a century, exhibiting at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, among others.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Whitten, Jack, 1939-2018

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Painter

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, October 27, 2016 and October 3, 2016. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The

HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section
A2016_033_001_001, TRT: 1:31:35 2016/10/03

Jack Whitten was born on December 5, 1939 in Bessemer, Alabama to Annie Cunningham Whitten and Mose Whitten. His mother was the daughter of coalminer Asbury Cunningham and homemaker Etta Snyder Cunningham. His paternal family were sharecroppers with white heritage. Whitten's mother was previously married to James Monroe Cross, a sign painter, with whom she had four children. Cross was often threatened by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and died under mysterious circumstances while visiting the local hospital. Whitten's parents met at 28th Street Church of God and later married. His father worked as a coal miner, while his mother worked as a seamstress, and founded the Annie B. Whitten Kindergarten. He grew up in Bessemer, where he worked on a neighbor's farm, and saw KKK rallies that passed by his home. He remembers his younger brother, fashion designer Billy Whitten, who owned Workroom 27 in Los Angeles, California, and worked for celebrities like Michael Jackson, Diana Ross and Redd Foxx.

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section
A2016_033_001_002, TRT: 2:28:59 2016/10/03

Jack Whitten's father, Mose Whitten, was a coal miner at the Muscoda Mines in Bessemer, Alabama. He learned to

hunt from his maternal uncle, Jesse Cunningham, and worked as a cook for another uncle at Hall's Café. Whitten took an interest in the arts, sketching landscapes and family portraits, as well as playing the saxophone in the marching band at George Washington Carver Junior High School. He attended Paul William Dunbar High School, where he worked as the school artist for Principal Jackson Solomon Abrams, and formed a dance band. He also learned jazz music from his band instructor. While in high school, Whitten earned money by providing the music for local radio station jingles, painting sign displays at department stores, and creating décor for theme nights at the Madison Night Spot club. He then attended Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama as a pre-med student. Whitten worked as a janitor to pay tuition, and hoped to become a U.S. Air Force pilot, until abruptly leaving the Tuskegee Institute.

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section
A2016_033_001_003, TRT: 3:30:09 2016/10/03

Jack Whitten grew up in Bessemer, Alabama under Jim Crow laws, where he once designed a civil rights demonstration poster for activist, Asbury Howard, and learned of the murder of Timothy Hood, a black U.S. Army veteran, who removed the Jim Crow sign on a city bus. Whitten also visited Montgomery, Alabama to hear Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak about the Montgomery Bus Boycott. After changing his major to art, Whitten transferred to Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Whitten worked over the summers in order to pay his college tuition. Two of these jobs were in Brooklyn, New York, where he worked construction on the Flatbush Avenue Extension, and waited tables at Lundy's Restaurant. Whitten took part in a nonviolent protest to increase funding at Southern University; after marchers were attacked, the university shut down for the semester. He left Southern University, and visited New Orleans, Louisiana, where he met Fats Domino at Mule's Restaurant & Bar.

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section
A2016_033_001_004, TRT: 4:31:35 2016/10/03

Jack Whitten moved to New York City in 1960, and

gained admission to Cooper Union, where he studied art, specializing in painting. There, he was mentored by painter Robert Gwathmey. Whitten was the only black student in his class at Cooper Union. He befriended artist Robert Blackburn, who introduced him to other established artists in the city, such as Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis and Jacob Lawrence. He also befriended other young black artists, such as Bob Thompson, William Lawrence Compton Kolawole and Emilio Cruz. Whitten frequented the Cedar Tavern, where the city's abstract painters gathered. He became acquainted with Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, who helped him acquire canvases at a discount. Although Whitten did not continue playing music, he frequented the Birdland jazz club, and met musicians like Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter and Archie Shepp. Whitten's art style was influenced by John Coltrane's description of his music.

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section
A2016_033_001_005, TRT: 5:28:48 2016/10/03

Jack Whitten established his studio on Lispenard Street in New York City in 1962. His first marriage to Florence Squires quickly ended in divorce. During the 1960s, many of Whitten's paintings were autobiographical or politically inspired, including a series on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He and many of his artist friends experimented with drugs like LSD and cocaine. Whitten belonged to a scene of black artists on the Lower East Side neighborhood of New York City, which included poet Ishmael Reed, and musicians Archie Shepp and Charlie Parker. His work was first shown at Allan Stone Gallery in 1965, where his first solo exhibition was also shown in 1968. Whitten was unable to support himself from selling his art alone, so he and Joe Overstreet advertised their handiwork services in the Village Voice. In 1968, Whitten began teaching art classes at Queens College, and Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. That same year, he also married his second wife Mary Staikos Whitten, a former classmate at Cooper Union.

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section
A2016_033_001_006, TRT: 6:15:28 2016/10/03

Jack Whitten narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section
A2016_033_002_007, TRT: 7:28:03 2016/10/27

Jack Whitten transitioned from using oil paint to acrylic paint in 1970. He obtained paint from Leonard Bocour, who traded him paint and polymers for his finished paintings. Whitten preferred acrylic paint because of its faster drying time, greater viscosity, and ability to be used as a binding agent. He invented a metal tool known as a developer, which he used to shape his acrylic paintings. Based on his work with the developer, Whitten started to create collages in 1973 that were constructed from cut pieces of acrylic paint. During the late 1970s, he began a series of works that he called his Greek alphabet paintings, which were roughly thirty paintings that used only the black and white color spectrum, because Whitten wanted to avoid the emotions related to the colors reds, blues and yellows. Later, in 1990, he began using tesserae paint chips to create a series of tessellated paintings that were inspired by ancient Mediterranean mosaics.

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section
A2016_033_002_008, TRT: 8:29:56 2016/10/27

Jack Whitten worked as a cabinet maker in the late 1960s, to supplement his income as an artist. He was also a professor at several New York City colleges, including the School of Visual Arts, Queens College and Cooper Union, where he taught for twenty-six years. In 1974, Whitten presented his artwork at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The exhibit was reserved for black artists without commercial representation, and also featured Alvin D. Loving and Melvin Edwards. During the late 1970s, Whitten focused on his Greek alphabet series of paintings, in which he experimented with the visual quality of his work. He also began building specialized tools from materials like wood, Plexiglas and brass, to create interlocking patterns. In 1980, Whitten completed his painting 'Dead Reckoning I,' which was named after a term he learned in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps at the Tuskegee Institute. Whitten had a background in the sciences, and many of his paintings were influenced by scientific discoveries.

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section

A2016_033_002_009, TRT: 9:31:09 2016/10/27

Jack Whitten's apartment building in Tribeca neighborhood of New York City caught fire in 1980, which caused him to postpone his art career for three years. After the fire, he purchased and renovated the apartment building, and converted it into a home and studio. In 1983, the Studio Museum in Harlem, under its president, Mary Schmidt Campbell, hosted a solo exhibition called 'Ten Years, 1970-1980' of Whitten's work. Whitten also showed his work at the Onyx Art Gallery. Throughout the 1980s, Whitten's work incorporated both Euclidean and fractal geometry, and he created paintings such as 'Garden in Bessemer.' In 1990, he began using crafted acrylic paint chips, which he called tesserae, to create collages. Whitten also used tesserae to create the Black Monoliths series, which honored major African American figures such as Ralph Ellison, Barbara Jordan, Jacob Lawrence and Thelonious Monk. Whitten spent many summers vacationing in Greece, where his favorite activities included deep-sea diving and spearfishing.

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section
A2016_033_002_010, TRT: 10:28:39 2016/10/27

Jack Whitten used tesserae made from acrylic paint, to create a series of paintings marked by pixelated designs. These paintings commemorated major African American cultural figures such as Bobby Short and Alvin D. Loving, and were time-consuming to create, as paint in that volume took months to dry. Whitten witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, from his studio in New York City's Tribeca neighborhood. He saw people jump from the burning buildings and the collapse of both towers. After the attacks, Whitten moved to the Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens, New York City, where he renovated an old firehouse to serve as his studio. The first painting he completed there was '9-11-01,' intended as a memorial for those killed in the attacks. Whitten presented a solo exhibit of his work at Museum of Modern Art PS1 in Queens in 2007. That same year, he joined Alexander Gray Associates, an art gallery based in New York City, which increased commercial interest in

his work.

Video Oral History Interview with Jack Whitten, Section
A2016_033_002_011, TRT: 11:34:49 2016/10/27

Jack Whitten sold one of his paintings to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, which was placed on display, and seen by his mother, Annie Cunningham Whitten. During the 2010s, his work was shown in solo exhibitions at Brandeis University, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in California, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Whitten was also awarded an honorary doctorate from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2014. He traveled to Europe in 2015 to present solo exhibitions in Berlin, Germany, and the Zeno X Gallery in Antwerp, Belgium. Whitten began working with the international art gallery Hauser and Wirth in 2016. President Barack Obama awarded him with the National Medal of Arts in 2016 in a ceremony at the White House. Whitten reflects upon his life, legacy and artistic career. He also describes his plans and hopes for the future.