



Featured in

**Issue 204**

## A Limited Look at the Long Career of Jack Whitten

The late US painter's first European survey, at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, is a missed opportunity

K BY [KITO NEDO](#) IN [REVIEWS](#) | 03 MAY 19



Björk, Miles Davis, Depeche Mode, U2: Anton Corbijn is best known for his image-defining celebrity portraits of the 1980s and '90s. It may seem strange, then, that a portrait by the photographer greets visitors at the entrance to 'Jack's Jacks', late US painter Jack Whitten's exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof. It was shot in 2017, a year before Whitten's death.

Whitten's work has long been admired in international artistic circles but, contrary to what the prominent positioning of Corbijn's portrait suggests, he never achieved painter-popstar status. When he joined Hauser & Wirth in 2016, there had been just one retrospective of his 50-year career in the US: 'Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting', a travelling exhibition that was first shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in 2014.

In the late 1960s, Whitten was an abstract expressionist, but he soon developed his own style, one based on a seemingly boundless curiosity and a desire to find unique solutions to the problems of pictorial invention. In the 1970s, he began to experiment with a 'squeegee' technique, dragging the self-constructed, sometimes oversized squeegees across his canvases – a painterly gesture that would later become associated with Gerhard Richter, who adopted the technique in the early eighties. At times, Whitten also ran a rake through his acrylics, at others, he secured little objects and dried flecks of paint onto his canvases, their surfaces shimmering like ancient mosaics.



Jack Whitten, *Sweet Little Angel, For B.B. King*, 2015, acrylic on panel, 114 × 114 cm.  
Courtesy: Jack Whitten Estate, Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, and Hauser & Wirth, London/Zurich/St.Moritz/Hong Kong/Los Angeles/New York/Somerset/Gstaad; photograph: John Berens

In 2017, Whitten told the *Paris Review*: ‘Everything I do is grounded in geometry, a lot of different forms of geometry, I work with all of them.’ But, in spite of this, his works emanate something very human, soulful, not to mention playful. To look at these canvases is to constantly move through space; like sculptures, their distinct surfaces change according to where the viewer is positioned. They oscillate, they move.

‘Jack’s Jacks’ is Whitten’s first solo show at a European museum. But the work is not entirely unknown in the German capital, where a small, one-man show was held at the (now-closed) gallery Kienzle & Gmeiner in 2009. Therefore, ‘Jack’s Jacks’ could have set itself a challenge and traced the broad development of Whitten’s long career, situating his impressive oeuvre within the context of European art history. Sadly, Udo Kittelmann and Sven Beckstette’s limited selection of 30 paintings does not do this: the curators focus on a single group of later works that the artist considered ‘gifts’ to the various figures listed in their titles. According to Beckstette, this decision stemmed from talks between Kittelmann and Whitten himself. Up until his death, Whitten was heavily involved with the curation of the show, which was initially slated as a personal survey. Additionally, the plan was to rely predominantly on works from European collections.

Over the years, Whitten returned again and again to specific individuals and historical events: one of the earliest paintings in the show, *“King’s Wish” (Martin Luther’s Dream)*, dates from 1968; the most recent, *Quantum Wall, VIII (For Arshile Gorky, My First Love in Painting)*, dates from 2017, the year before Whitten’s death. Rather than portraits or history paintings in the strictest sense, the results are abstract renderings of a subjective vision that passed seamlessly over the likes of Muhammad Ali (*Black Monolith X, Birth of Muhammad Ali*, 2016) and Louise Bourgeois (*Saint Louise AKA The Tittie Painting for Louise Bourgeois*, 2010).



[SHOP](#) [VIP](#)

[FEATURES](#) [INTERVIEWS](#) [LISTINGS & REVIEWS](#) [OPINION](#) [STUDIOS](#) [VISIT](#)

[SIGN IN](#)



Jack Whitten, *Apps for Obama*, 2011, acrylic on hollow core door, 2.1 × 2.3 m. Courtesy: Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp; photograph: John Berens

Whitten's pictures move deftly through these many disparate aspects of contemporary culture – pop, sports, politics. In the troubled career of Ali, for instance, Whitten recognised certain challenges that he had faced while making art: 'The man had this primal force about him, but the beauty was – what I call "the plasticity of boxing" – he could take that primal force and he knew how to structure it. In a way, that's what I want to do in painting.' Another example is the prominently hung *Apps for Obama* (2011): a blue-tiled rectangle recalling the display of an iPad, on which apps appear to dance like radically abstracted Oskar Schlemmer dolls.

Whitten's practice was storied and wide-ranging – spanning drawing, sculpture, small-format painting – something that is not represented here. Instead, a disproportionate amount of space is devoted to the late work of the 2010s. But if 'Jack's Jacks' demonstrates one thing, it is Whitten's boundless inventiveness in dealing with paint as his primary medium. In the early stages of his career, he worked with his squeegees (as in *Zulu Tea Parlor*, 1973); later, he dried, broke and cut up paint, fusing contemporary references with those that reside in the recesses of art history in order to create something new. The blue of the three-part picture *Quantum Wall (A Gift for Prince)* (2016), for example, shines like the blue tiles of the famous Ishtar Gate from ancient Babylon, now in Berlin's Pergamon Museum. This is one of several delightful moments in 'Jack's Jacks', an exhibition that will nonetheless be remembered as a major missed opportunity to treat Berlin to a more comprehensive overview of Whitten's quite miraculous talents.

*Translated by Nicholas Grindell*

**Jack Whitten, 'Jack's Jacks' runs at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, until 1 September 2019.**

*Main image: Jack Whitten, One Hundred Ninety Pieces of Color: For Ellsworth Kelly #2 (detail), 2016, acrylic on canvas, 122 × 122 cm. Courtesy: Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp; photograph: John Berens*



KITO NEDO

Kito Nedo lives in Berlin where he works as contributing editor for *frieze* and as freelance journalist for several magazines and newspapers. In 2017, he won the ADKV-Art Cologne Award for Art Criticism.

TAGS

Jack Whitten, Painting, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Kito Nedo, Review

SHARE THIS



Advertisement

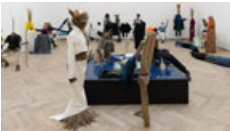
MORE LIKE THIS



Davide Stucchi  
Shines Light on  
Habits, Desires  
and Biological  
Needs



When Water  
Becomes a  
Commodity:  
Barbara  
Kapusta's  
Digital Desert



What Can We  
Learn from a  
Return to  
Witchcraft?



Helga Paris's  
Portraits  
Capture the  
Unseen  
Realities of  
Women



Artists' Artists:  
Ashland Mines  
on Rykeyn  
Bailey's  
Painterly  
Gestures



Louise  
Giovanelli's  
Post-Pixel  
Pointillism



Kwesi  
Botchway's  
Defiant Figures  
Examine the



Alex Da Corte's  
Nostalgia for  
Pop



[Olu Ogunnaike's  
Radical Revival  
of London Plane  
Trees](#) [SHOP](#) [VIP](#)



[Zhao Gang  
Captures  
Northeast  
China's Near-  
Extinct Culture](#)

[FEATURES](#)

[INTERVIEWS](#)

[LISTINGS & REVIEWS](#)

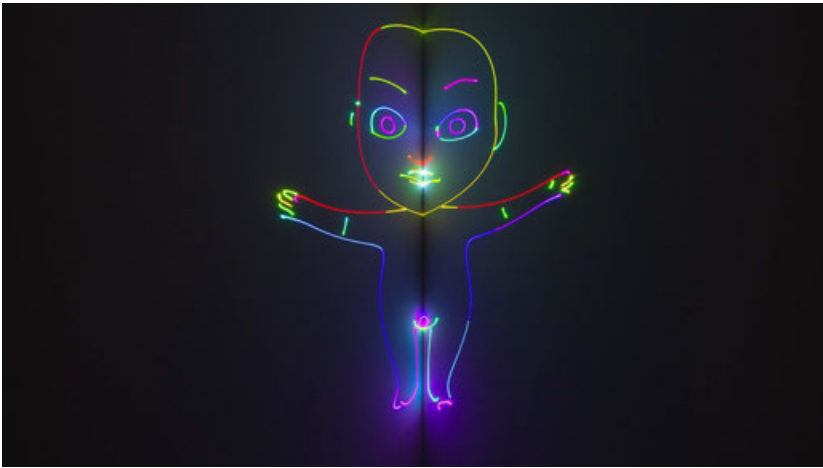
[OPINION](#)

[STUDIOS](#)

[VISIT](#)

Advertisement

## MORE LIKE THIS



[Matt Copson Stages the Creation and the Cruelty of Life](#)



[Davide Stucchi Shines Light on Habits, Desires and Biological Needs](#)



[In Defence of Discomfort: Kai Althoff's Whitechapel Show is a Dreamscape](#)



[Meet Me in Shanghai: The Best Exhibitions in Eastern China](#)

Advertisement

### The Company

[About](#)  
[Careers](#)  
[Advertise](#)  
[Contact Us](#)

### Help

[Privacy Policy](#)  
[Legals](#)  
[Cookie Policy](#)

### Follow Us

[Facebook](#)  
[Twitter](#)  
[Instagram](#)