

Jack Whitten The Greek Alphabet Paintings

In the 1970s, Jack Whitten developed a unique painting language driven by process and concept and characterized by material experimentation, dense luminosities, and multidimensionality. This exhibition brings together forty works from Whitten’s land-mark Greek Alphabet series, realized in his downtown New York studio between 1975 and 1978. Rarely seen at the time of their making and never before as an ensemble, these paintings represent a turning point in the artist's practice. Whitten’s systematic investigation of acrylic paint, indirect methods of execution, and collapse of gesture into surface place these works at the intersection of Conceptual, Minimalist, and Process art. Situated at Dia Beacon among works by his contemporaries, the Greek Alphabet series reveals Whitten's distinct contribution to abstract painting in the 1970s.

The series is comprised of abstract compositions, predominantly black and white and ordered per the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet. Though for some letters the artist made (or kept) only one painting, most letters present variations on a primary composition, which grows in complexity as the alphabet unfolds. To make the works, Whitten covered his studio floor with an evenly hard platform for controlled accidents and pressure. Atop the platform he positioned metal wires, geometric silhouettes, and other “disruptors” (as he referred to them), following preparatory diagrams. He then tacked canvas over the arrangement; coated the canvas with several layers of acrylic paint variously mixed with minerals and thinners; and further incised and embossed the surface using taut string, an ice pick, screws, and other such indirect methods. Finally, Whitten raked the pliable acrylic with a twelve-foot-wide serrated blade that he called the “developer,” in reference to photographic processes, generating a striped pattern that at once interferes with and reveals the picture as coextensive with the paint that carries it.

Like many of his peers, by 1970 the artist had moved away from the psychologically laden brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionism. Whitten devised a system for the Greek Alphabet paintings to distance himself from associations brought about by title, color, and gestural mark-making, and the progress through the alphabet gave a tempo to his studio time. If the series is legible as a system, however, it is not altogether pre-determined by it. Rather, ideation is entwined with process in these works. “Not an illustration of an idea but the material embodiment of the idea,” the artist suggested. “What’s important here is that no separation of image, content, idea, process is allowed, it’s all compressed in the *making* of the object.”¹

For his surfaces, Whitten found inspiration in the accretion of dirt on New York’s side-walks, in the selective darkening of silver salts in homogeneous photographic emulsion, and in the fractal nature of jazz music. Like those phenomena, each mark in a Greek Alphabet painting attracts singular attention while remaining connected to the whole.

Consider *Eta Group III*, which is based, like *Eta Group I, II*, and *IV* (all 1976), on the squaring of a circle. However, unlike its cognates, the vibrant surfacing of *Eta Group III* derives almost exclusively from the developer’s modulated scoring. The studied manipulation of acrylic bestows the paintings with an inherent luminosity and static noise. To various degrees, all the Greek Alphabet paintings present the moiré effect that occurs when the pattern of a monitor interferes with the pattern of an image, and that has its origins in textile printing, specifically the shimmering quality of watered silk. The result, the artist noted, is a “weaving of light”: a surface that provokes spatial experience through material layers in contact.²

Whitten's interest in contemporary imaging techniques, from space photography to video, is further evident in works such as *Mee I* (1977). Here, the mutual action of thin paint layers and horizontal raking results in an intermittent glide of white over black. At times, ridged areas of black-on-black flare up in halos of white light, calling to mind galaxies and glitches. Throughout the series, various indexical processes are evoked only to be made ambiguous in scale and temporality by the displacement and deferral of the mark. As a result, causality is scrambled. Decision-making is engulfed in *Mee I*, with the painting carrying the memory of its making in its multidimensionality—a condition common to all the Greek Alphabet works.

To Whitten, this newfound space in painting bore philosophical connotations, encompassing the spiritual dimensions of certain African sculptures, the new mediascape, quantum physics, and space travel. By 1978 the capaciousness of this structure was such that he sought to integrate additional spatial systems. In *Khee II* (1978), white horizontal grooves run across the multitonal picture. Four springing arcs and three vertical planes—triangular, slanted, and rectangular—pace the field, doubled by red, yellow, and blue incisions, while expansive orthogonal planes are interspersed throughout the composition. The geometry is woven within and atop a surface that accommodates illusionistic volumetric devices such as coloring, sfumato, slanting, and transparency; the nebulous blend of colors is grounded by the markings into a vivid whole. *Omega I* (1978) anticipates the rubbings that characterize Whitten's work of the decade to follow, appearing here distinct from, yet coterminous with, the signature grooves. “The problem,” Whitten intimated upon reaching the end of the series, “is always one of finding a structure which allows your spirit to roam.”³

notes

- Jack Whitten, handwritten note on napkin, ca. 1978, archive of the Jack Whitten Estate. Emphasis in the original.
- Whitten, roundtable in conjunction with the exhibition *Light Years: Jack Whitten, 1971–73*, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, September 16–December 8, 2013.
- Whitten, studio log, November 1977–78, archive of the Jack Whitten Estate.

further reading

Goldsmith, Kenneth. “Jack Whitten interviewed by Kenneth Goldsmith.” *Bomb* 48 (Summer 1994), pp. 36–41.

Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Paintings. San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2015.

Jack Whitten: Ten Years, 1970—1980. New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1982.

Jack Whitten: The Greek Alphabet Paintings. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2023.

Whitten, Jack. Oral history interview by Judith Olch Richards, December 1 and 3, 2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

———. *Notes from the Woodshed*. Edited by Katy Siegel. Zürich: Hauser & Wirth Publishers, 2018.

about the artist

Jack Whitten was born in Bessemer, Alabama, in 1939. He moved to New York in 1960 to pursue a BFA in painting at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art and lived in the city for the rest of his life. After his first trip to Greece in 1969, he regularly spent summers on the island of Crete. Sculptures realized during his summers there as well as widely experimental drawings accompanied his painting practice of more than five decades. Whitten had his first solo exhibition at the Allan Stone Gallery, New York, in 1968, followed by early solo institutional presentations at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1974, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, in 1983. In recent years, surveys of his work have been presented internationally at institu-tions including the Baltimore Museum of Art; the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Whitten died in New York in 2018.

performance

Wadada Leo Smith
Saturday, December 3, 2022, 2 pm
Dia Beacon, 3 Beekman Street, Beacon, New York

Dia:

checklist

All works acrylic on canvas unless otherwise noted

- 1. Alpha Group I**, 1975
Acrylic and string on canvas
Private collection
- 2. Alpha Group II**, 1975
Acrylic and string on canvas
Private collection
- 3. Alpha Group III**, 1975
Private collection, courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York
- 4. Zeta Group I**, 1975
Jack Whitten Estate
- 5. Epsilon Group I**, 1976
Dallas Museum of Art, TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art Fund and gift of The Rachofsky Collection
- 6. Epsilon Series I**, 1976
Private collection, courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York
- 7. Delta Group II**, 1975
The Metropolitan Museum of Art; purchase, Joseph H. Hazen Foundation Inc.; gift, 1975
- 8. Gamma Group III**, 1975
Private collection, Boston
- 9. Gamma Group II**, 1975
Martin and Pippa Hale
- 10. Beta Group II**, 1976
Ilene and Michael Salcman
- 11. Beta Group I**, 1975
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Flora Miller Biddle
- 12. Theta Group I**, 1976
Kienzle Art Foundation
- 13. Lambda III**, 1976
Jack Whitten Estate
- 14. Lambda II**, 1976
Jack Whitten Estate
- 15. Lambda I**, 1976
Jack Whitten Estate

- 16. Omikron I**, 1977
The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection
- 17. Yiota Group II**, 1976
Private collection
- 18. Eta Group I**, 1976
Collection W. Tate Dougherty
- 19. Eta Group IV**, 1976
Jack Whitten Estate
- 20. Eta Group III**, 1976
Jack Whitten Estate
- 21. Eta Group II**, 1976
Private collection
- 22. Nee II**, 1977
Jack Whitten Estate
- 23. Mee I**, 1977
Jack Whitten Estate
- 24. Kappa I**, 1976
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Levine
- 25. Sigma IV**, 1977
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2013
- 26. Sigma II**, 1977
Collection Fotene Demoulas and Tom Coté
- 27. Ypsilon II**, 1978
Collection Stephen and Jody Melzer
- 28. Taf II**, 1978
Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody
- 29. Taf I**, 1978
Collection Bill and Sheila Lambert
- 30. Omega I**, 1978
Private collection
- 31. Pee I**, 1977
Private collection
- 32. Pee III**, 1977
Collection Crystal McCrary and Raymond J. McGuire
- 33. Psee I**, 1978
Collection Charles W. Banta

- 34. Psee II**, 1978
Collection Lizbeth and George Krupp
- 35. Psee III**, 1978
Collection Alexander Klabin
- 36. Khee II**, 1978
The Art Institute of Chicago; Contemporary Art Discretionary Fund; through prior purchase with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Solomon B. Smith; through prior gift of Michael Abrams; Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Purchase Prize Fund; purchased with funds provided by Denise Gardner; Max V. Kohnstam, N. W. Harris, William H. Bartles, and Laura Slobe Memorial purchase prize funds
- 37. Khee I**, 1978
The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of Lawrence Levine, New York
- 38. Xzee III**, 1977
Jack Whitten Estate
- 39. Xzee IV**, 1977
Jack Whitten Estate
- 40. Xzee I**, 1977
Private collection

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Jack Whitten: The Greek Alphabet Paintings is curated by Donna De Salvo, senior adjunct curator for special projects, and Matilde Guidelli-Guidi, associate curator, with Zuna Maza, curatorial assistant.

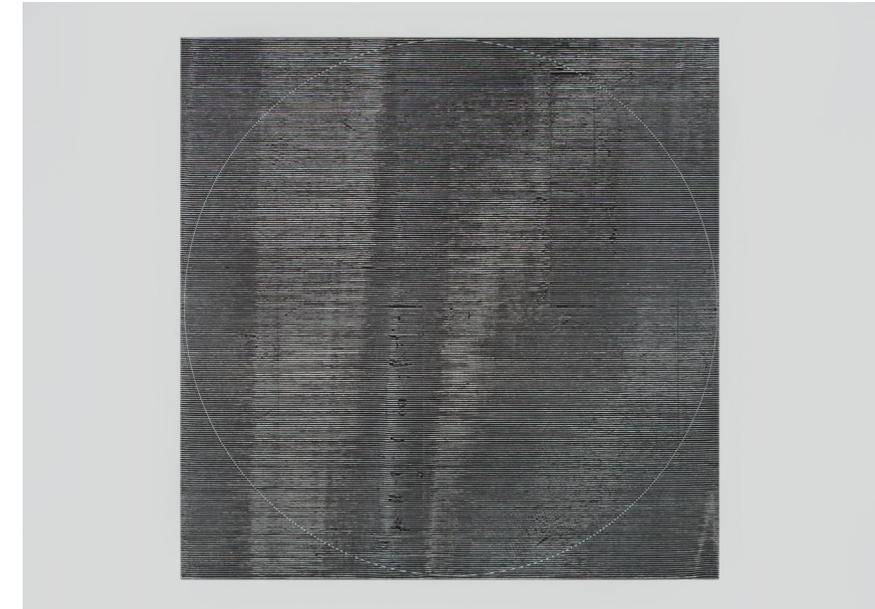
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Cover: Jack Whitten, *Eta Group III*, 1976. Jack Whitten Estate. © Jack Whitten Estate. Photo courtesy Jack Whitten Estate and Hauser & Wirth

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3 Beekman Street
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