

Jack Whitten in his studio, Queens, New York, 2017. Production still from the Art21 *Extended Play* film, "Jack Whitten: An Artist's Life." © Art21, Inc. 2018.

art21.org/jackwhitten



"I'm not a narrative painter. I don't do the idea or the painting being the illustration of an idea. It's all about the materiality of the paint."
—Jack Whitten

Jack Whitten

ABOUT

Born
1939

Education

Attended: Tuskegee University (Alabama)
and Southern University (Louisiana)
Graduated, BFA: Cooper Union (New York)

Lived and Worked

New York City

About the Artist

Whitten's proclivity for invention manifested in his signature "tesserae": small cubes cut from slabs of acrylic paint and adhered to the canvas, angled to catch and reflect light. Investigating the notion of paint as a collage element, Whitten used this technique as a vehicle to explore his passion for science and technology; he thought of the tesserae as individual bytes of information. For more than four decades, Whitten utilized the tesserae to develop his *Black Monolith* series. Believing that art should reflect the period in which it's made, Whitten created these paintings as abstracted tributes to Black artists, musicians, and public figures such as Ralph Ellison, Chuck Berry, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Whitten lived in New York City, where he passed away in January 2018.

TEACHING CONNECTIONS

Media and Materials

painting
collage
sculpture

Key Words and Ideas

abstraction
activism
community
figuration
history

humility
light
innovation
tools
tribute

Related Artists

Ai Weiwei
Mark Bradford
Jordan Casteel
Abigail DeVille
Leonardo Drew
Keltie Ferris
Doreen Garner
Katharina Grosse
Mary Heilmann

Arturo Herrera
Glenn Ligon
Kerry James Marshall
Julie Mehretu
Elizabeth Murray
Avery Singer
James Turrell
Marela Zacarías

How to Use This Guide

Art21 encourages active engagement when teaching with our films. The questions and activities below are recommendations for incorporating Art21 films featuring Jack Whitten into your classroom. Each class will likely require different adaptations for best results.

NOTE: Please view the film before sharing with your students. In the film, there is an instance of strong language.

Before Viewing

Establish key ideas, in anticipation of viewing the film(s):

- ① How does one become an artist?
- ② When do artists serve as activists?
- ③ Why are tools important in artmaking? What tools do you value?

While Viewing

Support active viewing, and pause the film to clarify particular ideas:

- ① Which artists did Whitten refer to as influential figures in his artistic development? Are any of those names already familiar to you? If not, make a note and research them after the viewing.
- ② How did Whitten's early involvement in the civil-rights era influence his work?
- ③ Why did Whitten create his tool, the "developer"? What did this tool accomplish for him? What were the drawbacks?

After Viewing

Follow-up on key ideas and synthesize information learned from the film(s):

- ① Why is it important to have mentors and friends in your chosen professional arenas? How might they encourage an artist's development?
- ② How was Whitten's work tied to his early experience with social activism? In what ways did he create tributes to notable figures?
- ③ While Whitten used acrylic paint through the course of his career, how did his practice change? How did Whitten use abstraction to communicate ideas?

Related Activities

Engaging in creative activities after watching Art21 films can reinforce learning and stimulate ideas. Art21 encourages educators to adapt these activities to their classrooms.

- ✓ Ask students to create a tool to improve an aspect of their artmaking. Make sure that they explain why they created the tool and what it accomplishes for them.
- ✓ Whitten remarks, "Nobody springs forth from the head of Zeus." Ask students to consider which artists have influenced their individual styles and to create a series of tribute works.
- ✓ Research one of the figures portrayed in the *Black Monolith* series. Ask students to create a companion piece dedicated to the same individual, in any medium other than painting.