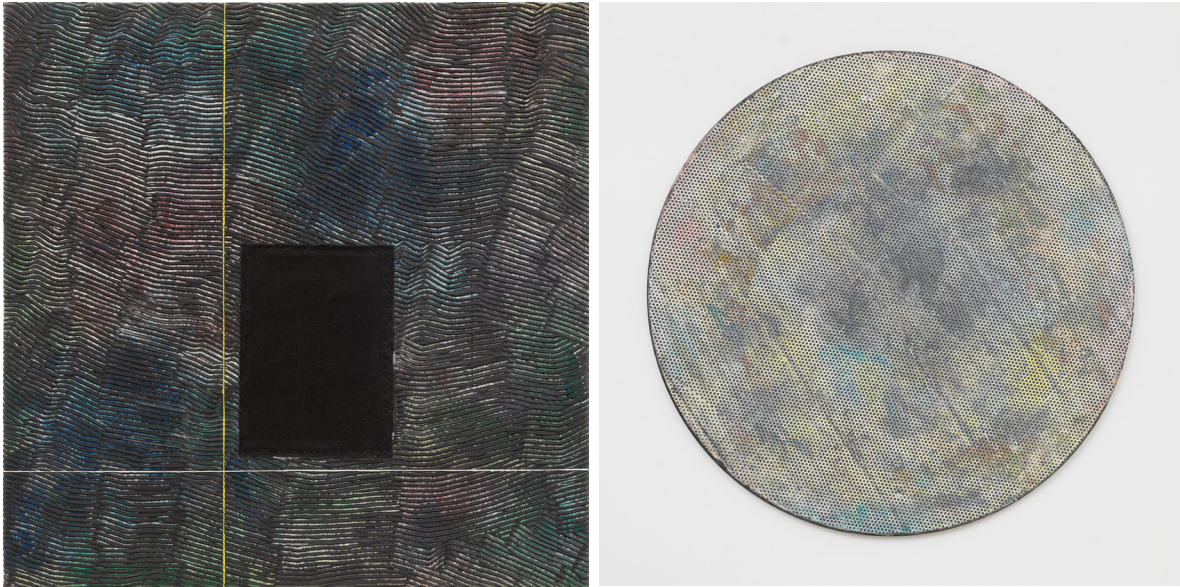


Press Release

Jack Whitten. The Numinous

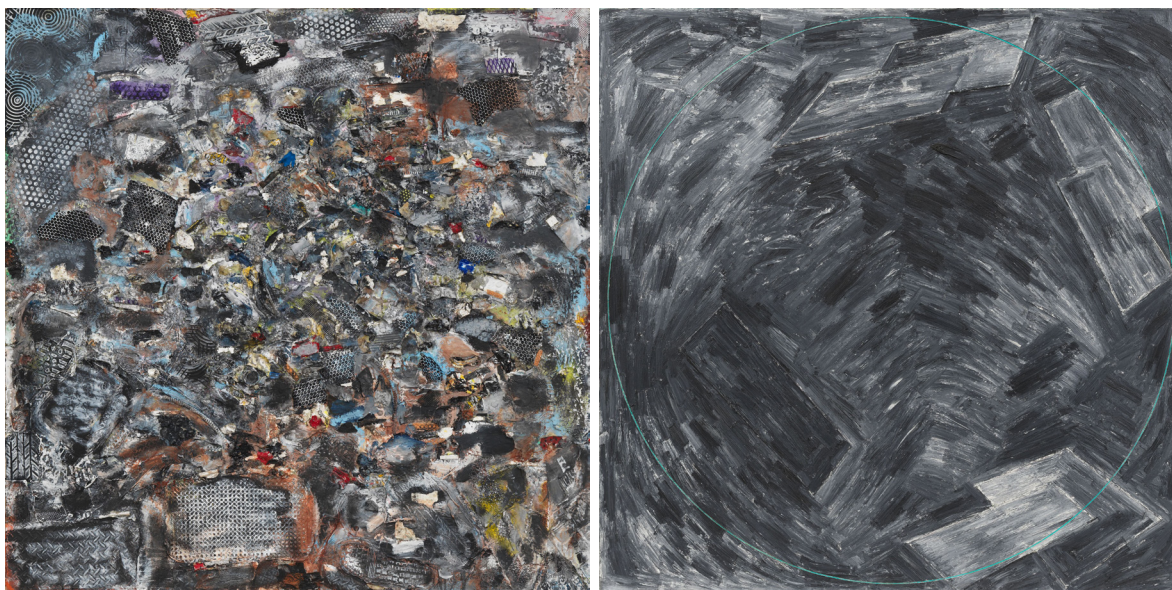
30 September 2026 – 10 January 2027
Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles
North Gallery



Los Angeles...Following the late artist's critically acclaimed 2025 retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Hauser & Wirth will present 'The Numinous,' an exhibition of Jack Whitten's paintings and works on paper from the 1980s, at its Downtown Los Angeles gallery. The exhibition focuses on a pivotal and still underexamined period in Whitten's six-decade career, where technical innovation and spiritual inquiry came together with new force.

After a 1980 house fire forced an extended pause in his practice, Whitten returned with renewed urgency. Testing and pushing acrylic paint to new effects, he began to treat the medium as a dense, malleable material—something that could be cut, layered and collaged like 'a skin.' Another turning point came in 1983, when The Studio Museum in Harlem presented a survey of Whitten's work from 1970 – 1980, organized by longtime supporter Henry Geldzahler. By then, the question for the artist was no longer how to build a new language of painting, but what that language could convey. The advanced imaging technologies of the era—cathode-ray scanning, radar, electron microscopy—offered Whitten new models for seeing and transmitting information. He began to imagine painting as a form of transmission: a way to channel the essence of a person, spirit or place through coded, repeatable units.

These ideas took shape in the Soulspace paintings and circular reliefs, begun in 1983. After more than a decade of minimizing the artist's hand and working with canvases laid flat on the studio floor, Whitten reintroduced gestural brushwork and returned to working upright. He used self-designed tools to incise arcs, lines and concentric circles into thick acrylic planes. Their rough, heavily worked surfaces evoke celestial navigation while alluding to the artist's own constellation of friends, family and influences.



For Whitten, meaning was embedded in matter itself. He described soul as a ‘molecular’ force of thought and feeling that preceded culture and ideology. This force was itself a source of wonder—or, as the title of the exhibition suggests, numinosity. Likening light in his paintings to John Coltrane’s use of sound, Whitten believed that, like jazz, ‘painting elicits the presence of the soul.’ ‘Soulspace’ was therefore not only a metaphor. It was a proposition that painting could make the invisible perceptible.

By 1985, Whitten had begun pressing wire mesh netting into wet acrylic, creating pixel-like grids of individually colored squares that anticipate his later tesserae works. He also began casting acrylic reliefs from urban surfaces—manhole covers, tire treads, metal screens and city walls—to produce the Site paintings. Rather than depicting a specific place, these works register the city’s physical imprint, creating a topographical space that exists between representation and abstraction. For Whitten, ‘Site’ referred less to a location than to a state of mind. He connected it to an atopic condition, from the Greek meaning ‘without place,’ that reflected broader questions of Black identity and belonging beyond fixed geography.

On view in the exhibition, more than a dozen Site works on paper, created through a range of experimental processes and material interventions, evidence the expansion of Whitten’s inquiry into surface and index. In such works as ‘Site #3’ and ‘Site #4,’ the direct transfer of texture onto delicate Japanese paper left little room for revision, making chance and irreversibility part of the act of making.

By the end of the decade, Whitten turned these material and spiritual concerns toward commemoration. He began what would become the most sustained series of his career: monumental tributes to luminaries of Black cultural and intellectual life. Works such as ‘Spiral: A Dedication to R. Bearden’ (1988) exemplify this impulse and foreshadow his landmark Black Monolith series, which translates remembrance into layered reliefs and swirling topographies.

At a moment when critics declared the death of painting, Whitten expanded what the medium could do. ‘The Numinous’ brings renewed focus to the extraordinary works he made in the 1980s, repositioning this period as a crucial chapter in his practice—one in which his investigations into material, spirit and abstraction coalesced into one of the most original bodies of work in postwar American art.

About the artist

Born in Bessemer, Alabama in 1939, Jack Whitten is celebrated for his innovative processes of applying paint to the surface of his canvases and transfiguring their material terrains. Although Whitten initially aligned with the New York circle of abstract expressionists active in the 1960s, his work gradually distanced from the movement's aesthetic philosophy and formal concerns, focusing more intensely on the experimental aspects of process and technique that came to define his practice.

The subtle visual tempos and formal techniques embedded in Whitten's work speak to the varied contexts of his early life. After a brief period studying medicine at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in the late 1950s, Whitten pivoted his attention to art, first attending Southern University in Baton Rouge before moving to New York and enrolling at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in 1960, where he completed the institution's five-year certificate program.

In the 1970s, Whitten's experiments with the materiality of paint reached a climax—removing a thick slab of acrylic paint from its support, he realized that the medium could be coaxed into the form of an independent object. Whitten used this mode of experimentation to challenge pre-existing notions of dimensionality in painting, repeatedly layering slices of acrylic ribbon in uneven fields of wet paint to mimic the application of mosaic tesserae to wet masonry. Over the course of a six-decade career, Whitten's work bridged gestural abstraction and process art, arriving at a nuanced language of painting that expanded the possibilities of the medium.

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Caption and courtesy information:

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Jack Whitten

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Psychic Intersection #1

1980

Acrylic and string on canvas

53.7 x 54 cm / 21 1/8 x 21 1/4 in

Photo: Sarah Muehlbauer

Sphere

1985, reworked 2008

Acrylic and oil on canvas

227.3 x 227.3 cm / 89 1/2 x 89 1/2 in

Photo: Object Studies

Spiral: A Dedication to R. Bearden

1988

Acrylic with cast acrylic on canvas

170.8 x 170.8 cm / 67 1/4 x 67 1/4 in

Photo: Object Studies

Soulspace VII

1984

Acrylic and oil on canvas

114.3 x 114.3 cm / 45 x 45 in

Photo: Sarah Muehlbauer