

Study Resource for In the Studio: Jack Whitten

What is the book about?

'In the Studio: Jack Whitten' provides readers with a comprehensive overview of the innovative artist and thinker, Jack Whitten. Written by writer and art critic Yinka Elujoba, the book intimately showcases Whitten's studio life, major influences and experimental use of materials and techniques. The artist is celebrated internationally for his innovative processes of applying paint to the surface of his canvases and transfiguring their material terrains.

This guide displays a myriad of Whitten's inspirations, from ancient art at Saint Catherine's monastery to Benoit Mandelbrot, to tributes to Whitten's love of jazz and artists John Coltrane and Thelonius Monk. A meeting place for Whitten's writing practice, the book also highlights various formats of Whitten's written work, from personal studio notes and logs on his conceptual processes, to essays on his passion for jazz. Key peer relationships between Whitten and his community such as Melvin Edwards, William T. Williams, Harvey Quaytman and Norman Lewis are also shared. Additionally, moments from Whitten's time in Crete, Greece highlighting his wood sculptures and the impact that wood carving had on the artist's painting process.

Who is it for?

This book is perfect for anyone who wants to learn more about Jack Whitten's voice. For any student and all creative spirits, it will provide textual and visual insight into materials, tools, techniques, and creative mediums that impacted Whitten over his lifetime.

Why is it great for learners?

This publication is a collection of archival material that communicates the artist's voice in new ways. A new perspective on Whitten's techniques and work will generate inspiration – the artist always pushed creative and social boundaries and invented his form of artmaking on his own terms, constantly looking towards the 'future of painting' (Elujoba, 17). Whitten's innovative work and thought processes will energize those who read the book – and encourage all makers and thinkers to maintain an important philosophy which he highlights in his studio notes – staying true to yourself.

What will you learn?

By the time readers finish the book, Whitten will continue to be understood as a profound contemporary artist and thinker, but also as a collector, craftsman and jazz lover. Readers gain insight into the artist's influences that they may not have known about before – readers have a chance to understand Whitten's earlier life experiences and connect these to his later influences as an artist. As the book tells a story about the artist's voice and outlook, the reader will feel as though they know the artist on more of a personal level.

Discussion Questions

Process and Abstraction

- Whitten committed himself to processes like woodcarving that influenced the modes in which he painted. Refer to pages 87 – 89. Whitten states ‘the whole concept of making a painting as opposed to painting a painting came from my carving wood’. Do you have processes or creative methods that inspire others? What is the significance of one process and medium deeply informing another in creative practice?
- Refer to pages 54 – 67. Whitten built his creative community upon his move to New York City in 1960 with fellow artists, who alongside Whitten wanted to push the boundaries of traditional painting methods and abstraction. Do you have a community that supports you as a creative or do you have creative figures that inspire you? How so? How has this affected your own practice and how it situates itself in the world around you?
- Refer to pages 23– 25. Whitten made the statement ‘I JUST WANT A SLAB OF PAINT’- he later created slab paintings which involved manipulating acrylic paint on canvases with a wooden developer across the surface (Whitten, 23–24). What impact do you think Whitten’s making materials had on his process? How do you think his painting constructions contributed to and interrupted the traditional art-making techniques of the time?

Continued Discussion of Material

- Refer to pages 81 – 89. The artist utilized wood in many ways – in his painting tool designs and formations of his own inspired by memory, family and African sculpture. Whitten considered wood to be ‘elemental matter’, ‘waiting for someone to release its spirit’ (Whitten, 82). What impact does material have in your practice? Do you feel connected to the materials used? In what ways? Refer to page 75. Whitten’s studio was a key site for his decades-long collection of ‘posters, newspaper clippings, photographs, strips of fabric, an axe, a dried rose, license plates, strings, masks, sculptures and maps... even in his private life he accrued these things, little bits piling on top of each other until they formed great mounds. Whitten’s practice of collecting helps us see his paintings in a new light, as themselves of materials like tesserae’ (Elujoba, 75). Do you collect anything? If so, what and why? Has this process ever had a substantial impact on your creative practice?
- Refer to pages 33–34 on Whitten’s tesserae technique using large portions of acrylic paint. The artist described how his use of ‘acrylic tesserae is a unit. The tesserae provided me with a tool for structuring molecular perception’ (Whitten, 33–34). Whitten was interested in how the tiles on his canvases would ‘catch or reflect light’ - what is the significance of this ‘bricklayer’ technique and what could this say about Whitten’s relationship to painting? How do you think Whitten felt about the materiality of paint?

Woodshedding and Jazz

- Jack Whitten eventually began to title his notes with the term ‘woodshed’ - which ‘refers to the jazz musician’s concept of ‘woodshedding’, or practicing in private, free to experiment with ideas before taking them public’ (Elujoba, 103). In relation to your creative context, how do you understand the relationship between private and public space? As a creative, what is it like to bring private thoughts and ideas into spaces that others can be a part of?
- Refer to pages 116 – 127. Whitten’s relationship to jazz began in high school where he played tenor saxophone in the marching band. The genre would later become a major creative and spiritual influence on Whitten, his thought processes and practice. The artist states, ‘abstract artists are attracted to jazz because of its expandable qualities. Jazz imposes no limit on feeling and its basic elements of spontaneity/improvisation preserve freshness of spirit...as an abstract painter, I translate Coltrane’s sheets of sound into sheets of light. Every emotion that ripples through my body is compressed into a plane of light’ (Whitten, 123-124). Does a genre of music or specific musicians inspire you, the way you think, the way you see yourself and/or your practice? If so, in what ways?
- Refer to pages 102 – 115. Taking the form of prose, poetry and streams of consciousness, Whitten’s studio notes document his theories, everyday occurrences and how he worked and reworked ideas about himself and the world around him. Does writing play a role in your life and/or your creative practice? If so, how does it help you and/or your practice to grow? Does writing challenge you and create space for vulnerability?