

## Signature Assignment for AA/ICS/1

Course: ART 377 Contemporary and World Art  
Instructor: Jennifer Vess  
Assignment Title: Black Monoliths by Jack Whitten – Intersectional Research and Response

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Outcomes to be assessed: AA/ICS/1 [=BA/ICS/1] [=AA/IDS/3] Identify and explore multiple forms of cultural expression in order to explain how they reflect the values and ideas of their time and place.

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Assignment Description: View the video about artist Jack Whitten (<https://youtu.be/GFVsd450nCU>). After watching the video, select one of his paintings from the “Black Monolith” series to research and write a one page response. On a separate page, please include an image of the painting you select. Each of the paintings from the series “Black Monoliths” is inspired by a black person who “has contributed a lot to society” (Whitten). Whichever painting you select, research the person it is inspired by. What things did they contributed to society in their life? Describe how Jack Whitten portrays them in paint. Describe the visual appearance of the work of art. What is your opinion of the artist and their process? How would you describe the aesthetic of the painting - how does it feel and how does this relate to the content of the work (being inspired by an influential person of color)? What mood or tone does it evoke?

### Description of video (from Art21):

“Renowned abstract painter Jack Whitten discusses the personal philosophies that drove his work over the course of nearly six decades, chronicling his development as an artist and his relentless innovation in painting. ‘I can build anything I want to build,’ said the artist. ‘It’s all about the materiality of the paint.’ Filmed at work on what would become his final painting, Whitten spent his life pushing abstraction into new territories. He passed away shortly after this interview.

His earliest work combined figuration and abstraction; but, in the late 1960s, Whitten switched from oil to acrylic to focus on the material nature of paint rather than the image it conveyed. He built a tool called the “developer” and used it to create paintings that existed as a single line—“one gesture, three seconds.” These “slab” paintings led Whitten to his next artistic development: a new kind of tesserae (a material used in the construction of mosaics) made by cutting cubes of color from large slabs of acrylic paint.

Whitten’s experiences growing up in the South during the height of segregation, as well as his participation in the civil rights movement, informed his lifetime of work. His “Black Monoliths,” a series of

abstracted tributes, memorialize important Black figures such as James Baldwin and Barbara Jordan. 'I find that with each one, I have to locate the essence of that person,' said the artist. 'That person becomes a symbol and I build that into the paint.' Now a symbol himself, Whitten was one of the most influential abstract artists of his generation. The painting filmed in progress, "Quantum Wall, VIII (For Arshile Gorky, My First Love In Painting)," is on view as part of a special presentation in memory of the artist at Hauser & Wirth New York through March 31, 2018. While Jack Whitten's early work combined figuration and abstraction, he became known for his conceptual advancements, focusing on the materiality of paint. Constantly inventing in the studio, Whitten created a tool he called the "developer," a twelve-foot-long wooden rake used to move large amounts of acrylic paint in a single gesture. He also created a signature kind of tesserae: small cubes cut from slabs of acrylic paint and adhered to the canvas, angled to catch and reflect light. For over four decades, Whitten utilized the tesserae to develop his "Black Monoliths", a series of abstracted tributes to Black artists, musicians, and public figures such as Ralph Ellison, Chuck Berry, and W.E.B. Du Bois. One of the most influential abstract and conceptual painters of his generation, Whitten lived in New York City, where he passed away in January 2018."

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Evaluation criteria:

The response will be evaluated based on the following criteria.

1. Ability to describe the visual characteristics of a work of art. Show ability to use art vocabulary to describe the visual formal elements present in the work.
  2. Ability to identify content within a work of art. Demonstrate ability to use research and analysis to determine the motives and meanings behind a work of art.
  3. Ability to reflect on a work of art, have an emotional response and articulate the ways in which the work has impact. Describe how the viewer's (student's) past experience impacts their interpretation of a work of art.
  4. Ability to relate the work of art to the time and place of its creation. Recognize the cultural norms of the time period and describe how the artist is responding to the specific culture of when the work was made.
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Formatting:

One page, double spaced.

