

# Dia:



**Jack Whitten**

The Greek Alphabet Paintings

November 18, 2022–July 10, 2023

**Dia Beacon**

Riggio Galleries

3 Beekman Street

Beacon, New York

## 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 landmark 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 predetermined 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."<sup>1</sup>

For his surfaces, Whitten found inspiration in the accretion of dirt on New York's sidewalks, 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 multitoneal 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."<sup>3</sup>

## notes

1. Jack Whitten, handwritten note on napkin, ca. 1978, archive of the Jack Whitten Estate. Emphasis in the original.
2. 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.
3. 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 institutions 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

## 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