

**Jack Whitten, Met Breuer, 9/12/18**

The exhibition focuses on and is advertised around his sculpture, but it is the paintings that were included in the show that most impressed me.

The sculptures almost all include sections of nails, bolts, screws, detritus clumped together.



To Western Eyes they probably appear striking, bold, risky – such a contrast between the smooth very, very carefully worked woods and the lumpy, chaotic detritus. They are, in fact, inspired by the power figure sculptures of central Africa, a couple of which are included in the exhibition. These I was already familiar with and have studied at some depth.

At first, Whitten's adoption of this technique struck me as significant: black American artist adopts/makes reference to his black African heritage.

But as I looked and looked at Whitten's sculptures, I was less and less moved. Something was wrong, something missing. There's an artificiality to them. They are very, very, very carefully fabricated – the choices of woods, the joining of the woods, the finishing of the wood surfaces. And then there is this injected burst of contrasting materials and textures, a sort of: "Ah, hah! Now watch this!" self-consciousness. And this is not to mention the fact that the African sculptures' nails are functional, with each one inserted for a spe-







cific event, to memorialize it, or to vent to the figure's power within for a specific purpose. Whitten's nails are decorative. They have no emotional power. They are visually striking, which is their intention. And they clearly reference the African works, but do so without any meaning beyond "I am referencing African works".

By contrast, Whitten's paintings are stunning and *very* powerful. The exhibition is billed as being about the sculptures, but it is the painting, almost all from his late years, that steal the show. This one below had been my introduction to Whitten when I saw it some time



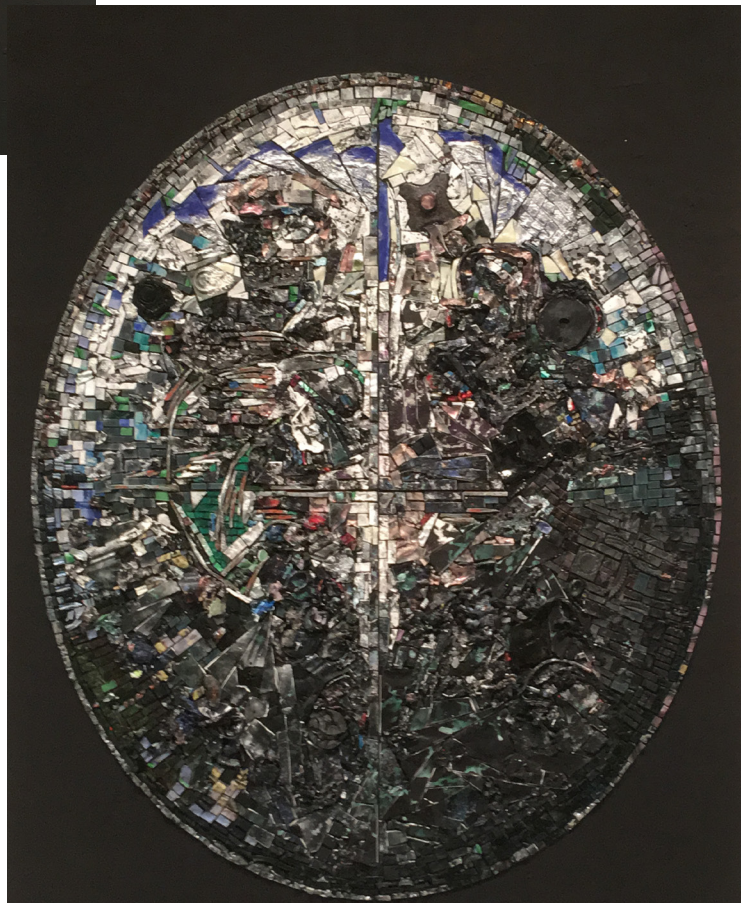


ago at MOMA. Seeing it again I am again bowled over. It is so complex yet so coherent, it is so physically beautiful yet so understated. It bears repeated, repeated looking, which I did here at Breuer and which I had done at MOMA. None of the sculptures I saw bear this sort of repeated looking. There is not that much going on in them – compositionally, emotionally, intellectually.

And then his *Black Monolith* series. Phew!



and



and others. These are stunning in so many ways! What is going on here? Why are they so striking, so powerful?

The technique is extraordinary – little pieces of mosaic tiles, most (all?) of them not even two inches long, glued to the surface, covering the surface to make the final effect. The tiles are small chunks of dried acrylic paint, which is what allows him to have so much con-



trol over color, as much as any painter working with acrylic paint. Apparently he would paint thick slabs of acrylic, then when dried chopped them into chunks with a cleaver or ax. So there's an extreme control in his original color choices, then a randomness that results from the chopping, and then an improvisational quality required by the unpredictable irregularity of the tile chunks. And then more control introduced by the sometimes mini-patterns he creates with the chunks, as here in this detail from *Black Monolith VI* (Terry Adkins).



The green pattern in the center here...

The thin arc to its left broken by the straight horizontal, in turn broken by the comet streak/rooster tail....

The perimeter "wall" around the whole....

The radiating... rays at bottom left...

The little grid of mostly whites at top left...

This is all *very* complex and *very* sophisticated when examined up close like this. Part of the sophistication is that when you step back, all these details fuse into a gestalt, an overall impression, an overall composition.

And the sheer visual beauty! These later *Monoliths* are much more colorful than his earlier, more monochromatic works. But even those, for example, the large ? I first saw at MOMA, have tonality and iridescence in addition to the complex and striking linear patterns.

And yet these paintings, like the sculptures, are using accretion as vocabulary. But here, the entirety of the piece is created by accretion. Imagine one of these paintings with large areas of the painting smoothly painted, then a section of acrylic tile accretions. The tiled accretions would in that case feel like an “effect“, a deliberate attempt to be clever, to catch our attention. (Cf. “Watch this!”) Here the accretions *are* the piece. This is the way this thing exists, the way it is. There are no special effects, it just is. And the nails in the power figures just are. They are there naturally, part of the piece’s natural way of being. As are these small acrylic tiles in the paintings. As are not the nails and accretions of the sculptures.