

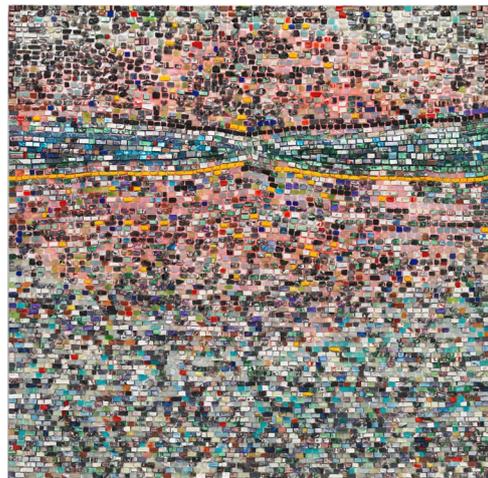
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Dispatulo

Press Release

Online Exhibition

Arshile Gorky & Jack Whitten



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Live date: Wednesday 20 May 2020

Arshile Gorky and Jack Whitten, two consummate master artists of the 20th century, are shown together in this online exhibition. The presentation was inspired by Whitten himself, who paid tribute to Gorky in a speech he gave in 2017. 'Arshile Gorky was my first love in painting,' he explained, 'it was Gorky who first excited my imagination.' Whitten described the experience of looking at Gorky's work as, 'witnessing something that comes from the deep soul of an artist.'

Belonging to different generations, each artist developed a highly individual visual vocabulary within their oeuvre. Gorky played a pivotal role in the shift to abstraction that transformed 20th-century American art, bridging surrealism and abstract expressionism. By absorbing and reacting to the work of ancient and past masters, as well as contemporary artists, he asserted his own understanding and imagination; a traditionalist sensibility in an American vanguard context. Whitten made it his mission to disrupt the discipline of art history through experiments with material, process, and technique. He effectively constructed a bridge between gestural abstraction and process art.

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During Whitten's intimate tribute he emphasized the soul, color, and profound mastery present in Gorky's work and its resonance, explaining: 'I too have suffered at the hands of man's inhumanity to man. Gorky knew how, what this does of the psyche... I can read it in the color structure'. The connection between these two artists is poignantly revealed in this exhibition, through the final work created by Jack Whitten in 2017 before his passing in January 2018, a homage to Arshile Gorky. Titled 'Quantum Wall, VIII (For Arshile Gorky, My First Love In Painting)', the work is constituted by a colorful array of acrylic paint tiles that both physically and metaphorically reflect the light, sensibility, and impression Gorky's work left on the artist's mind and imagination.

Both Gorky and Whitten turned to the natural world for solace and inspiration, often employing landscape motifs to express underlying emotions. Gorky spent extended periods of time between 1943 and 1946 at Crooked Run Farm in Virginia, becoming enchanted by the bucolic surroundings, and his response began to manifest in his vibrant compositions. As he explained, 'I do not paint in front of, but from within nature.' The resulting works, including 'Untitled' drawings and 'Virginia Landscape' from 1944 – 1945, are filled with organic forms and infused with extraordinary expressive freedom, marking a profound reawakening of his connection to nature. In the last few years of his life, between 1946 – 1948, Gorky goes on to make arguably some of his most iconic works, such as the remarkable 'Pastoral' (1947), rediscovered in 2010, using gestural planes of color that give shape to the negative space and seeming to emerge from within the canvas. As well as his masterful 'Gray Drawing for Pastoral' (ca. 1946 – 1947), his instinctive symbols – still amorphous and suggestive – form a distinctive vocabulary comprising recurring forms.

**'Arshile Gorky was my first love
in painting, it was Gorky who first
excited my imagination. '**

– Jack Whitten



Whitten absorbed the ancient landscapes of Crete; its colors and topographical viewpoints were expressed as elements in his art which he described as 'structured feelings'. Whitten vividly described the impact on his senses: 'Memory, both good and bad, is a powerful activator of emotion. The scent of fresh sawed pine logs, fresh sugarcane, mulberries, wild blackberries, huckleberries, plums, watermelons, persimmons, wild grapes and muscadine are all alive and active through sense memory'. In this vein, the exhibition displays Whitten's 'Garden in Bessemer VI' (1968), directly influenced by Gorky's 'Garden in Sochi' (1941), a work that signaled a shift in the use of acrylic paint as collage to create an almost geometrical view of nature.

The central role of Gorky's draughtsmanship in his practice is exemplified in an early seminal work featured in the exhibition, 'Untitled (Study for Mural),' executed in 1933 – 1934. A series of vignettes made up of

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abstract and figurative shapes and objects, the work is one of only three pen and ink drawings that the artist conceived. Over the course of his career, Whitten ceaselessly worked through a range of styles and techniques, experimenting continuously to arrive at a nuanced language of painting that hovers between mechanical automation and spiritual expression. In the 1970s, and visible in works such as 'Steel City I,' Whitten began experimenting with mechanical automation, moving away from gestural mark-making.

Saskia Spender, President, and Parker Field, Managing Director, of The Arshile Gorky Foundation respond to the exhibition: 'A taste of Gorky vis-a-vis Whitten is timely and enticing. Harmonious in many respects, particularly in terms of palette and compositional structure, Gorky and Whitten were artists of many faces and styles. As we continue to appreciate their compositions side by side, we look forward to studying the nuanced consonance between the two artists' bodies of works. Occupying opposite halves of the 20th century, their kinship tells a compelling story of American art.'

Also responding to the exhibition, Mary Whitten says: 'To be able to see the love and admiration Jack had for Gorky, albeit on a digital screen, is a palpable connection between two artists at different ends of the 20th century. The call-and-response aspect of the paired landscapes almost speaking to one another is quite moving. I think as Jack grew older and dove deeper into his feelings, the beauty and sadness that runs through Gorky's oeuvre continued to inform Jack's expression.'

This exhibition precedes The Arshile Gorky Catalogue Raisonné, an invaluable web-based resource presenting the first definitive record of Gorky's complete production. The first installment will launch in early 2021, followed by further sections in subsequent months. As well as a forthcoming exhibition of rarely seen works by Jack Whitten at Hauser & Wirth Zürich, and the 2020 reissue by Hauser & Wirth Publishers of the seminal collection of the artist's writings, 'Jack Whitten: Notes from the Woodshed' from 2018.

About Arshile Gorky

Arshile Gorky was born an ethnic Armenian in Ottoman Anatolia in c.1904. Fleeing the genocide that claimed the life of his mother, he emigrated to the United States as a teenage refugee in 1920. After five years with relatives in Massachusetts, Gorky moved to New York and changed his name in honor of the celebrated Russian poet. Refusing all categories, whether artistic or political, as necessarily reductive, Gorky forsook assimilation in favor of celebrating his otherness, becoming a central figure of the cultural milieu of a city on the brink of Modernism.

After a decade of working in New York, where he achieved a prominent position as a leading artist, Gorky initiated a series of studies and paintings observed from nature while on holiday in Connecticut first, and then over two summers at a farm in Virginia. Frequently returning to fragmentary and idealized elements of his early life, Gorky incorporated memories from his childhood as well as his adult fears and desires, among the reality of his surroundings.

About Jack Whitten

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 attentions to art, first attending the 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 earned his BFA degree.

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In the 1970s, Whitten's experiments with the materiality of paint reached a climax – removing a thick slab of acrylic paint from its support, Whitten 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 long career, Whitten's work bridged rhythms of gestural abstraction and process art.

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Under the umbrella of Hauser & Wirth's new global philanthropic and charitable initiative #artforbetter, we are donating 10% of gross profits from sales of all works in the online exhibitions to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund for the World Health Organization.

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Arshile Gorky
Untitled
c. 1947–1948
Oil on canvas
111.8 x 137.2 cm / 44 x 54 in
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Photo: Christopher Burke

Jack Whitten
Quantum Wall, VIII (For Arshile Gorky, My First Love In Painting)
2017
Acrylic on canvas
122.6 x 122.6 x 6.5 cm / 48 1/4 x 48 1/4 x 2 1/2 in
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Arshile Gorky
Virginia Landscape
c. 1944
Pencil and crayon on paper
47 x 60cm / 18 1/2 x 23 3/8 in
© (2019) The Arshile Gorky Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS) Courtesy The Arshile Gorky Foundation and Hauser & Wirth

Jack Whitten
King's Wish (Martin Luther's Dream)
1968
Oil on canvas
172.4 x 129.7 x 4.5 cm / 67 7/8 x 51 1/8 x 1 3/4 in
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