



## THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART PRESENTS FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION OF JACK WHITTEN'S SCULPTURES

### *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963-2017* Features 40 Works That Connect Traditions of Western and African Art

**BALTIMORE, MD (UPDATED April 2, 2018)**—This spring, The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) will present the first exhibition dedicated to sculptures by renowned contemporary artist Jack Whitten. *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963-2017*, on view April 22 through July 29, 2018, reveals an extensive and entirely unknown body of the late artist's work. Co-organized with The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), *Odyssey* features 40 of Whitten's sculptures made in Greece over the course of his five-decade career. Created from a diverse spectrum of materials—including wood, marble, copper, bone, fishing wire, and personal mementos—the works are contextualized with African, Minoan, and Cycladic sculptures and objects that inspired Whitten through the years. The exhibition also unites Whitten's *Black Monoliths* series for the first time to reveal how sculpture influenced his paintings. This ticketed exhibition is curated by Katy Siegel, BMA Senior Programming and Research Curator and Thaw Chair in Modern American Art at Stony Brook University, and Kelly Baum, Cynthia Hazen Polsky and Leon Polsky Curator of Contemporary Art at The Met.

"What's especially notable about *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture* is that we are not only diversifying the approach we take to examine an artist, but are looking at a completely unexplored yet very rich facet of the artist's oeuvre," said BMA Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director Christopher Bedford. "We're especially pleased to collaborate with The Met, such an influential source for Whitten in his early years, and to explore the full spectrum of Whitten's practice and illustrate how his sculptures have informed his widely admired paintings."

Whitten was one of the most important artists of his generation. His paintings range from figurative work addressing Civil Rights in the 1960s to groundbreaking experimentation with abstraction in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, to recent work memorializing Black historical figures such as James Baldwin and W.E.B. Du Bois. Whitten began carving wood in the 1960s in order to understand African sculpture, both aesthetically and in terms of his own identity as an African American. His art grew in unexpected ways when in 1969 he began spending summers on the island of Crete. There, Whitten was inspired by ancient Cycladic and Minoan objects, recognizing their functional role in society as repositories of power, memory, sensuality, and spirituality, much like the African works he had seen in New York institutions. The resourcefulness of the people of Crete and their connection to nature and to material life recalled his own upbringing in Alabama. In Crete, his materials expanded to incorporate local wood and marble, as well as bones left over from his fishing excursions. These organic materials—shaped by techniques such as carving, burning, and aggregation—imbued his sculptures with a profound connection to ritual, nature, and the most fundamental experiences of human life. Whitten saw his work as just the latest episode in a long history of exchange between Africa, the African diaspora, and the Mediterranean. As the artist wrote in his studio log in 1975, "I am aware of the fact that this is the tradition in Art which I must connect with—a work of art with a function motivated by the tradition of African sculpture—MY WAY—not Picasso's European interpretation."

*Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963-2017* presents examples of works that inspired Whitten with carved figures from Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone drawn from the BMA's outstanding collection of African art; as well as objects from Cyprus, Crete, and the Peloponnese from the collection of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. A gallery dedicated to Whitten's *Black Monolith* series of paintings

honoring African American cultural figures—including Muhammad Ali, Maya Angelou, and Ornette Coleman—reveals the connection between Whitten’s paintings and his previously unknown sculptures, and marks the first time these works have been exhibited together.

“It’s thrilling to share an unknown aspect of a contemporary master, especially when it reveals so much about the artist’s vision and process,” said Siegel. “Whitten’s sculpture renders a new understanding of American culture as the product of intertwined rather than opposed African and European traditions. And in doing so, it positions Black identity as central to a broad, cosmopolitan humanism.”

Whitten’s introduction to African art came when he visited The Met and Brooklyn Museum in New York as a young man in the summers of 1958 and 1959. The encounters left a lasting impression, as he believed African sculpture was a vital inheritance for artists working in the African diaspora. Whitten moved to New York in 1960 and remained there following graduation from Cooper Union in 1964, studying the collection of African art owned by his first art dealer, Allan Stone, and embedding himself both in the downtown NYC painting scene, and in the uptown circles of Black artists like Romare Bearden. Whitten made sculpture in private, even as he became known as an important and boundary-breaking painter. He experimented with the materiality and techniques, employing an array of acrylic polymers and exploring the variances in viscosity, clarity, brilliance, and elasticity. To make his paintings, Whitten used an inventive and broad range of materials such as iron oxide, dry pigments, crushed Mylar, ash, bone, and blood. The materials and their handling all carry profound metaphysical and social meaning.

### **JACK WHITTEN**

Born in Bessemer, Alabama in 1939, Whitten’s work is informed by growing up in the Jim Crow South, and his experiences of historical and personal struggles for freedom. He originally planned a career as an army doctor and began pre-medical studies at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he was inspired by George Washington Carver’s legacy as a scientist, inventor, and artist. Whitten became increasingly involved in the growing Civil Rights Movement, attending the Montgomery Bus Boycott to hear Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision for a changed America. He also participated in the Civil Rights demonstrations in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, while studying art at Southern University. Whitten graduated from Cooper Union in 1964 and first began showing his work in New York at the Allan Stone Gallery in a group show in 1965 and a solo exhibition in 1968. He has been the subject of numerous other solo exhibitions, including *Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting*, a traveling exhibition organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art of San Diego in 2014-2015; *Jack Whitten: Erasures* at Savannah College of Art and Design in 2012; an exhibition of memorial paintings at the Atlanta Contemporary Arts Center in Georgia in 2008; a solo show at MoMA PS1 in 2007; a 10-year retrospective at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1983; and a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of Art in 1974. His powerful painting, *9-11-01* (2006), was included in the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013 and is currently on view at The Baltimore Museum of Art. Whitten was awarded a National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama in 2016, and was inducted into the National Academy Museum and School and received an honorary doctorate from Brandeis University the same year. Whitten’s work is in numerous prestigious collections including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Tate London. The artist passed away in January 2018.

### **EXHIBITION SPONSORS**

This exhibition is generously sponsored by The Alvin and Fanny B. Thalheimer Foundation, Suzanne F. Cohen, Anonymous, Heidi and Brian Berghuis, Amy L. Gould and Matthew S. Polk, Jr., Agnes Gund, Transamerica, Guy and Nupur Parekh Flynn, LaVerna Hahn Charitable Trust, Nancy Dorman and Stan Mazaroff, Amy and Marc Meadows, Clair Zamoiski Segal, Dorothy Wagner Wallis Charitable Trust, Eddie C. and C. Sylvia Brown, Eileen Harris Norton Foundation, Ilene and Michael Salcman, Bank of America, and Hauser & Wirth.

### TICKET INFORMATION

Tickets are available through [artbma.org](http://artbma.org) and at the BMA Box Office beginning March 22. Prices are \$10 for adults, \$8 for seniors, and \$7 for groups of 10 or more. BMA Members, children/youth under the age of 18, and students with ID are admitted free. For more information, call 443-573-1701.

### TOUR SCHEDULE

*Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963-2017* will be on view at The Met Breuer September 6 - December 2, 2018.

### CATALOGUE

*Odyssey's* catalogue features the sculptures made by Whitten over the past 50 years, as well as the *Black Monolith* series of paintings and archival photographs. The catalogue includes essays by Katy Siegel and Kelly Baum, as well as contributions by Kwame Anthony Appiah, Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University; Kellie Jones, Associate Professor of Art History and African American Studies at Columbia University; Courtney J. Martin, Deputy Director and Chief Curator of Dia Art Foundation; and Richard Shiff, University of Texas at Austin's Cain Chair in Art History.

### THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

Founded in 1914, The Baltimore Museum of Art is a major cultural destination recognized for engaging diverse audiences through dynamic exhibitions and innovative educational and community outreach programs. The BMA's internationally renowned collection of 95,000 objects encompasses more than 1,000 works by Henri Matisse anchored by the famed Cone Collection of modern art, as well as one of the nation's finest holdings of prints, drawings, and photographs. The galleries showcase an exceptional collection of art from Africa; important works by established and emerging contemporary artists; outstanding European and American paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts; significant artworks from China; ancient Antioch mosaics; and exquisite textiles from around the world. The 210,000- square-foot museum is also distinguished by a grand historic building designed in the 1920s by renowned American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of 20th-century sculpture. The BMA is located in Charles Village, three miles north of the Inner Harbor, and is adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University. General admission to the BMA is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

### VISITOR INFORMATION

General admission to the BMA is free. Special exhibitions may be ticketed. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. The museum is closed Monday, Tuesday, New Year's Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit [artbma.org](http://artbma.org).

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#### For media in Baltimore:

Anne Mannix Brown / Sarah Pedroni  
The Baltimore Museum of Art  
443-573-1870  
[abrown@artbma.org](mailto:abrown@artbma.org) / [spedroni@artbma.org](mailto:spedroni@artbma.org)

#### For media outside of Baltimore:

Stephanie Yeo / Andrea Cihlarova  
Resnicow and Associates  
212-671-5161 / 212-671-5164  
[syeo@resnicow.com](mailto:syeo@resnicow.com) / [acihlarova@resnicow.com](mailto:acihlarova@resnicow.com)