



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Jack Whitten,
2009 December 1-3

Funding for this interview was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jack Whitten on 2013 December 1 and 3. The interview took place in Woodside, N.Y., and was conducted by Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Jack Whitten and Judith Olch Richards have reviewed the transcript. Jack Whitten's corrections and emendations appear below in brackets. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Jack Whitten on December 1, 2009, at his studio in Woodside, Queens, New York, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

Jack, I'd like to start with your family, as far back as you want to go— it could be even your grandparents, if you have information about them, and then going on to your parents and yourself and your siblings. And then we'll focus on you again.

JACK WHITTEN: Yes. My mom [as] Annie B. Whitten and my father was Mose Whitten.

MS. RICHARDS: Annie – A-N-N-I-E?

MR. WHITTEN: A-N-N-I-E.

MS. RICHARDS: And B is –

MR. WHITTEN: Belle. Annie Belle.

MS. RICHARDS: Where was she born?

MR. WHITTEN: She was born in Alabama. She wasn't born in Bessemer, though. She was born in Clinton County, I believe. My father was born in Mississippi. Mose Whitten. Occupation? My father was a coal miner and my mom was a seamstress who later opened a kindergarten in Bessemer. Whitten Kindergarten.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked a lot, in previous interviews I read, about your childhood. You were the oldest?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh no. No. My mom was married twice and her first husband, [was] Monroe Cross.

MS. RICHARDS: Monroe Cross?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes. James Monroe Cross, really. Monroe was his middle name. My mom had four kids with James Monroe Cross. Monroe Cross was a local sign-painter. He did commercial signs. He had a business, which was very unusual at that time in the South for a black man to say that he had his own business and especially something like sign-painting. Very unusual.

MS. RICHARDS: How did he learn that? Do you know?

MR. WHITTEN: That I never – no one ever told me. I don't know if he was self-taught or if he was trained in a school. I never knew. But that was my mom's first husband and she had four kids. Two boys and two girls. Martha Cross, Laverne Cross, James Monroe Cross Jr. – he was named after his father – and Thomas Cross, the youngest. And James Monroe Cross, my mother's first husband, died an early death when the youngest kid was I think somewhere like one year old or so.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it an accident or a –

MR. WHITTEN: No, it was not [an accident]. It was some sort of an illness. All we know is that he was taken ill, came down with a lot of pain. He took a friend of his to a hospital because the friend was sick and when he was there at the hospital – this is the story that I grew up with – when he was at the hospital, he became ill with severe pain and it proceeded to get worse and worse during the day.

Without notifying my mother or anyone else in the family, they claimed that he was rushed to the operating room and operated on and he died, I think on the table. My mother always suspected some sort of foul play but no one could ever prove it. He was a well-known guy, there, doing that kind of work.

MS. RICHARDS: Foul play in terms of purposefully or just accidentally?

MR. WHITTEN: She seemed to think that – the stories I heard from her always was they think that it was purposely. I mean, he always got racial threats. I grew up with stories, like –

MS. RICHARDS: Because he was doing something that he shouldn't be doing?

MR. WHITTEN: A black man doing a job that white people did not want him to do. I've heard stories, like, he would be up on a scaffold doing a sign. He would come back down and someone would have left a note attached to the ladder. You know, thinks like: "Watch out, boy, the Ku Klux Klan is watching you. We don't want niggers doing this kind of work." That kind of a thing. And from what I hear, he received several threats like that, so it's not far fetched to say that there could be something to her suspicion. But no one ever knew. No one could prove it nor was anyone in a position to pursue it. But that's what I grew up with, those stories.

Of course, I never knew the man. I wasn't even born then. People in the community said that I bear a resemblance of him and people even go so far as to say that I received his talents, in some way. [Laughs.] People in the South, though, believed in stuff like that. They have – they call it – what's the word they use? Marked, a child is marked. That's what the Southerners would use. People would say that because of my mother's grief, I was a marked baby. I don't know what to say about things like that, but I'm aware of it in terms of, you know, Southern folklore.

MS. RICHARDS: So she, then, met your father.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. After years of struggle – I think she almost lost the family home. She moved in with her mother, my grandmother, whose name was Etta.

MS. RICHARDS: E-T-T?

MR. WHITTEN: E-T-T-A. Etta Cuningham.

MS. RICHARDS: With two N's?

MR. WHITTEN: E-T-T-A, C-U-N-[N-] I-N-G-H-A-M. That was my grandma, whom I remember. I have a fond remembrance of her and a little bit of our neighborhood.

MS. RICHARDS: Did she grow up in Alabama, too?

MR. WHITTEN: She grew up in Alabama. Born in Alabama, grew up in Alabama. The family moved to Bessemer and that's where she had her kids. Etta Cuningham. They said I even looked like him. He also did paintings. The first artwork that I ever saw, that I grew up with, was done by this man. I have it at home.

MS. RICHARDS: In your–

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. If we go to the apartment on Thursday, I'll show it to you. When my mom died, I requested from the family this painting, that I should have it because that's what I grew up with. That was the first thing that I saw that you could call art. My mom kept it on the wall all those years.

MS. RICHARDS: So how did your mother meet your father?

MR. WHITTEN: I think she met him at some sort of a church function, something to do with the church. He had come up from Mississippi, looking for work. And I was told that they met at church, which is probably true. I mean, at that time the social networking took place in church, primarily. Young man, young woman – you know, if it [was] not school, but at that age they wouldn't have been at school, it most likely was at church.

MS. RICHARDS: He had –

MR. WHITTEN: My father was not a churchgoing man, though. Later, he pretty much removed himself from the church.

MS. RICHARDS: He hadn't been married before?

MR. WHITTEN: He hadn't been married before, that we know of. Later, after his death, though, something did happen, [others] tried to claim that he was married – which was a nasty incident because, after his death, my mom was left with three of her kids: myself, [the] oldest, my brother Jesse –

MS. RICHARDS: J-E-S-S-E?

MR. WHITTEN: Jesse Whitten. So my father's name was Mose Whitten, so Jesse Whitten and my younger brother, Billy Whitten. Billy F. Whitten, which stands for Frank. It would be Billy Frank Whitten. He was named after his granddaddy. My grandfather – my father's father – was Frank Whitten, from Mississippi.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're saying that when your father died, there was some kind of claim?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, there was a little nasty incident there. Someone in the family – and it was the grandfather, really. My father had a little pension payment from his work in the mines. He came to the house – this was, like, about a year afterwards – trying to say that my father was married to some woman and they were not legally divorced. And therefore, the pension should go to her. I remember this. It was nasty. But the courts didn't accept that, so the little bit of pension money that my mom received went to us, which wasn't much, at that time. The guy was a coal miner.

MS. RICHARDS: It's amazing there was a pension.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, it was very little. And on top of it, he was in debt. At that time, you know, all of those big companies down South had ways to ensnarl people in debt. They had what are called company stores. And you could go there and buy goods on credit. It was set up in such a way – both black and white; it wasn't just black people. [Laughs.] In truth, there's a lot of Southern blues songs written about that. You know, I sold my life to the company store. That's a true thing, very true.

So people would take out debt toward their payroll and they could never catch up because of high interest rates and everybody's always living on the edge. So financially, all those people who worked for those mines, they never get out of debt. I remember my mom, being such a Christian soul, thought it was her duty to pay his debt, which literally took money out of our mouths. But she did it.

MS. RICHARDS: How old were you when he died?

MR. WHITTEN: I would have been approaching five years old, about five. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So what was the school like that you went to, the elementary school? And what were your main interests as a student?

MR. WHITTEN: I was good in the sciences – math, you know, or biology. Those were my top subjects. But I was always into the arts. I painted when I was a kid. I have paintings that date back to my teenage years.

MS. RICHARDS: What materials did you use?

MR. WHITTEN: Oil paint. I built an easel [on canvas board].

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have trouble finding the art materials in Bessemer?

MR. WHITTEN: The first art supplies that I used were leftovers from [James Monroe].

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you if he had left supplies.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, my mom kept all that stuff: his brushes, his paints.

MS. RICHARDS: From James Monroe?

MR. WHITTEN: Things that he used to use, from James Monroe. The first time I ever used art supplies, it was from the stash of goods that my mom had saved all those years. My mom was a person who never threw anything away, never. [Laughs.] Our house was, like, a junkyard in the back. You know, a house, a junk house, [where] you kept everything. But that's typical Southern. Southerners do not throw anything away.

MS. RICHARDS: Or [the] Depression.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. They came out of that period, so people were very frugal. You know, it was always a matter of survival. You're talking about a people who live, constantly, right on the edge, economically: subsistence living.

MS. RICHARDS: So you said after you used James Monroe's supplies, you were able to buy supplies in Bessemer?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there an art supply store, or craft store?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. Well, there were stores, like craft stores – local five-and-dime stores that usually had some

art supplies. But I remember making my own easel. I did landscapes.

MS. RICHARDS: Where were you getting the information about being an artist, and having an easel, and what an easel was and how it was built?

MR. WHITTEN: [I learned from shop class in junior high school]

MS. RICHARDS: Were there magazines that you could look at art, or artists, or see pictures of people painting at easels, so that you even knew about all that?

MR. WHITTEN: No. There was, in the neighborhood, one or two - what you would call outsider artists. I remember this; there were. And that part of Alabama, you know, that's also the hometown of Thornton Dial. Thornton Dial is one of America's best known outsider artists.

MS. RICHARDS: He grew up in Bessemer? He lived in Bessemer?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, sure. I always visit him when I go home. So there [were] people like that, who were outsider-type artists. But other than that, I had no access to the museums were off limits. All through high school and junior high school, when they took us on school field trips, they never took us to the museum because it was off limits to blacks. They took us to the steel mills and took us to the coal mines, but never to the museums. [Laughs.] It's incredible, truly incredible.

MS. RICHARDS: So as you were going through elementary school, you said you were good at and interested in science, but you also did art.

MR. WHITTEN: I did art and I did music. I played tenor saxophone.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have private music lessons, or learn in school?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. Well, at first I had private music lessons and then we learned at school. I was a member of the school band, the marching band, and in high school, a member of the dance band. And I played tenor saxophone seriously. I mean, I thought at one point that I would go into music. I didn't sell my horn until, oh, 1962 or '63.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other people in your family interested in music, or who played an instrument?

MR. WHITTEN: Absolutely. I grew up with a piano in the house. Both my sisters played piano. Toots, my sister Toots; Martha played piano. My sister Laverne played piano.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I don't have Laverne. Wait, yes I do. Okay.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. They were both piano players. My brother before me, Tommy, was a tenor sax player. So I grew up with talent, you know? And, of course, my mom, as a seamstress, even in terms of her - my mom made all of our clothes. I mean, for years I wore homemade clothes. My mom would buy used clothes - from Army Surplus, Salvation Army - take them apart, clean them, dye them any color she wanted, and would remake them into outfits for us.

MS. RICHARDS: Did she learn from her mother?

MR. WHITTEN: She learned primarily from her mother.

MS. RICHARDS: You said she supported the family as a seamstress.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. At first, before she opened the kindergarten, all of her income, for the whole family, was from her work as a seamstress.

MS. RICHARDS: Did she teach you how to sew?

MR. WHITTEN: She demanded that all the boys know how to sew. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Obviously, the girls, but also the boys?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, the girls. My sister Laverne was a terrific seamstress. She was well-known in the community. But my mom taught us to sew, do repair work. I remember my first project was making a pair of pajamas.

MS. RICHARDS: So at one point there were seven children living -

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, it was seven kids. The first four kids that my mom had, plus the three that she had with my father, Mose.

MS. RICHARDS: Was this a house with a few bedrooms? I mean, how did you all –

MR. WHITTEN: One, two, three bedrooms. Mom had added on an extra room. Yeah, it was ample space.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you also have a garden?

MR. WHITTEN: We had a garden. The same as everybody, down there. A garden was something that everybody did. We were within the city limits, so we couldn't have things like a pig. We were allowed to – you could grow chickens; we had chickens. We grew rabbits; we grew ducks.

MS. RICHARDS: To eat?

MR. WHITTEN: To eat and to make a little change. I remember having as many as 50, 60 rabbits that we would use not only for food on the table, at home, but you could also make an extra dollar by selling them to people who wanted fresh rabbit or fresh chicken, or fresh duck.

But we were not allowed to have cows and pigs within the city limits of Bessemer. Small town, but right across the tracks from us, where the city limits stopped, people had cows, mules, horses, small farms.

MS. RICHARDS: So in school you were playing the saxophone. You were continuing creating art works.

MR. WHITTEN: And I was the local school artist.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were the artist.

MR. WHITTEN: I was the school's artist.

MS. RICHARDS: So if something –

MR. WHITTEN: Whenever there was anything needed to be done – posters, anything – they always called me. I did it.

MS. RICHARDS: As you were going through school, you weren't imagining – you enjoyed the art – but you weren't imagining becoming an artist.

MR. WHITTEN: Well, it wasn't encouraged.

MS. RICHARDS: You said, in fact, you were thinking of being a musician.

MR. WHITTEN: I was thinking of being a musician, but any form of the arts were not encouraged because of economic reasons.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MR. WHITTEN: You know, you always said that it's nice that you can do that, but you can't make a living at it. So it was never encouraged. All through high school, I would – my first art classes were in high school. John B. Hall. John B. Hall was my first art instructor.

MS. RICHARDS: John B. –

MR. WHITTEN: John B. Hall.

MS. RICHARDS: H-U-?

MR. WHITTEN: H-A-L-L.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Mm-hmm [Affirmative].

MR. WHITTEN: He was my first art instructor at Dunbar High School. It wasn't an extensive program, but it was a beginning. John B. Hall was an interesting man. But in those days, like at a black high school like that, an instructor being an art instructor, he was also the physical ed instructor [laughs] the coach, the social studies – what else did he do? Drivers' training.

MS. RICHARDS: So he must have taught just one art class a week?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, one a week. That's what it was. We had kind of a shed of a place that we worked in.

MS. RICHARDS: Did he bring in reproductions of artworks in books and things to share that you might not have seen before?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. There [were] some books and reproductions of things. But the main thing I got out of that class was John B. Hall had a side job doing [hand lettered price cards doing a brush]. That is, you know, at that time before mechanized silk screens and so forth, local department stores would have sales.

And all those sales tags were [painted] by hand with a brush. And John B. Hall had the accounts that he did that kind of work. He taught me how to do it. And when he left being an instructor at Dunbar to accept another position down at Alabama State [College], he gave me those accounts. So through high school, I made extra money.

MS. RICHARDS: So you had him as an instructor early in the high school years –

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – and were able to do that.

MR. WHITTEN: Right. So he was a great man. I really credit him –

MS. RICHARDS: Was he white or black?

MR. WHITTEN: No, he was black. Oh, no – are you kidding? At that time, it was –

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. You couldn't teach?

MR. WHITTEN: No. It's strictly segregated. I grew up in a strictly segregated apartheid [society].

MS. RICHARDS: So all the teachers had to be black as well.

MR. WHITTEN: Black. All the teachers, all the students. I grew up in a total, separate, segregated society. Total. Not a little bit. Total.

MS. RICHARDS: And when you were doing these signs, though, you were doing them for white stores as well as black.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah. White-owned stores. [Occasionally] somebody did sort of a small business, they would call to do a sign, a poster. One of the bigger accounts was a place called Manufacturers' Outlet. They did these once-a-week sales – dollar sales, they called them. Right? And I would have to paint signs with a dollar sign – sometimes eight, 10 feet. [Laughs.] I took over my mom's whole dining room to do these things. We did them on white butcher paper. And they wanted them big, bold, graphic.

MS. RICHARDS: And then rolled them up and carried them?

MR. WHITTEN: Carried them all and installed them. Small [price]cards like that – one dollar, 50 cents, 25 cents. You know? Two for a dollar, three for a dollar. And truthfully, when I think back, it was fun. My first example of doing large-scale things. You do an eight-, 10-foot dollar sign – that's quite impressive.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you ever imagine continuing that kind of work?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, it was in my mind to do the arts, but again, it was never encouraged. Coming from a poor black community, segregation. And the instructors had your interests in mind. They were thinking about your future. So for me, I went to Tuskegee Institute out of high school, right out of high school.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you – how did you end up going there? Did the instructor encourage you, said that was the right place? Or did you independently research it or think about what would be best?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, no, I got a full – Tuskegee had what is called a work scholarship program. And because my grades were good – I was an honors student – that allowed me to go into Tuskegee, pretty much a full scholarship program. But it meant that I had to work.

MS. RICHARDS: How far was that from Bessemer?

MR. WHITTEN: Tuskegee from Bessemer – that's in Montgomery County. It's about hour-and-a-half drive. Not more than two hours, if I remember. Tuskegee Institute at that time was known as Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama.

MS. RICHARDS: Was your mother very happy about that?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, absolutely. My older brother [James] did some college.

MS. RICHARDS: Which brother?

MR. WHITTEN: James. And my sister Laverne did some college at the local community college. She didn't finish. Who else had access to college? [My sister Martha went to nursing school.] That was about it. James went to the Korean War in the Army.

To backtrack a little bit, if you came out of that kind of a community in the South – again, white or black – what was available to you, number one, was the U.S. Army – if your family didn't have money to send you to college, if you didn't have grades. Or the steel mills, the coal mines, the ore mines. And if you were black, you know, that was it. It was either the Army or the coal mines. You had very little chance of local employment.

MS. RICHARDS: Except for those very few people like you who managed to get to college.

MR. WHITTEN: Very few people. Yeah. Very few. So when I got into college at Tuskegee, that was a big thing. Big thing. And they [steered] me toward the sciences. So I went into Tuskegee as a pre-med student.

MS. RICHARDS: When you said, they [steered] you toward the sciences –

MR. WHITTEN: "They" are the school, my instructors in high school.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, in high school. So you went in intending to major in some scientific field.

MR. WHITTEN: I went into – the idea was I was taking pre-med studies – mathematics, biology, zoology, that kind of thing – botany – which were subjects I really had a feeling for. And I was an Air Force ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] cadet. So the idea was to be an [Air Force] doctor. And Tuskegee at that time was well known for their special Air Force ROTC [program] because of the Tuskegee airmen, that came out of a program – that program originated at Tuskegee. That's why they call them Tuskegee [Airmen]. [Army Air Corp for blacks.]

In truth, they used to bring a lot of those guys in to talk to us to our class about their experiences in the war, experiences with racism in the military. They were advisors. I remember a lot of them, terrific bunch of guys. That's why I keep a little photograph of them on my wall up there.

MS. RICHARDS: So how long did you continue at Tuskegee focusing on science?

MR. WHITTEN: I stayed at Tuskegee for two years. Two years. But after two years, I realized that – by that time, I was thinking a lot, starting to read [philosophy]. And still in the back of my mind, the arts.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you also meeting other students from different places at Tuskegee who expanded your world?

MR. WHITTEN: Most of them were local, from the South. Probably the first people I met that sort of expanded my notion of the world – we had some of the first African students that studied in the USA: kids from Ghana, from Nigeria. I knew them. The first time I'd met people actually from another country. I remember having a lot of fun with those kids. But most of the student bodies were local. Tuskegee was an all-black college with all black instructors. So the law forbid anybody white from mixing.

But in the back of my mind was always the arts. Even at Tuskegee, I continued to do landscape – drawing from the landscapes.

MS. RICHARDS: And also playing the saxophone?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. A little bit. Still playing the saxophone. I played in the Air Force ROTC marching band, which was a highly disciplined thing to do. Air Force marching band was a serious business.

MS. RICHARDS: When you left Tuskegee after two years, you gave up the ROTC track?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. I dropped out of that. I realized that my love for airplanes and everything was great, but, you know, it was kind of a romantic idea. When you're taking those ROTC classes, we realized that this thing that you're supposedly driving is a weapon. [Laughs.] It can quickly [make you] lose your romanticism. [Laughs.] So I left Tuskegee –

I should say something happened at Tuskegee that I didn't really understand. And the only way I can describe it when I tell this is revelation. I remember being in an early morning Air Force ROTC class. And it was as if

something had put their or somebody had put their hands on me.

And I remember standing up, like, bewildered, like in a daze, and I didn't understand what was going on. But I remember the instructor calling to me, "Cadet Whitten, Cadet Whitten. Attention!" And I sit down back in my seat, right, but I didn't know what had happened. But after that incident, I realized that I had to leave Tuskegee. Then I went further South to –[Southern University in Baton Rouge, LA to study art.]

MS. RICHARDS: But what was the incident?

MR. WHITTEN: It was like something had touched me. It had changed me.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the communication?

MR. WHITTEN: The feeling was that I had to leave Tuskegee.

MS. RICHARDS: Was is a positive feeling or a fearful feeling?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, it was a feeling that I didn't know what was going on. It was hard to – it was hard to describe it in that sense. It's like the kind of experience that I've often heard people in the South who are religious people who claim that if they were preachers, they would say things like, God called me to preach. That's would be the explanation.

MS. RICHARDS: It was a feeling of wanting to go beyond something.

MR. WHITTEN: Go beyond something.

MS. RICHARDS: To break free of something.

MR. WHITTEN: It had to be something other than Tuskegee and the studying of medicine and going into the military. My oldest brother was a military person. He [was] a very decorated veteran from the Korean War. And he was back at Tuskegee in the Army ROTC to receive his Second Lieutenant [commission]. And he was about to graduate.

MS. RICHARDS: Become a commissioned officer.

MR. WHITTEN: That's right. In the U.S. Army. So the military thing – my other brother Tommy was already in the military. So I had two people ahead of me that were military people. And of course, my uncle –[Thomas Cunningham, a World War II veteran who served in the Pacific with the Navy.

MS. RICHARDS: Tommy was enlisted.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, he was enlisted. Tommy left high school – smart guy. Faked the birth certificate [laughs] because he was underage. Fast as he left high school, he went straight to the U.S. Air Force. And in those days, that was unusual because nobody black from Bessemer, Alabama, went to the U.S. Air Force. You went to the U.S. Army.

But Tommy was a smart kid. And he went to the U.S. Air Force, which was very unusual. I remember when Tommy came back to Bessemer wearing his blue uniform – boy, people were taken aback. Even caused some trouble amongst white people there because they had never seen a black kid wearing an Air Force uniform. You didn't see that. Very unusual.

So military was sort of ingrained in me. The truth about it – I even grew up reading military manuals [laughs] if you can believe that. We actually got manuals from surplus Army stores, read about weaponry – all kinds of stuff. When I got to Tuskegee, shit, I knew a lot of stuff about the military.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you hunt as a kid in the summer?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, yeah. Hunting was my middle name. Hunting and fishing. I was a terrific shot. I grew up with guns. We used guns. Hunting everything – everything from squirrel to rabbit to quail to deer – even raccoons, possums. We said in the South if it moves, we shoot it. [They laugh.] We ate everything. But it was a lot of fun. You know, it's sort of – it's still with me, in the summer months [in Greece. I spear fish with a gun.]

MS. RICHARDS: Your father died when you were five so he didn't teach you how to shoot in all those – did your mother or did you have uncles?

MR. WHITTEN: My older brothers. My uncle Jesse across the street, who was a steel mill worker. He would at times take the kids out.

MS. RICHARDS: Your mother's brother?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, my mother's brother lived across the street from us – Jesse. He would occasionally take the kids out hunting. When I became a teenager, my mom remarried a man named Wesley.

MS. RICHARDS: First name Wesley?

MR. WHITTEN: Or his last name was Wesley. His first name – that's a good question. That didn't last too long. [Wesley Sims]

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. WHITTEN: But he made a big impact on us kids as teenagers.

MS. RICHARDS: Good impact?

MR. WHITTEN: For us, it was positive. For my mom, not so positive. But you know, he had a big farm. He would take us hunting, fishing.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you move to his farm?

MR. WHITTEN: No. No. We always stayed at our family home. But we went there regularly – wasn't too far. He was from the area we call McCalla.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MR. WHITTEN: M-C-hyphen-C-A-L-L-A. In truth, you'd say you were where Thornton Dial lives now.

But we would go there to fish and hunt. And this man Wesley knew a lot about the woods. He knew a lot about the forest and how to hunt for wild vegetables and all kinds of medicinal plants he knew. So he trained me to do that stuff. I would go into the woods with him and he would point, we would pick things. You know, this is for this, this is for that. So that was very good. I enjoyed that. The man knew a lot about folklore.

But also he had a dark side to him. In truth, it became known that Wesley was a conjurer – the word in the South is used for somebody who's connected to some sort of a spiritual forces. And they can use it against you, right? So he was known for this. Kind of a con man, the truth about it.

But that didn't last too long with my mom. But for us, the kids – my mom often said that she married him primarily because of us, the boys – having three boys, no father. He sort of filled in the gaps. It worked for a while.

MS. RICHARDS: She sounds like an incredibly strong person.

MR. WHITTEN: My mom?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: You had to be. For someone to say that they raised seven kids by themselves at that time in the South under those conditions politically – you had to be a strong figure. Otherwise, we wouldn't have survived. My survival depended on the family – who was my mom – the church and the school. Those were the three institutions that guided us.

MS. RICHARDS: So after you left Tuskegee, then where did you go?

MR. WHITTEN: Went further south to Southern University.

MS. RICHARDS: Where is that?

MR. WHITTEN: In Baton Rouge [LA]. I went there as an art student.

MS. RICHARDS: And why did you pick that place?

MR. WHITTEN: It was available. It was a state school, which meant that it didn't cost that much. Tuskegee did not have an art program. In truth, if Tuskegee had had an art program, I probably would have stayed there. But I went to Southern.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that an integrated school?

MR. WHITTEN: No. Hell no. Schools down South did not integrate until much later. Strictly black state college. All black instructors. And there I had my first black art instructors. One of the main ones that I worked with was a fellow named Jean Paul Hubbard. H-U-B-B-A-R-D. Jean Paul. He was a [black Louisiana] French Cajun.

Did watercolors. He was known for his watercolors. And I often think of him because I speak so much about the influence of photography on my work. Jean Peal Hubbard went out in nature, took 35-millimeter transparencies, brought them back to the studio, projected them and did paintings of them. That's kind of amazing.

MS. RICHARDS: What year was that?

MR. WHITTEN: That would have to be '59 – early '59 – because I only stayed at Southern for a year.

MS. RICHARDS: Were the results what you had imagined? – was his work similar to what photorealism looked like? Artists who also –

MR. WHITTEN: It was the beginning of that kind of a thinking. I mean, he did these transparent watercolors done from slide projections. It was my first experience with somebody using a gadget like that, like the camera, taking from nature. But I realize more and more it must have had an effect upon me, that that was my first encounter with somebody doing that kind of a thing doing those kinds of procedures – way before I came to New York [city].

MS. RICHARDS: When you started at Southern University, you started to see yourself as becoming an artist?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, as an artist. By then I knew that – I understood that revelation I had at Tuskegee better. And I knew then that that's what I'd do. My family became very angry. My oldest brother [James], who was graduating with his Second Lieutenant commission, was beyond [laughs] appalled.

MS. RICHARDS: You threw your life away.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, my God. [Laughs.] "You don't know what you're doing. You're throwing your life away." He actually hit me. He and his buddies.

MS. RICHARDS: Trying to knock some sense into you.

MR. WHITTEN: My mom was berserk. Again, you're throwing your life away. You don't know what you're doing. That there was no encouragement from nobody. Nobody. One man at Tuskegee, a professor of architecture – I went to him because I was having doubts about what I was doing, involved with music –

[Telephone rings] there's the phone. Maybe since we have this break time, I'll take it.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: So you were saying that there was the architecture teacher and you went to him for advice.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, I met this professor at Tuskegee – of architecture. And I went to him; he was the closest thing to art. [Laughs.] And I told him my doubts about going into medicine and going into the Air Force. And he told me about Cooper Union [New York City] – that's when I first heard of Cooper Union. He told me it was tuition-free, that there was a test involved – if you went there and made this application, did this test and you pass, you could have a tuition-free school. Never heard of anything like that. [Laughs.] But that's when I first heard of Cooper.

MS. RICHARDS: What was his name?

MR. WHITTEN: I don't remember his name, unfortunately. But he was a professor of architecture.

MS. RICHARDS: But you went to Southern University –

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And was that tuition-free?

MR. WHITTEN: No, no. It was a state school but it was inexpensive. Probably was something like – I don't remember exactly but somewhere in the range of [\$400-\$800 a year].

MS. RICHARDS: Were you supporting yourself?

MR. WHITTEN: At that point, yeah, because Mom didn't have any money at that time. Well, in truth, nobody in the family did. She would send food packages, though, both at Tuskegee and at Southern, which was quite helpful. Only problem with that, though, every time I got a box, all my buddies would be in line [laughs] because they knew what was in that box, right?

MS. RICHARDS: So you were an art major and was that – did you define that as painting, sculpture?

MR. WHITTEN: Drawing, painting. Unfortunately, because of restrictions down there from a moral point of view and religious points of view, you couldn't use a nude model – the model was always draped, which was a big mistake. But, you know, that's the South for you. Within that Bible Belt, so it wasn't allowed.

MS. RICHARDS: You did take figure drawing?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I took figure drawing. I had a very good art history course – I remember his name: Professor Cardoza; forget his first name; Cardoza was his name – which gave me a pretty good start in art history. Because I realized when I came to New York, later, that I knew a lot, all from books [and slides]. Never saw the real thing but I could recognize stuff from slides and books.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other students you met at Southern University whom you kept up with and who were important friends or influences?

MR. WHITTEN: It was a small group of us in music. I was still doing a little playing on the side. We would go to New Orleans [LA] a lot; hang out there at jazz clubs and so forth, and I did a little playing with the sax, in bands and so forth. Nothing too serious because by then I was realizing that I'm leaning more toward painting, not music.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you allowed to go to the museum in New Orleans?

MR. WHITTEN: Never went to a museum in New Orleans. I don't remember if it was because I couldn't go. It was still the segregated South though, you know. But I don't want to be misquoted there. I don't know if it was because they didn't allow us there. In Birmingham, we didn't go because we couldn't.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were at Southern University as an art student and you were studying art history, what artists in art history were you particularly drawn to or who were especially inspiring or exciting to you?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, believe it or not, Italian Renaissance. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: It's had that impact on a lot of people.

MR. WHITTEN: Italian Renaissance was probably my first big interest. And again, I had never seen those things. Only from slides and in books. Now, I often think about that. I might have been drawn to that because in church, going to Sunday school, we saw illustrations of religious subject matter – that probably was the connection. Illustrated Sunday school books [inaudible]. The story of Jesus.

MS. RICHARDS: The saints.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. Then when I discovered Italian Renaissance, probably just connected the two. But something beyond just the notion of illustration.

MS. RICHARDS: So you went through that school for two years, the university?

MR. WHITTEN: I only stayed at Southern for one year. I got involved politically down there with the civil rights demonstrations. We closed down Southern University – it was a big thing, big thing – and led a civil rights march. The locals became involved – the local ministry – and we led a huge, huge, absolutely huge civil rights march.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the target of that particular march?

MR. WHITTEN: We went to the state capitol building. We marched to that state capitol building. It started off as a student protest because we felt that being a black state school, we were not being funded properly. That's what started it. Even in the art department: There [were] no facilities that were worth [any]thing. So that's how the protest started, that the state was not funding the black schools properly. But it mushroomed into a much larger civil right thing.

I was always interested in civil rights. My mother led voter registration rights. At home, my mother would have meetings with the local people where she taught how to pass those tests. In those days, black people had to pass a test to become a registered voter. Plus, you had to pay a poll tax. My mama used to have meetings where she would teach people how to pass those tests and one of the times when I was in high school, probably

the first paid commission I had to do [as] artwork, was from a man named – oh boy, it's important that I call this guy's name – he was a local civil rights activist. Asbury – Asbury Howard, that was his name.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know how to spell "Asbury"?

MR. WHITTEN: It's probably A-S-B-U-R-Y.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Okay.

MR. WHITTEN: Howard. He was a known civil rights activist in Bessemer. But Asbury came to me – I must have been eleventh grade – and he said, son, I hear you can draw, you're an artist. I want you to do something for me: I want you to paint me a poster of a black man with his hands tied behind him in chains. I want a big poster that I can hold like that. I think he gave me 50 cents. I did that poster. He took that poster and led a little demonstration there, in Bessemer, Alabama, on the steps of the county courthouse. Got beat up for it.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to say, that was dangerous.

MR. WHITTEN: Damn right. Very dangerous. But he used that poster that he had paid me [for].

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't sign it?

MR. WHITTEN: No. I wouldn't have. But maybe I did – I don't know. But I remember getting 50 cents from him.

So, you know, the bus boycott was happening at that time, in the '50s, when I was in high school. When I went to Tuskegee, I met Martin Luther King at a talk he was giving at the church in Montgomery. I had gone there. So that was in my blood but – and I was interested in King and what he was doing. He was in all the newspapers there because all our bus lines [in] Bessemer [were] segregated.

Again, I grew up in strict, segregated apartheid. My memory's one of the buses with a sign – the front of the sign said "White" and the back of the sign said "Colored." The bus driver was the only person who could move that sign. So I have memories of going, getting on the bus – there would be empty seats for the white people up front, the blacks would be standing up in the back, but nobody could move that sign.

So as a kid, I remember a young man, a soldier, friend of my sister's, in uniform, came home on furlough, got on the bus. He moved the sign so he could sit. The bus driver stopped the bus, told him to put it back. The man says, "Look, there's seats available. I want to sit." They exchanged "nigger this, nigger that, nigger that." Bus driver pulls out a gun and shoots the kid on the bus. That kid's name was Hood. What was his first name? My sister would remember.

MS. RICHARDS: Did he shoot him – wounded him? Or kill him?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, he killed him! They brought the body, when they buried him, the procession moved through the black neighborhoods in a flag-draped coffin. I was a kid but I remember it. Sure did. One of the Hoods.

So what happened in Montgomery when that woman [Claudette] Covo [sic] [Colvin], who was the first to do that, and then later Ms. [Rosa] Parks moved that sign – you know, it became big news.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the name of the woman before Parks?

MR. WHITTEN: The name was "Covo" and her first name was –

MS. RICHARDS: That was in the news recently.

MR. WHITTEN: It was in the news recently. I was glad to see it.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: I was glad to see it because nobody ever mentioned – we knew about it because we knew it.

MS. RICHARDS: I'll look it up.

MR. WHITTEN: But of course, they made the big deal for Ms. Parks. And we know the logic of it.

MS. RICHARDS: So you got involved in this big demonstration at the university or going beyond.

MR. WHITTEN: See, all that stuff was embedded in me, this whole separation of races, the politics of it. I think one of the bad things for me as kid in Bessemer – Bessemer, Alabama in the summertime was hot, humid – disgustingly hot. One of the hardest things for us kids [was] to walk past the white swimming pool which was

city-owned, by tax payers' dollars, and to see white kids swimming but we couldn't go in. That was hard. That was hard. Even the public park – the little shaded area with trees, with a water fountain in the middle – we could walk through that park but you couldn't sit and god forbid if you went to the water fountain. Things like that.

[My brother James and others built a dam in Parsons' branch] to make a swimming pool for the black kids. And it was a lot of fun! White people couldn't even take that. We came back once to go swimming – they had come in in the night and thrown in broken bottles. So the first kid that jumped, his feet came out all bloody. Shit like that.

Even the lake – we had a lake called West Lake. Big lake in Bessemer, Alabama. Bridge went across and divided the lake. We could walk across that bridge and we could only look at people swimming. I remember they had a big platform out there, diving boards. And us being fishermen and hunters: We could walk across that bridge, we could see the fish in the water, but we couldn't fish there. So occasionally, my buddy J.D. and I would slip in the back, way back where there's a lot of bushes back there, and fish. But if white people spotted you, boy, they would shoot at you. I had to tell somebody once – shit, I didn't go to Vietnam, I've never been in a war, but I didn't have to go to Vietnam to find out what the sound of a bullet was like passing over your head. I learned in Alabama. They would shoot at you for fishing!

They would have signs up: "No Niggers Allowed." But we would go in there in the evening and fish. We'd catch those big blue gills and we had a little technique we call a "tight line." [Bamboo fishing poles which we made.] You didn't use a – cork: Long bamboo poles, throw it out, let the line stretch out – tight line, we called it – float across the top, fishing with worms and crickets. We'd catch big blue gills. We'd walk through the neighborhood with them strung up. People knew where they came from – nobody would say anything. [They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: So you said that you only stayed at Southern University for a year because –

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, participating in that thing, that march. That march became violent; people would attack you. When we made it to the steps of the state office building, people up in those buildings up high – that building must have been about four or five stories high – they would throw shit out of the window, piss, everything down on you, on top of you. People cursing, people hitting you. It was a bad scene.

That's what forced me out of [the South]. After the experience in that march, I went – I threw everything I had away: all my clothing, everything. Southern University had a big lake there on the banks of the Mississippi River. I threw everything I had away.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that a kind of ritual?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. It was a gesture. It was literally saying, the hell with it. Threw everything away. Got rid of everything.

MS. RICHARDS: Including your artwork?

MR. WHITTEN: No, some of the artwork I brought back with me. No, I didn't bring it back. I left it with – what was his name? He was a local minister, I didn't live on campus; I rent[ed] a room from this local minister. It was a shack: a cockroach-infested shack. But it was cheap. And when I left, I left some things with him.

[END CD 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Jack Whitten on December 1st, 2009, in Woodside, Queens, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

So you say you threw everything into the lake.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry; you were talking – describing the shack that you rented.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, it was a shack that had about five rooms and a little cooking facility, bathroom in the hallway. You could take a shower. But bedroom was just humid, hot. And, boy, ideal cockroach [laughs] – It was the type of place if you came in at night, if you didn't turn the light on at night. You'd hear something under your feet "crunch, crunch, crunch," and they'd be cockroaches. But it was cheap. I didn't have any money. I made money by doing portrait sketches on the street, 25 cents, 50 cents. Ate primarily at a place called – I think it was called – the name of that community was called Scotlandville. It was a notorious little community outside of Baton Rouge, all black.

MS. RICHARDS: Notorious for what?

MR. WHITTEN: Criminal activities, small thugs, and that kind of a thing, very poor. There was a little club that we

hung out at. I think it was called Triangle, Triangle Club. There you could eat. They did food like soul cooking. And the cheapest thing on that menu that I lived on day after day after day was a plate of rice, white rice, red kidney beans or pinto beans cooked with fat – what they call fatback. You could get that for 30 cents. And for an extra nickel, you could get a big piece of corn bread. And I lived on that for days at a time. If you had a little bit more, you could buy collard greens cooked with smoked ham hock.

I mean, luckily, when you put that bean, rice, mixture together, you got your proteins.

MS. RICHARDS: Forget about fruit and vegetables.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. Occasionally if you had enough money to buy an apple or something or find something along the way or pick something locally.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you decided to leave there and you threw everything away, was Cooper Union in your sights?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, yeah, yeah. I left there [with] a buddy of mine, we went to New Orleans.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the buddy's name?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, boy, that's a good question. I'm sorry I can't say. He was a musician. We called him Bird.

MS. RICHARDS: Bird?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, he was a musician. He played alto saxophone. They nicknamed him after Charlie Parker.

We went to – he was from New Orleans and we went to New Orleans. We hung out there for a few days. And the best thing that happened to me in New Orleans, the first night we were in New Orleans, we're at a local club called – boy, I think it was called Mules – M-U-L-E – Mules. I'm sure that was the name of it.

MS. RICHARDS: M-U-L-E-S?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes. Mules Bar, stayed open all night, go there, beer, drinking. But the night we were there, the bartender – Fats Domino was there, the blues singer – the bartender told him, hey, that's those kids that was on TV down in Baton Rouge because it was all over on TV. This thing, it was national covered. And Fats Domino came over to our table and he says, "sons, I'm mighty proud of what you guys did, mighty proud. Why don't you guys come over here and join us."

So Fats Domino brought us to his table, fantastic. And my mouth was like [they laugh] – And we hung out with Fats Domino for about two days and two nights in New Orleans. I'll never forget it. He was driving a big Cadillac, convertible, champagne color, white side, no they were tan, sort of a tannish beige sidewall tires, fantastic thing. And boy, people treated us like royalty. People bought us things, bought us drinks, food. The girls treated us nice. [They laugh.] Fats Domino was like a royalty down there at that time.

I mean, he was one of those unusual people. Both white and black loved him and responded to him. That's the one thing I noticed about him. That was a treat.

MS. RICHARDS: Of course, this was New Orleans.

MR. WHITTEN: Sure, this was New Orleans, 1959. I haven't been back there since, by the way. Then I took a bus from New Orleans to New York.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you already applied to Cooper?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, I had sent a letter requesting some of their materials, what was involved, deadlines because I had to be in New York to take that test. At that time, you had to be there and you had to – they administered your test. It was in the old – those tests were administered in the old Hewitt Building.

MS. RICHARDS: Hewitt?

MR. WHITTEN: Hewitt, they just tore it down to build that big fantastic monstrosity. But the old Hewitt Building, that's where we took those tests.

And my contact person in New York was my uncle Thomas – my mom's brother, uncle Tom.

MS. RICHARDS: So his name is Cunningham?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, Thomas Cunningham lived in Jamaica, Queens, a community called Springfield Gardens. He

was my contact person.

I got in touch with Tom, told him I was coming to New York to take this test for Cooper. He allowed me to come to his house. He had a little space down in the basement, where I slept. He and his wife, Mamie, he had two kids at the time. They took me in. And I stayed with Tom – see, I had been to New York previously because I would come to New York to get summer work.

MS. RICHARDS: I didn't realize that.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you mean summer work?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, colleges like Tuskegee, all the colleges down South, especially the black colleges, had postings for summer work for students. A lot of kids went to work on the tobacco farms in Virginia, North Carolina. I went to work upstate New York in Woodbridge, New York, at a hotel. The name of it was Alamac, in Woodbridge, New York. I did a summer job there. The idea was to go and work in the summer, and make enough money to come back for school. I did that two summers on a row.

MS. RICHARDS: The Tuskegee summers? The summers when you were at Tuskegee?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, when I was at Tuskegee.

MS. RICHARDS: So you didn't spend time in Manhattan or in New York City.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, I would come – if I was upstate New York working, when I had a little time off I would visit my uncle and I would visit jazz clubs. And then the second summer of work, my uncle got me a job working for a construction company. My uncle was a policeman, traffic cop. He worked at a corner in Brooklyn, the corner of Flatbush Avenue and Tillary, right at the base of the bridge. That was his corner.

MS. RICHARDS: New York City police?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes. When Tom died, I did a painting, a memorial painting for him. It was called *TC's Corner* [1996]. It's a big cross section. But he commanded that corner, Flatbush Avenue and Tillary. There was a big construction job going on there, building the subways and the Flatbush Avenue extension line. And Tom told the contractor [laughs] my Uncle Tom was like six, four – big. Looked like a – just to look at him, you thought you're looking at a big Irish cop. He told the contractor, "my nephew, who's in college, is coming in town looking for summer work and it would be to your advantage to hire him." [Laughs.] That's what he told the man. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So the second summer you did not work in Woodbridge.

MR. WHITTEN: No, I worked for that one summer. And then, this construction job, I could make more money, my God.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have knowledge of construction?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, growing up in Alabama, you know how to do things. You grew up working, labor, sure. But this is the first time I had worked with a professional company. The guy did not want to hire me, Italian fellow.

MS. RICHARDS: Because you were black or because you –

MR. WHITTEN: I was a skinny kid. He says, "what in the hell am I doing hiring this kid?" He looks at me. "You know how to work kid?" I said, hey man, I'm from Alabama. I'm used to work."

So I remember the first job he gave me, he threw a – not threw – he put a claw hammer in my hand. They were doing construction work [for] cement forms. In those days they used all wood to build the forms. And when they build these forms, after the concrete was poured and cured, they removed these forms. So the first job he gave me was removing these forms, cleaning off the cement, and pulling the nails out. And I did it and he was very impressed.

By the time summer was coming to a close, the man approached me. He said, "why in the hell are you going back to college, Jack? If you stay with me, you can make some good money." He says, "in a year, you could be foreman here." The guy liked me. He saw that I was a good worker, right? I got along with people. And besides, I was making – he was paying me like five dollars, six dollars an hour, unheard of money – unheard of. Even my uncle was impressed.

I was living with my Uncle Tom in Jamaica, working there that summer job. It was good money. So I had some

money in my pocket to go back to school, plus I was in New York, subway ride from Queens. I could go visit the jazz clubs, those hotspots, Birdland, all those places I visited. [Five Spot, Jazz gallery.]

What else did I do? Another summer job, I worked at a place out in Sheepshead Bay [NY].

MS. RICHARDS: Which summer – was this the summer when you're at Southern University?

MR. WHITTEN: It would have been the summer – it would have been the second summer at Tuskegee.

MS. RICHARDS: So the summer before you went to Tuskegee, you went to Woodridge, New York, and then –

MR. WHITTEN: That was the first summer I came to New York. The summer job was in Woodbridge. The second summer would have been at the construction company. So I must have been at Southern. I worked at a place called Lundy's, Sheepshead Bay. They only hired black waiters. Big place, they advertise themselves as the largest restaurant in the world. Great food, two story building, very unique architecture. And I worked there.

MS. RICHARDS: As a waiter?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. But it was interesting. They only had black waiters. And they [were] like professionals. These guys who worked those jobs were pros.

MS. RICHARDS: It must have been hard for you to get that job then. You weren't a professional waiter.

MR. WHITTEN: I wasn't a professional, but they'd hire students in the summer, but they always put us on the second floor, which the old guys wouldn't do, which meant that you had to come out of the kitchen with big tray of food, climb up the stairs.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: And the older guys were vicious, mean, nasty. You'd sit there, trying to get your order together. If they needed something, they were behind your back. They would steal it. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Cut throat.

MR. WHITTEN: But in that business, being a waiter, you know, your tip depended on efficiency. People said that you weren't efficient enough, gave you a small tip. But I learned a lot on that job.

MS. RICHARDS: So it sounds like in terms of cultural activities, they were mainly, when you were in New York in the summers, focused on the music scene.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, every chance I got, I went to the jazz clubs.

And then, my older brother came back from Europe. And my brother Tommy, first in the Air Force, he finished that stick with the Air Force and then he went into the Army– became a paratrooper and jumped with the 52nd Airborne, was sent to Europe. He spent a lot of time in Germany, a big Army base, Wiesbaden, big base at that time in '50s. He was there. And he was in music, played tenor sax, local jazz clubs while he was in the Army. He enjoyed it so much there, when he was discharged from the Army he went back to Europe, went on a scholarship to study in Amsterdam [Netherlands] at the Amsterdam Conservatory of Music on the G.I. Bill.

MS. RICHARDS: So he'd been – he'd fought in Korea [Korean War].

MR. WHITTEN: No, [Tom] hadn't fought in Korea. My oldest brother, James, had fought in Korea.

MS. RICHARDS: But the G.I. Bill, you had to have fought in Korea, I thought.

MR. WHITTEN: Well, you had to be of the military. I don't know if they specified you had to fight or not.

MS. RICHARDS: Certain years.

MR. WHITTEN: That I don't know. But he got some money to go to school.

And my older brother, James, who had fought in Korea, went back to Tuskegee on the G.I. Bill and an [Army] ROTC, but he had to sign a paper saying that if the Army was paying for his education, he owed army so many more years. So he eventually became a captain. He loved the military. But brother Tom did not fight in Korea. But he did go back to school receiving money from the Army.

MS. RICHARDS: In Amsterdam.

MR. WHITTEN: In Amsterdam. And he was required to speak Dutch to do this. So he had to learn Dutch.

MS. RICHARDS: That's no small undertaking.

MR. WHITTEN: No small undertaking. He stayed in the Europe all through the '50s. And then he came back to New York, which would have been about 1960, '61. And we lived together for a while. That first year-

MS. RICHARDS: So going back to New York, you went to Cooper. You took the test.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, I went to Cooper, took that test. They accepted me. And I went to school that fall of 1960.

MS. RICHARDS: So you went to New York in '59?

MR. WHITTEN: That would have been the end of '59. Wait a minute. That would have been that spring semester - spring semester at Southern University would have been 1960.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes and I would have entered Cooper Union at the fall semester of 1960.

MS. RICHARDS: And when you first came, you were living with your uncle.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, he was a contact, my Uncle Tom and his wife -

MS. RICHARDS: So you commuted from Queens to Cooper.

MR. WHITTEN: - right, yeah. And then later, I moved in with friends of mine in a room. Lower East Side.

MS. RICHARDS: You said you lived with your brother as well.

MR. WHITTEN: I lived with my brother for a while that summer when I was working, before I went to Cooper. And then we hung out at a lot of jazz clubs because by then he was playing at a lot of jazz clubs out in Queens. There[were] a lot of clubs out there.

MS. RICHARDS: When you started at Cooper, did you decide to be a painting major?

MR. WHITTEN: The way Cooper was set up then - everybody did a fundamentals course that first year. You had to do that. They had a [foundation] year, very intense.

MS. RICHARDS: I think they still do.

MR. WHITTEN: They probably still do.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that exciting, the whole - was it everything you dreamed that it would be in terms of -

MR. WHITTEN: - oh, more. My coming straight from the South like that to Cooper Union - first of all, it was the first time that I'd ever had white instructors, first time I'd ever been in classroom with white kids.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there any black instructors?

MR. WHITTEN: - no, no, no, no. Wait a minute. Robert Blackburn worked in the printmaking workshop. He was not a professor. He ran the printmakers workshop at Cooper. That's when I met Bob Blackburn. And Robert Blackburn took me under his wing, being a black kid, from what I remember, there was only one other black kid at Cooper that time, was a young man in architecture.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you the first two?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, no, not the first. There had been blacks there before, but there's always like one. [Telephone rings.]

[Audio Break.]

I had some good instructors. It was good for me. Cooper was good for me.

MS. RICHARDS: Who were some of the instructors?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, the first person that I have to call would be the painter Robert Gwathmey. Have you heard of Robert Gwathmey?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: He's the father of Charles Gwathmey, the architect. Now, Robert is a Southerner. He did those paintings of black farmers, people picking cotton and so for. He has a real Southern drawl. So I often speak of Robert Gwathmey as my sort of in-between person, right? Because he being a Southerner, he was the only person that could understand me. [Laughs.] When Robert Gwathmey and I started talking, the rest of the class would [not understand] [they laugh] - And he really played it up. But he was great for me. And he was my drawing professor.

MS. RICHARDS: What were your paintings like when you first started there? What did they look like?

MR. WHITTEN: Figurative based but loose. My great love, coming to New York, when I started discovering artists and things, but my great first love would be [Arshile] Gorky, fell in love with Gorky. That was my first attraction. So I would go out of my way to find out as many Gorky's I could. So that was - in the early '60s, Gorky was the major influence.

MS. RICHARDS: You said that when you got to Cooper, it was the first time you had white instructors.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You also then could go to any museum.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes -

MS. RICHARDS: That must have been a tremendous experience.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, I lived at the Modern [Museum of Modern Art], the MET [Metropolitan Museum of Art], the Whitney [American Art Museum], the Frick [Collection], all those places. I realized immediately that I had to reinforce my art history and that was the first time I actually saw the real things.

MS. RICHARDS: So Robert Gwathmey-

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, the next person that I started with, painting instructor - I can see his face - David Lund, a fairly well-known painter, David Lund.

MS. RICHARDS: L-U-N-D?

MR. WHITTEN: L-U-N-D. Charles Cajori, who's having a great comeback. He's been showing a lot, works getting out there, a surprise. And he had an opening on Fifty-Seventh Street. I walked in -

MS. RICHARDS: In Washburn [Gallery], right?

MR. WHITTEN: - was it Washburn? I don't think so. It was another gallery, not Washburn - on Fifty-Seventh Street, in that Fuller [ph] building, one of those galleries. But he's been getting some good notice lately.

Oh, Leo Amino, my first -

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell his last name?

MR. WHITTEN: Amino, it would be - his first name was Leo, A-M-I-N-O, yes, Japanese fellow. In truth, he was probably the first Japanese I ever met, sure, had to be. Hans Beckmann, who was very Bauhaus figure in design. Who else? [Ben]Cunningham, good with color, introduction of color, [and Jack Stewart in painting].

And of course, Bob Blackburn in printmaking. And Bob Blackburn, being a black, he was the only black there in a position as instructor, immediately introduced me to a bunch of people in the community. It was like grabbing me, you got to go meet Romare [Romy] Bearden. He calls up Romy, hey man, we got a black student here at Cooper. You've got to meet him. [Laughs.] So he takes me to [Romare] Bearden.

MS. RICHARDS: You were a celebrity.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, yes. [Laughs.] And then Romy says, "You've got to meet Jacob Lawrence." So he sends me to Jacob Lawrence. [Laughs.] "You've got to meet Norman Lewis," so he sends me to Norman Lewis. Fantastic, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Did you maintained some friendships with all of these?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, yes. Yes, those are my first great mentors. And then meeting another painter, black, Bill Rivers, Bill Haywood Rivers, another big influence at that time. And then, on top of that, I'm introduced to Bill

[Willem] de Kooning.

MS. RICHARDS: How did that happen?

MR. WHITTEN: Hanging out. As a student at Cooper Union I would make a beeline to the Cedar Bar because everybody told me that's where you go to meet people. I met him at Cedar Bar. Bill de Kooning, I meet Franz Kline, and then a host of other people, Philip Guston, hanging out on the scene, going to parties and so forth. I meet [Barnett] Newman. I meet [Mark] Rothko.

So my introduction to New York was fantastic, right? I'm meeting people from both sides of the divide. I'm meeting Michael Goldberg. And by 1962, when I left the Lower East Side, I meet LeRoi Jones, [and] through him I met a lot of people. I met Allen Ginsberg through LeRoi and later Jack Kerouac, major figures of that time. But Roi - his house was like the center of activity. There, going to the old early Five Spot, boy, started meeting a lot of musicians that would be hanging out at LeRoi's -

MS. RICHARDS: You weren't playing anymore, were you?

MR. WHITTEN: - no, no, by that time, hell. [Laughs.] When I came in New York and started getting introduced to the jazz scene and hanging out at Birdland -

MS. RICHARDS: Hanging where?

MR. WHITTEN: - Birdland.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MR. WHITTEN: I sat down and I made the right decision because man what I was hearing by 1960, '61, '62, what I was hearing firsthand in New York on the jazz scene, no way. Those people were monsters.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean it was so much better than, yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Blowing me away. I heard all of - those Monday night sessions at Birdland were just incredible. I would go to the Five Spot and practically sit at the feet of [Thelonious] Monk.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have some kind of record player and you bought records and listened to them -

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, by [then], I had enough money. I had bought a little record player. My first studio in New York was Avenue B and Tenth Street.

MS. RICHARDS: So that's the Lower East Side you're talking about, where you lived.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, Lower East Side, that was [my] first studio.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the address?

MR. WHITTEN: Whoa, yeah. It was in the middle of a block. It was like, I think, probably about 369. It was a storefront.

MS. RICHARDS: Three sixty nine East Tenth Street.

MR. WHITTEN: East Tenth Street. It was between Avenue B and C. It was a long, narrow place. I first moved in there with a roommate from Cooper Union.

MS. RICHARDS: So you lived and worked there?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, carved a studio space up at the front. One of the students from Cooper and I were roommates. His name was Joe Kearns, a Jewish fellow from Riverdale.

MS. RICHARDS: Kearns?

MR. WHITTEN: Kearns, K-E-A-R-N-S, Joe Kearns, we lived together. And we stayed together for a while. But what [ended] that was Joe had a cat. [Laughs.] Big enormous cat. Every morning, that cat would make a b-line to the bathtub to take a shit. It wouldn't use the -

MS. RICHARDS: Litter box.

MR. WHITTEN: - litter box. Every morning, every morning, oh, I said, "Joe, you've got to get rid of this cat, man." But Joe didn't want to get rid of this cat. So that became like, hey, I can't do this. You know, you're rushing to

school. You're rocking the world trying to make some money, trying to take a fast shower and there's a pile of cat shit. [Laughs.] Too much.

MS. RICHARDS: You said "running to work." What work were you doing there?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, at Cooper Union you could get job placements. There's always like a little bulletin board there. And I got work in the display industry.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, where you had experience.

MR. WHITTEN: In the display industry, doing big [displays] for the department stores. First company I worked for was called the Pentone Company.

MS. RICHARDS: Pentone?

MR. WHITTEN: P-E-N-T-O-N-E, Pentone Company.

MS. RICHARDS: P-E-N.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. Run by a fellow named Marvin Sylvor, S-Y-L-V-O-R. Marvin just died. I read his obituary in *The New York Times* about two years ago. I knew him well.

MS. RICHARDS: You kept in touch with him?

MR. WHITTEN: Not after working, no I didn't. But I would hear about him. He later owned a company that he made carousels, became well-known for these carousels that he made, original duplicates of the real thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, you mean -

MR. WHITTEN: Right, he had a plant out in Brooklyn, Marvin Sylvor. I worked for him all those early years - '61, '62, '63, '64.

MS. RICHARDS: - you mean amusement park carousels.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, three dimensional, real thing though. European make - he became well-known for that. In truth, I think he did those that were in Central Park [New York City]. I think so.

MS. RICHARDS: So hand carved.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, he had craftsmen working for him. But when he left the display business, that's [what] he went into. Because I remember reading a big article about it.

But I worked for him at Pentone. And a lot of the young artists worked there and a lot of older artists who couldn't - like misfits that couldn't work a regular job. But Marvin realized that he had a pool of talent to pull from, young artists, older artists who were not making it, could never hold down a nine to five job. Marvin's policy was, I don't care how you dress. I don't care what you do. I just want the work done. So it was a free floating atmosphere, a lot of young artists. And there I met a lot of artists in and out. A lot, lot, lot.

MS. RICHARDS: - at Cooper, you were there from 1960 to '64?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And you said in '62 you moved to new studio?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, the East Side was heating up. See, the [Lower] East Side was a big scene, early '60s, a lot of young artists, filmmakers, poets, writers, big hot scene. I'd hang out - [there] was a bar on the corner of Avenue B and Twelfth Street. The name was Stanley's, Stanley's Bar, run by Stanley, old Polish fellow, who loved the artists. Stanley was like of a banker, father figure. You needed some money. You needed some food. [Laughs]

MS. RICHARDS: By that time the scene has shifted away from the Cedar or they were just different -

MR. WHITTEN: By then, the older artists, like de Kooning, had started to move out. They were starting to make money by then. De Kooning still had a studio on Fourth Avenue at that time, but it was like about '65, '66, I believe, he started moving [to Long Island]. But I knew him in those early days like '62, '63, '64, '65.

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of conversation did you have when you'd see him in the bar?

MR. WHITTEN: Usually in the bar he was so engaged with other people. And he was drinking a lot then. So it was

like not art discussions, you know, but it was things like, you know, "hey, kid. How are you doing? Worked today? Everything going okay?" Stuff like that, which was – for me, was enough.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it more with any of the others you mentioned, Newman, Rothko, Guston, Kline?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, I knew them less than I did de Kooning. Yes. I would meet those people, Rothko. Al Held introduced me to Rothko for the first time. It was Al Held. But usually you would meet them only briefly on the street or – not close enough to be invited to the studio, nothing like that. Young artist, you know, nobody invited young artists.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you visit the Tenth [Street] galleries at that point?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, yeah. All the time. All the time. And I knew a lot of those people that were showing. I never showed in those galleries because I was just barely starting out. First venture I had in showing was – we had a small co-op gallery on the Lower East Side with some more artists and I would show there –

MS. RICHARDS: You were – I think I –

MR. WHITTEN: – called Edios, E-D-I-O-S. Edios group we called it.

MS. RICHARDS: E-D-I-O-S. What defined you as a group?

MR. WHITTEN: [Edios], which later became a very important word for me.

MS. RICHARDS: What defined you as a group and how did you form? Were you all Cooper students?

MR. WHITTEN: No. We knew each other from Stanley's bar. Bob Moskowitz, a young Jewish fellow was one of the major players in that. A little group of us. We had a little gallery in the old Charles Theatre.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember who else was in there?

MR. WHITTEN: Charles Theatre had moved from the Lower East Side down [on Grand] Street and they had a location on Avenue B between Eleventh and Tenth, or Eleventh and Twelfth. There was a little up-stairs balcony there, Charles Theatre. We did shows there, Edios group.

MS. RICHARDS: Who else was in the Edios group?

MR. WHITTEN: A fellow named – what was his name? Something K, K – Lekayka [sp]. Lekayka. How would you spell that? Bob. His first name was Bob. Bob Lekayka, which was interesting because he was doing process paintings, probably one of the first artists I[knew] [who] was doing process paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: What year was it that this group formed?

MR. WHITTEN: That would have been '63, '64.

MS. RICHARDS: So you said you moved in '62.

MR. WHITTEN: I moved from the Lower East Side to what is now called Tribeca, Lispenard Street, 36 Lispenard Street, on the corner of Church and Lispenard. I found a loft there because the East Side was heating up. It was beginning to change, you know, drugs were starting to move in, too much activity, violence.

MS. RICHARDS: So this was quieter?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, very quiet. At that time, I was one of the first artists to move into Tribeca. On my block there was one other artist. His name was John Fisher, the bread man we called him, sculptor, worked in bread, all of his sculptures built from bread. In truth, I have an original John Fisher bagel, probably worth money today. I have a signed John Fisher bagel, 1966.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow. It's actual bread underneath the acrylic?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, yes. That's a real bagel. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Well-preserved.

MR. WHITTEN: Crazy dude, man. I don't know if John is still alive or not. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: And you rented this loft. Was it –

MR. WHITTEN: I rented a second floor loft at 36 Lispenard Street. And it was an interesting building because it was one of the first AIR [Artist in Residence] buildings.

MS. RICHARDS: AIR buildings.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes. And there, my reach into the art world expanded because of one person who had the third floor. Her name was Letty Eisenhauer, an early girlfriend of Roy Lichtenstein. And Letty knew all the pop artists. She was in all those happenings, Alan Kaprow. She knew [Andy] Warhol. She knew [Jasper] Johns. And she would have big parties and that's where I met the first pop artist[s] through Letty.

The truth, Jasper and I were at a birthday party for Flora Biddle at the Whitney Museum last year. Flora turned 80. And I went to Jasper and I said, you probably don't remember me. I was a young artist then. He says, try me. I said, do you remember Letty Eisenhauer? It popped up. [Laughs.] Remember those parties she used to have? Man, you've been around that long? [They laugh.] It was funny.

I met all those people through Letty. Nam June Paik who was a dear friend of Letty's and later moved into our building for a while.

I was in Berlin [Germany], just recently, the director there at the Hamburger Bahnhof [contemporary collection in the National Gallery, Berlin], Mr. Udo Kittelmann, was giving me a tour of the Hamburger Bahnhof and there was this whole room with Joseph Beuys, with Nam June Paik and - [Daniel] Spoerri. I said, "Hey, man," I said, "you know Nam June was the first Korean I ever met. And I say, you see all them damned robots? I'm the person that used to carry those things around from site to site." He said, no way. I said, oh, yes. [I met Daniel Spoerri through Letty.]

Nam June was charming. He could charm your ass off but he'd always get me to work for him. And so I was carrying those things, helping him set up- you know Ms. Charlotte Moorman, right?

MS. RICHARDS: The studio - how big was it -

MR. WHITTEN: My studio [was about a thousand square feet.] I moved in there with my first wife, fall of 1962.

MS. RICHARDS: What was her name?

MR. WHITTEN: Her name was Florence Squires.

MS. RICHARDS: Was she also an artist?

MR. WHITTEN: She was an artist's model. She's since changed her name but when I married her, she was Florence Squires. And I have one daughter with Florence, Keita.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MR. WHITTEN: K-E-I-T-A.

MS. RICHARDS: K-E-I-T-A?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And is her name Keita Whitten?

MR. WHITTEN: Now she goes by the name of Whitten because her first marriage fell apart and she has one kid by that first marriage. And now she uses the name Whitten so she goes by Keita Whitten.

MS. RICHARDS: So Florence Squires was a model.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes. And I met her on the modeling stand at Cooper Union when I was a student.

MS. RICHARDS: [At Cooper Union.]

MR. WHITTEN: She was modeling.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, on the model's stand.

MR. WHITTEN: The life class, a class that was led by Charles Cajori. There's some funny stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: When did you get married? While you were still at Cooper?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. Sure did.

MS. RICHARDS: And the marriage was in New York?

MR. WHITTEN: In New York. We got married at city hall. But the marriage didn't last and right after the birth of my first kid, we pretty much broke up which was painful, painful for the kid, very painful.

MS. RICHARDS: So after that did you stay in the Lispenard loft?

MR. WHITTEN: I stayed in the Lispenard loft. She moved out to another apartment. And I continued to stay at Lispenard. I was at Lispenard for 40 years.

MS. RICHARDS: When you first went in, did you have to put in a bathroom, a kitchen?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: The whole thing was completely raw.

MR. WHITTEN: Raw floor, no heat.

MS. RICHARDS: Cold water.

MR. WHITTEN: Cold water. That's what you had to do. All artists did that, hiding from the fire department. Even though we had an AIR, they would still harass us. In truth, AIR was just to let them know that if something happened in a fire or something that there was an artist in the building [but you were not legal].

MS. RICHARDS: But you didn't have a C of O [Certificate of Occupancy], the building?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, hell no. No. But I had that second floor. And then later, when I met my second wife, Mary, and we moved in at Lispenard, we got the second floor so we had two floors of the building.

MS. RICHARDS: The first time you were in, which floor were you on?

MR. WHITTEN: I was on the second floor but then we got the third floor so we had two floors.

MS. RICHARDS: Letty had lived on the third floor.

MR. WHITTEN: Letty moved on.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you meet your second wife?

MR. WHITTEN: Letty broke up with Roy Lichtenstein, painful breakup and after that she moved out of Lispenard. And then Roy met his present wife. Roy was a good guy. I liked him a lot. I really did. Of all the pop artists, he I think I admired the most. I didn't like Warhol. I didn't even like Rauschenberg that much. But Roy really, I can say sincerely I liked.

MS. RICHARDS: So after she moved out, you got that third floor?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, not immediately. Right, but when Letty moved out, me and my wife, Mary, we got that floor because Mary was getting involved with a friend of hers doing art restoration, [paper] conservation work.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you meet Mary?

MR. WHITTEN: At Cooper Union. We met as students at Cooper. But she was married and I was married. And it was after Cooper that we met again and started seeing each other.

MS. RICHARDS: What is her last - what was her -

MR. WHITTEN: Her name was Mary Staikos, S-T-A-I-K-O-S. And we have one kid, Mirsini, M-I-R-S-I-N-I, Mirsini Alexandra Whitten, who is now married and goes by the name Amidon.

MS. RICHARDS: First name or one -

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, her last name now. Her married name is Amidon, A-M-I-D-O-N. Her first name is Mirsini.

My first wife, Florence was of Trinidadian descent. Her father was from Trinidad. And my second wife, Mary, [is] of Greek descent. Her father was Greek, Andrew [Staikos].

MS. RICHARDS: For both of these marriages, your mother wasn't in New York or did she come?

MR. WHITTEN: My mother came to New York. My mother knew my first wife and my second wife. We even went to Alabama which was not a good trip with my first wife. I took my first wife to Alabama to meet my family and that was not – that did not work out.

My first wife was a black woman who wore her hair natural, one of the first black women who wore their hair natural. And when I took her home to Alabama it freaked people out. In the black community, you didn't do that. The black community would believe in pressing your hair to make it look like white folks hair so I'm taking my wife to Alabama with her natural hair, afro. My aunt went berserk. My mother went berserk. [Laughs.] Was that a mistake.

MS. RICHARDS: All because of her hair.

MR. WHITTEN: All because of her hair. Took one look at her and said, "oh!" It was horrible, absolutely horrible.

MS. RICHARDS: For both of you.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, yeah. Painful for me, painful for her.

MS. RICHARDS: But in New York that was cool.

MR. WHITTEN: It was cool even in the black communities. Sure. But even among black conservatives in the 1960s you didn't do that. No way. This was only like a group of underground, sort of "left wing" people.

To be a young woman, black in the '60s in New York and wear your hair natural in an Afro, you were still considered to be a Leftist outsider of things, which is an interesting thing to think about it because in the south, at church, the church that I grew up in, the church of God, sort of a Pentecostal [Christian] Fundamentalist church, the elders in the church, the women, all – they all kept their hair natural but it was not seen as a political statement. It was seen as a statement of spirituality. They forbid women to hot comb their hair.

Interesting, no? So it was acceptable from a spiritual point of view, spiritual perspective to have natural hair. And all the women in that church – and women were strong in that church – they all have their hair natural.

MS. RICHARDS: Now, were these older women with grey hair, maybe widows?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. Yeah. But even they and their – if they had kids, they were not allowed to put a hot comb in their hair. That was church rule. But when I took my wife down south with an Afro natural, that was considered as a political statement and that was a no-no. But I never made those connections. But originally, those women never put hot irons in their hair.

MS. RICHARDS: Was your mother by that time excited or proud or happy that you were at Cooper, that you were getting this education, you were going to –

MR. WHITTEN: They didn't really understand that. They didn't understand what I was doing. They had no vision of what I – it was much later, much later. And even then they never really knew. I think the most impressive thing that happened with my mom – the Metropolitan Museum bought a painting of mine, like 197 – probably about '74.

MS. RICHARDS: Same year as the Whitney show?

MR. WHITTEN: Before. Henry Geldzahler was senior curator at the Metropolitan Museum and he was one of my first big supporters in New York. He advised the Metropolitan to buy that painting. There was a special fund that was set up for acquisition. It was called the Hazen Foundation. And they bought that painting directly from me out of the studio.

And Henry had the balls – I have to put it that way – to include it in the show of American modernism. It freaked people out in New York, even *The New York Times* like – "and he even put a young black painter by the name of Jack Whitten in the show." So here you are, have a painting of Jack Whitten, one of those great period painting like 1974 in the Metropolitan Museum in a big, major show.

MS. RICHARDS: And that, your mother and your family –

MR. WHITTEN: And my mother happened to be in New York visiting and I remember taking her to the Metropolitan.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, what a wonderful coincidence that she was there.

MR. WHITTEN: That was good. And I remember it was the first time she had been in what you would really call a museum and I remember her walking up those big stairs that were leading to the galleries when I walked in there and she was very impressed.

And I remember asking her, mom, what do you think? And she said something that was so touching. She said - I'll never forget it. And she said, "well, son, I don't know what I'm looking at but, she says, I know it got something to do with the scientific world." I said, that's quite fitting, mom.

Even from an early date I realized that I was working with something that was an analogy to science. I had a big background in science. I mean, I understood that. I had a whiff of that even as far back as the early '60s.

MS. RICHARDS: I read that you were carving wood while you were at Cooper.

MR. WHITTEN: I started carving wood - yes, with Leo Amino. I told him that I was interesting in wood carving because by then I had been introduced to African sculpture and I was going out to see some of the real things, and Bearden and Rivers, another black painter at that time. His name was - not Woodruff. I had met Woodruff but it wasn't - it was another guy, what was his name?

MS. RICHARDS: Hale Woodruff you mean?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. Zell, Zell Ingram. Whoa. How did I come up with that? I-N-G-R-A-M. Zell Ingram. He was a painter, black, and he talked a lot about African sculpture and I got interested. I started going out to the museums.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you learn from that teacher how to carve?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes. Leo Amino. Leo Amino started me off and my good friend at that time, who was also a student at Cooper Union, his name was Christopher Wilmarth, very important American sculptor. We were in school together at Cooper.

I told Chris I wanted to start doing some wood carving but I've got to go buy some tools and Chris says to me, "oh, I've got plenty of tools. What do you want?" Chris lived down the street from me on Lispenard.

Chris loaned me my first wood carving tools, sure did. That's how I got started. Later on when I got a little money, bought some chisels, I gave the tools back to Chris. But it was Chris who loaned me the first tools.

The whole - what started me to do wood carving, because I was being introduced to African art and in my naïve mind I figured, well, if I start wood carving, getting my hands on those shapes maybe I can learn more than what I'm learning from the books. That was my point of entry. That was my objective just to get in my hand the feel of what those forms feel like so I started carving wood. I felt it was the best practical way of understanding [African sculpture].

Later on I met Allan Stone who had a huge collection [of African art.] - I met Allan Stone in like '65.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you meet him?

MR. WHITTEN: The painter Joe Overstreet had met Allan Stone and had approached him about looking at our work. Joe was ballsy in that way, you know, approaching people saying, you know, "we've got these people out here working, nobody's paying no attention to them. Would you come and look at it?" And Allan Stone says, look, if you get some things together, I'll come by and look.

So Joe arranged for a group of us, myself, Bill Hutson - who else was involved? Lawrence Compton, Joe, somebody else. There was another person. William White. It could have been Luther Van, L-U-T-H-E-R. I think Luther Van was there. Bill Hutson for sure was involved. So Joe got these works together and invited Allan Stone down. Allan Stone came down.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you physically gather these works?

MR. WHITTEN: Joe had a studio on the Bowery, at the Bowery, that would be Prince Street. Yeah. Joe had a studio there. That's where Allan came one evening, late one evening.

MS. RICHARDS: What paintings of yours -

MR. WHITTEN: Allan said he didn't know that there were people working, black, young black painters. One of the people they knew about, young and black at that time, would have been Bob Thompson who was showing with Martha Jackson. And Emilio Cruz was showing a little bit with Zabriskie [Gallery] but other than that, nobody else was showing. The other generation, Bearden was just beginning to get a little recognition and Lawrence, of

course, and Norman. But for my generation, only Bob and Emilio were showing a little bit. We weren't.

So that's how I met Allan Stone. And then the next year, Allan invited me into a group show at his gallery. So that was the first time I showed in a commercial gallery. That would be 19[65] -

MS. RICHARDS: Sixty-five.

MR. WHITTEN: Sixty-five. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: The year before I applied for a John Hay Whitney fellowship.

MS. RICHARDS: The year before you graduated Cooper?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes. I was just about to graduate. So I went to Romy and I told Romy, I needed four references and asked if he would sign one. He says, of course. And then, he called on Jake[Jacob Lawrence]. He said, I'll call Jake up and Jake told me to come up. Jake was teaching at Pratt [Pratt Institute, Brooklyn New York City]. He had a studio in Brooklyn and I went out there with the papers and Jake signed one. Allan Stone says, well, Thiebaud is here. It's when I first met Wayne Thiebaud and Wayne Thiebaud says, of course I'll sign one. [Laughs.] And there was one other painter that I knew that I approached. His name was Lawrence Calcagno [who had] loft on the Bowery.

MS. RICHARDS: Calcagno?

MR. WHITTEN: C-A-L-C-A-G-N-O. Yes. That would be right. He signed one. So for reference I had Romy Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Wayne Thiebaud and Lawrence Calcagno. Sent those papers in, they gave it to me. I think it was like \$4,500 cash.

MS. RICHARDS: And that was to do what?

MR. WHITTEN: The John Hay Whitney Foundation was a grant set up for minority artists. And I made my application to paint. The first papers I wrote to them, I wanted to go to Africa to work and made arrangements to go to Ghana. And when I got the grant, my first wife, Florence, became pregnant so that knocked those plans out so I had to use that money as expenses here in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were allowed to support your work where you were.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes. The idea was that here's money, you take it, you use it, you produce paintings, you work. It was great coming right out of art school and you get a grant like that, \$4,500 cash. I had never had that much money in my life.

MS. RICHARDS: It's just enough to live on for -

MR. WHITTEN: So I stocked up on materials. The first check I got, I went to the art supply store and said, give me that, give me that, a whole lot of stuff. [They laugh.] Because in those days, it was always desperate - materials were hard to get, how am I going to get a set of art supplies?

MS. RICHARDS: The paintings you showed to Allan Stone in '65 were for a group show?

MR. WHITTEN: A group show.

MS. RICHARDS: Those were paintings on canvas?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes. Oil on canvas. I was working all through the '60s. And then afterwards, Allan gave me my first one-man show in 1968, which, again, was a big deal at that time for a gallery to give a young black artist, abstract artist, a one-man show. That was unusual but Allan Stone did it.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you remain - even though I know that you didn't continue showing there, and we'll talk about the gallery, your involvement with galleries in a little bit -

[END CD 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards with Jack Whitten on December 1, 2009, in Queens, New York for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, you were asking about women.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, women artists.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, the first woman artist that I met -

MS. RICHARDS: Black, yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: Black, at that time is Mildred Thompson. She was a painter. She's known. Her work had resurfaced and then later people have had a great interest in her, Mildred Thompson.

MS. RICHARDS: Was she married to an artist?

MR. WHITTEN: No, she - when I met her she was seeing a painter, Lawrence Compton, another black guy who was a painter who was close with myself, Joe Overstreet, William White, and Bill Rivers. Lawrence Compton, had a studio in Brooklyn, in Brooklyn Heights, and he was an important figure this guy Compton. But they were close.

Later, Mildred came out of the closet and she proclaimed herself as a lesbian and that ended that and she left and moved to Germany. That was the last I saw her but occasionally I would hear about her and then it was later that I met Vivian Brown and then later Howardena [Pindell] but that was much later. Howardena came along on the scene much later.

MS. RICHARDS: After you left school, you've talked about your painting in the '60s as being expressionistic, autobiographical.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Can you talk about the imagery that you were working with and the evolution of the painting in the second half of the '60s?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. The first influence was Gorky, that surrealist mix, coming out of the landscape figuration. Second big influence in that period was Bill de Kooning. So my works gravitated - I was a figurative - an abstract figurative expressionist. That's the best way to describe it.

Subject matter was Jack Whitten, hence I call it autobiographical. I'm dealing with myself in terms of the political, myself in terms of sexuality, myself in terms of testing my spiritual views.

I'm putting Jack Whitten on the couch is what I'm doing and that was a time when all of us [were] involved with the early writings of Jung, been introduced to Freud and everybody is toying with the notion of the subconscious and the effects upon the notions of identity and coming from the South, being black, and the politics of race, terminologies of who am I.

First you were a Negro, then colored, which was a little nicer they claimed, Nigra, when the white school superintendents would come to school they wanted to appear to be nice. They didn't want to say nigger.

They didn't necessarily want to say Negro. So it would be our Nigra children, which was a nice, supposedly a nice thing, or occasionally our colored children and then after that the word became Afro-American.

And then after that came the notion of black. I'm trying to put in order in how [identity] was introduced throughout my life, these identity things and what do you call these people and then later African-American, black American.

All [in] these terminologies [of identity] trying to hinge in [were confusing.] - so when I started sensing the nature of the problem, which only became a problem for me when I came to New York because growing up in Alabama, you were black, period. It was no big deal.

But when I came to New York, all these notions of identity issues came to bear. I actually met blacks in New York when I came here in 1960 who were totally confused in terms of identity. Who were they? I knew people thinking they were Africans, dressed in African garb and shit, all kinds of fantasy trips.

But for me growing up in the South, you were black, period, whether you liked it or not. It was no problem. But I sensed in coming to New York and meeting people it was a big problem.

So I tackled the problem throughout those ten years of the 1960s. That's why I refer to them as autobiographical paintings and they were built upon the structure of Abstract Expressionism, which was my academy. Abstract Expressionism was my academy.

MS. RICHARDS: Where do you think that color sense came from, the very distinctive, powerful dark rich colors in those paintings, and bright ones too?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, bright, [emotional], young man, youth, intensity, that's where it came from, expressive quality of color, color coding in terms of [emotional] factors, exactly is where it come from.

Extremely emotional, but that's why Allan Stone loved those paintings because they had all those ingredients coming out of Abstract Expressionism that he loved and supported. But that's where the color came from.

MS. RICHARDS: And the faces in the darkness?

MR. WHITTEN: That came from a number of places. Now I know. At first I didn't understand the faces. [In] 1964 I started seeing images within things, any kind of disturbance. I'll be at the bar and looking at the bar and I would see a face peering out of it. I would just start seeing faces everywhere, table, everything.

I have a nice big round table that I painted and it's all about exposing the faces that I saw in the wood grain. That's where that word eidos came to bear, ancient word and I only start understanding that word more when I became involved with philosophy and the reading of philosophy.

MS. RICHARDS: When was that?

MR. WHITTEN: Mid-'60s. Mid-'60s I met a man. His name was Jeff Waite, Jeffrey, W-A-I-T-E. I worked for Jeff. Jeff was a cabinetmaker, a carpenter, took me on in his shop and taught me cabinetmaking. I'm a cabinetmaker. I do really high quality cabinet work.

When I left the display business I started making most of my money working with Jeff in cabinetry and then all through the late-'60s, even to the early-'70s I did cabinet work for a living. I got jobs through the art world working for collectors, dealers and so forth, but working at a high end, not just banging some stuff together.

So Jeff taught me cabinetwork and Jeff had been a philosophy major from McGill University [Montreal, Quebec, Canada]. His great love was Edmund Husserl and Jeff got me reading. He would notice me. By the time I started seeing these faces I would start picking up things. We'd be out on the job. I would always pick something up, found object. I would see something in it.

One day Jeff had been studying me, watching my doing this. One day I went to reach to pick up something. I said, oh! I was always excited when I found one of these found objects.

So one day we were tearing down a wall to put a cabinet in place and one of these objects that just jumped out at me and I remember picking it up and when I picked it up Jeff grabbed my arm and Jeff says to me, "why did you pick up that one and not that one?"

I said, I don't know. I mean, this is the one that speaks to me. This is the one, and Jeff says, oh, and then he knew it was time for him to introduce me. [Laughs.] He says, well, you've got to read this. You've got to read that. You've got to read that.

So it was Jeff who started me to read philosophy and in particular Husserl, where in Husserl he makes a big theme of the eidetic science, damn right.

He speaks of it as a science but different from the physical sciences, the notion of phenomenology. That's his contribution. So that got me started. So I had to find out more about these images that I saw. It ends up that that's an ancient thing, old, ancient. It goes way back, even -

MS. RICHARDS: You were reading Campbell, too, about archetypes?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, yeah, then I got introduced to Campbell later and I started reading all of that, all of Carl Jung's, that big book of his in the '60's *Psyche and Symbol* [Garden City, New York: Double Day, 1958], big book. All of us kids from the '60s, my generation, we read that stuff.

In truth, it became so intense for me, by 1968 I did that first show at Allan's and right after that, approaching 1969, my god man, my thinking had just skyrocketed, all this reading, all of the work, and in 1969, boy, I had another huge revelation.

Something just - some sort of a giant mental breakthrough, which almost forced me over the edge into a mental breakdown because these images became so strong.

That's when I wrote on my studio wall, "The image is photographic; therefore, I must photograph my thoughts." I went around thinking that I was a camera and that I, my brain, was operating as a camera and it was because of all those damn images I was seeing.

But it reached a peak and it exploded in 1969 to the point that a close friend advised me, maybe you should go

and speak with someone, meaning a psychiatrist [laughs] and it reached such a peak that I saw the value in maybe this guy's right.

I got a recommendation and went to see a guy. I think his name was Friedman, Dr. Friedman. I'm sure it was, Jewish doctor, Upper East Side. I remember going there and talking, talking, talking. He'd just sit and listen.

That's all he did. He let me rant, right. That's what we call it today; I think we call it vent. He finally says to me, nothing wrong with you. You just opened up Pandora's Box.

I'll never forget it. That's what he said. You opened up Pandora's Box and I was like, well what does that mean. He says, you know, like you almost blew a fuse, that's what, all this damn reading, all this intensity in the studio, that kind of a thing.

MS. RICHARDS: So he basically - the message was don't worry about it?

MR. WHITTEN: Structure it; you've got to structure it. You've got to find a way of structuring it. This was his advice. But mentally I was a wreck. I mean, I was like catatonic. I couldn't get out of bed. I couldn't do nothing. My eating habits, I couldn't eat meat. I lived off of rice and vegetables.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you think there was about, meat -

MR. WHITTEN: I think it was some sort of a - I often try to put into a perspective of kind of an almost like a spiritual thing, like a cleansing of the body.

MS. RICHARDS: But it was all coming at you so fast that you couldn't control it.

MR. WHITTEN: I couldn't control it. It sort of mushroomed. Hence, he called it Pandora's Box.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you walked away from that -

MR. WHITTEN: I was doing a lot of heavy reading, intense. I've always, from the 1960s onwards, my studio practice has always been intense, no time wasted, work, work, work, work, work, work, work, all through the '60s. But by 1969 it exploded.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think there was an imbalance between actually creating things in the studio and reading?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, the reading was spurring me on. I'm reading Nietzsche. I'm reading Husserl. I'm reading Kant. Right from the beginning I was attracted more to the German writers. I started to read Heidegger, reading Freud, reading all of Jung, being introduced to Zen culture.

MS. RICHARDS: Did that come at all through the poets, the East Village poets, the Zen?

MR. WHITTEN: A little bit. I knew Ginsberg at that time and he had already become a Buddhist. So it was in the air and then the whole '60s drug culture we have to speak of, like I'm too old [young?] to be a Beatnik and I'm too young [old?] to be a hippie. So I came right in at the gap there. [Laughs.] It's interesting, very interesting, right in the gap.

But I knew people from that period, right? I knew Roy. I knew Ginsberg. I knew Kerouac.

MS. RICHARDS: During the late-'60s when you were doing these paintings you also did quite a bit of work on paper I believe.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, god yes, a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you approach working on paper? Were they primary, secondary? How did they function in relationship to your whole practice?

MR. WHITTEN: The influence came out of Gorky and de Kooning primarily and [of course Jackson Pollock,] a little bit of Hofmann in terms of [spontaneity].

But all those artists emphasized work on paper and Allan Stone collected Gorkys. Allan Stone had a lot of Gorky drawings and I can literally pick them up and examine them. He allowed me to look at them and when I think back, I think that really influenced me.

In the summertime we left New York and my friend Jeffrey Waite, who[m] I was working with, had a farmhouse upstate New York in Putnam County, Kent Cliffs. We would spend the summers up there.

Jeff could get jobs and we found that we could work a day or two in the city, get one or two little jobs up there.

We could make enough money for a nice summer and I did a lot of woodcarving up there and work on paper primarily.

MS. RICHARDS: This is before you were married to Mary?

MR. WHITTEN: Mary and I married in '60 - what, '68? Yeah, but we were together. We were living together all that time. Mary and I, we spent the summers up in -

MS. RICHARDS: So you went to Kent Cliffs.

MR. WHITTEN: In Kent Cliffs, I did a lot of paper work up there, a lot of paper work, lot of woodcarving, had built a beautiful little outdoor platform right outside Jeff's barn in the woods and I would work there, beautiful area for working with wood, [using] local woods.

In truth, you see those black heads over there? They came from that period. My jug heads, I call them.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: The heads that you carry around with you. They're both cut from American elm that was stained and painted black.

MS. RICHARDS: You did all this carving, but you actually, as far as I know, didn't show them in a gallery.

MR. WHITTEN: I didn't show them, no.

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't consider them your real work?

MR. WHITTEN: No. Well, they were work in my mind but I never showed them. I never showed them to anybody. I mean, Allan saw a few of them and was interested in them, like that piece. That's an early woodcarving - but not to the point of showing them. But I have woodcarvings that date back to '62.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're saying that those artists—de Kooning, Gorky, Hofmann, their works on paper -

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, all emphasized this importance of work on paper influenced my thinking. So I did tons of paperwork all through the '60s and the '70s. Don't do as much now.

MS. RICHARDS: At the same time, did you keep studio notes or a diary or any kind of record of your thoughts starting way back in the '60s?

MR. WHITTEN: My studio journal starts at about late-'60s.

MS. RICHARDS: So around that time.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Keeping that journal, was that part of controlling this intense feeling you were trying to control?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. Somebody recommended to me that I should start jotting things down. It's like present-day - this is what it looks like. But this is '09. But I have stacks of these things that date back from the early-'60s.

MS. RICHARDS: Writing on loose paper rather than in a bound book?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, it's always like this.

MS. RICHARDS: Always loose paper.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. So like even now, right, when something worth putting down in my thinking goes in here.

MS. RICHARDS: As the '60s were progressing your painting was becoming more abstract.

MR. WHITTEN: More abstract. When I did that first show with Allan Stone it was definitely figurative expressionism.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you started, I think in '68 maybe, to do memorial paintings which have remained an important part of your -

MR. WHITTEN: The first ones that I did were in the late-'60s, Martin Luther King. There's a whole series o[n] Martin Luther King.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that part of what you showed at Allan's?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, Allan showed one or two of those paintings in that show. But those are the first memorials. Probably the first one I did, the first memorial painting, would be for my brother Tom, the jazz musician, who died in his apartment, caught fire on the Lower East Side on Grand Street, like 1966. Tom died in an apartment fire. That's probably the first one.

Then I started that series of Martin Luther King and then quite a few. There was one with JFK [John Fitzgerald Kennedy] behind that assassination that later was destroyed in a fire, believe it or not.

MS. RICHARDS: I read somewhere that you said you had two studio fires. Were those both on Lispenard?

MR. WHITTEN: I had a big studio on Broome Street.

MS. RICHARDS: When was that?

MR. WHITTEN: My wife Mary started off as a painter and she wanted a place to work. So we got that Broome Street studio, Broome Street loft, and we lived there for a while.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the number?

MR. WHITTEN: Whoa, that would be probably like 426. I passed by there yesterday on my way to the tunnel because I had to drive out to my friend's house in New Jersey. It had to be like 426 Broome Street in the middle of the block between Crosby and Lafayette, north side of the street. We had that first loft there.

MS. RICHARDS: And this is while keeping Lispenard?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I had two lofts. You know, we got that big loft on Broome Street at that time, for my wife's studio, it's like a hundred bucks. I was paying \$85 at Lispenard, whole floor, [laughs] the whole floor. So for years we had two floors, two lofts.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're saying you started out with the memorial to your brother.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I'm sure that was the first memorial painting.

MS. RICHARDS: And then when you were doing the memorials for Martin Luther King.

MR. WHITTEN: Martin Luther King and that's a series of those. There's more than one, exact number I couldn't tell you off the top of my head. But it's got to be at least seven or eight of them.

MS. RICHARDS: What attracted you to the whole concept of doing a memorial?

MR. WHITTEN: Probably growing up in the South.[A] funeral in the South is very rich, the rituals involved. That was probably my first attraction, to speak about the person that has passed, his life. That was the first - that was the major influence. But when I started reading more about different cultures I realized that this was something that was basic to all culture.

MS. RICHARDS: It wasn't really something that other artists in your circles, or in New York at that time, were doing, I don't think.

MR. WHITTEN: Let me think for a minute if there's anybody that might -

MS. RICHARDS: In other words, there might have been these other sources that you mentioned in your personal history rather than -

MR. WHITTEN: Well, there must have been -

MS. RICHARDS: You've mentioned Picasso, *Guernica* [1937].

MR. WHITTEN: Well, yeah, I saw that coming to New York.

MS. RICHARDS: But that's not for an individual.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, but that was a major influence on my thinking. That painting stayed up for a long time here in New York.

But I think the memorials in my mind started primarily through the church, the ritual services in terms of someone passing in the church and I've always had, always from a kid on, always had a rich sense of

compassion and empathy and remember meeting Hans Hofmann, and Hofmann even wrote about this, Hofmann always emphasized empathy as a [necessary] ingredient in art.

In truth, he went as far to say it was a necessary ingredient. I think his saying that really made an impact on me, that any great art had this value in it. So there are things that I can point to that influenced my thinking about the use of memorial and in truth, what else can we do when someone that you care about or somebody passes? That's one thing we do have available to us.

MS. RICHARDS: You said that one of the paintings you did was destroyed in a fire, the memorial?

MR. WHITTEN: That JFK painting was.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were saying that you had -

MR. WHITTEN: The JFK painting was-

MS. RICHARDS: So the fire was at Broome Street.

MR. WHITTEN: That was the first one, at Broome Street. The JFK painting was destroyed. The painting I did for those four black kids that [were] killed in the bombing down in Birmingham, Alabama, my home town, in the church, that was destroyed. What else? There was a painting there for Nat King Cole that was destroyed, probably some more stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have photos of any of those works?

MR. WHITTEN: I might have a photo. I'm not sure. We just did a - we just last year we started doing a documentation of all the work and making a database and I can check that database to see because - well, wait a minute. There might have been something that I had slides of that we haven't [put] them into the database yet because there are some things set aside.

We didn't complete the database. That's on transparencies. The only source I have is a transparency. But that has to be taken to a place and made into a digital format that we can put up. We spent all of last year doing the database.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: Big undertaking and it still isn't finished.

MS. RICHARDS: At the gallery?

MR. WHITTEN: Here

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. WHITTEN: I hire people. I had to hire people.

MS. RICHARDS: But for the gallery website or for your own archives?

MR. WHITTEN: For my own thing, first for my own archives. I had to hire a photographer, a computer person, two assistants, big undertaking, going to storage, taking things out of storage, a lot of things from the '70s, big large-scale paintings rolled up, whoa, very expensive operation.

MS. RICHARDS: What inspired you to do that?

MR. WHITTEN: My lawyer was insisting. My accountant was insisting. My wife was on my back.

MS. RICHARDS: For estate planning?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, estate planning.

MS. RICHARDS: For insurance?

MR. WHITTEN: You have to have this - you have to have this stuff organized.

MS. RICHARDS: An inventory, right.

MR. WHITTEN: And I realized I didn't know what I had. And editing, what should I keep, what I shouldn't keep, what's important, what's not, and everybody's on my back there, don't throw nothing away. But in my mind,

edit, edit, edit, edit. I've been working a long time.

When you're working as long as I have been working, we're talking 50 years, right, that's a lot of painting and you ain't selling all them paintings. I keep an extra storage that costs me over \$400 a month just as a storage room. That's why when I met David [Reed] and Katy [Siegel]. I said, this stuff's in storage that you requested. They were a little taken aback that I was even organized to that degree. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: When you say editing, you mean destroying works that you don't want people to see?

MR. WHITTEN: Absolutely. Well, destroying work that I didn't consider to be important, that were part of something transitional, led up to something. Then there are things that I keep in my collection that are not for sale. Those things are set aside.

But editing, everybody's telling me it's a dangerous situation. You shouldn't do it. You shouldn't touch them. Even Allan's hollering at me. You might be throwing away something important. I edited piles of stuff, piles of stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: So I guess we're up to around 1970 and you had another show at Allan Stone that year.

MR. WHITTEN: Well, right before 1970 there's something I have to talk about important happened.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh good.

MR. WHITTEN: I was talking about that point in my life where mentally I became really over the top. And my wife Mary, being of Greek background, her father was born in Greece on the Peloponnesus, had never been to Greece. She was born here in New York, raised in Detroit.

MS. RICHARDS: She had never been to Greece. Her father was born there.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. But she was born in New York, raised between [Detroit] and Cleveland.

MS. RICHARDS: Her mother wasn't Greek?

MR. WHITTEN: Her mother was Greek.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, they were both.

MR. WHITTEN: Her mother was born [New York]. So she comes up with the bright idea she wants to go to Greece, the whole Alex Haley thing in terms of "Roots" was in the air. Her sister had been and had spent time there in the summertime but Mary had never been.

So I said, well, damn right, let's go. I'm interested. I've always read Greek philosophy, very much impressed with those Mary Renault books on Greece. So I said, hell yeah, let's go. So we planned a trip to Greece. This would be -

MS. RICHARDS: Not with her parents.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh no, summer of 1969 we planned this trip. Two nights before leaving I had this powerful dream, powerful dream. In the dream I saw a tree rooted in the earth in an isolated space. The limbs were all cut off and dried out and the dream was a command. It was a command. "You're going to Greece."

"When you go to Greece you are to find this tree." It didn't say where but it just said somewhere in Greece there is this tree like waiting for you and when you find it you're supposed to do a woodcarving.

MS. RICHARDS: You're supposed to cut it down and use the wood?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, not cut it.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, carve it in place.

MR. WHITTEN: Carve it standing, freaked me out, powerful. I mean I woke up in a sweat, shaking. [Laughs.] I remember waking Mary up. I says, my god, I just had this powerful dream. I have to take my tools with me to Greece. So I gather up the tools I think I would need, the carving tools in a separate package.

So Mary went to Greece in terms of "roots." I went to Greece in terms of looking for this damn tree. [Laughs.] We went to Athens. We found a cheap hotel in the Plaka District, which is right at the base of the Acropolis.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell Plaka?

MR. WHITTEN: P-L-A-K-A.

MS. RICHARDS: Plaka.

MR. WHITTEN: It's a nice community, like a real nice bohemian, almost like West Village, that kind of a thing, lot of little shops and cafes and beautiful, beautiful. In the '60s Plaka was really sweet, music, eating out every night, café scenes.

We found a cheap hotel there. So we set up shop in Athens in Plaka and we used this as a jumping off point to visit other places all through the Peloponnesus, the islands and so forth. But after like a month of doing that our money was running out.

We didn't have that much money with us and at that time the U.S. dollar meant something. A dollar at that time to the drachma was 28 drachmas to the dollar.

But our money was running out. So people advised us to go to Crete, that it was cheaper. We took an overnight ferryboat, deck class, cheap, sleeping out in the open on the deck, which was fun, brought an old Army blanket from Monastriaki, which is a market district in Athens.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell -

MR. WHITTEN: Monastraki

MS. RICHARDS: M-O-N?

MR. WHITTEN: M-O-N-A-S-T[-I]-R-A-K-I,.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MR. WHITTEN: Found an old Army blanket, two old army blankets for 50 cents apiece [laughs] but we used those to cover us. It would be chilly out on the sea. You'd be [traveling] from the port city of Athens, which is Piraeus, to Iraklion on the north coast [of Crete].

We'd get to Iraklion, overnight ferry. There was a tourist police. I told him the story about the tree. He said, look, cheapest place on this island is the south coast. He put us on a bus that left the city of Iraklion and went across the island to the south to the village of Aghia Galini.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MR. WHITTEN: That's A-G-H-I-A G-A-L-I-N-I. It's a little fishing village on the south coast. That's where they sent us.

MS. RICHARDS: Just because it was cheap, not because it was beautiful?

MR. WHITTEN: Cheap, cheap, we were looking for the cheapest place that we could set up shop and live for a while and looking for this tree.

MS. RICHARDS: And travel around Crete.

MR. WHITTEN: We get on this bus, goes across the island, through the mountains, terrific. My wife was starting to freak out, dust and wind blowing. [Laughs] bumpy. But when we got through the mountain area we could see a glimpse of the sea.

So our hopes picked up, right. The bus goes down, down, down, down, all the way down from the mountains all the way down to the seaside and it pulled into this little village on the harbor and through the windows on the bus I saw this tree just as I saw it in my dream.

I pointed it out to Mary, look, there's the tree, there's the tree, you see it? It was freaky! [Laughs.] It was really freaky. We met an old man on that bus.

Mary could speak a little Greek. She wasn't great but she could speak a little bit, enough to communicate that we needed a room and this old man said to us, don't worry. I will take you to a room and he took us to a room in truth was his sister's place. [Laughs.]

But we managed to get a hotel room. It cost us a dollar a night, a dollar per bed. That's what it was.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, those were the days when it was Europe on five dollars a day.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, well we went armed with that book. We picked it up and that book helped a lot. So we found that hotel through this old man, a dollar a bed. So I'm saying to Mary, shit, a dollar a bed, I'm calculating. We had our first meal, another dollar. We could live here easy for three or four dollars a day.

So the next step for me was to find out who owned that land where the tree was. So I approached this guy. Somebody pointed [him] out. In truth, old Strati, Strati, Strati, I couldn't speak any Greek then.

MS. RICHARDS: Strati, is this last name?

MR. WHITTEN: Strati. His last name would be Troullinos.

MS. RICHARDS: So his first name is Strati?

MR. WHITTEN: Strati, S-T-R-A-T-I, Troullinos, T-R-O-U-L [-L]-[I]-N-O-S, I think it's two Ns.

MS. RICHARDS: Can you repeat the last name?

MR. WHITTEN: Let me see if I can get it phonetically. T-R-O-U-L-E-N-O - I'll have to check the spelling. I think it's T-R-O-U-L-E-N-N-O-U-S, Troulennous, but we couldn't get him to understand what I wanted to do. He thought we wanted to cut it down and I couldn't explain and Mary couldn't explain why.

[Telephone rings.]

[Audio Break.]

So I came up with the bright idea if I were to go up in the mountains [in] back [of] town, find some wood, haul it down, there was a clump of trees there on the harbor near the sea, and just set up shop and start working, I could explain to him what I wanted to do.

So when I did that, he understood. He knew exactly what I wanted to do. He took me in, takes me into his home, takes me through the back through the house, ends up the guy's an old cabinetmaker, [laughs] opens up his tool chest, whatever you need, take. Take whatever you need, right. So I got the go ahead to start.

MS. RICHARDS: Now I just want to ask you, obviously there aren't too many African-American or black people on the island of Crete.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh no, none.

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like you didn't experience any racism or any issues relating to that.

MR. WHITTEN: None whatsoever.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was completely absent.

MR. WHITTEN: I can say emphatically none whatsoever. These people took us in like we were their kids. So I stayed there and did that tree. I've been in all the newspapers, TV telling this story. Here's a local newspaper ad - here's a still photograph of it. It was in a local newspaper.

MS. RICHARDS: I see.

MR. WHITTEN: We became like celebrities. Our money was no good. People gave us everything. I would be working there. People would leave food, [wine, oil, fish, potatoes, et cetera].

MS. RICHARDS: This was all during that summer?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, people would leave food. People would leave wine.

MS. RICHARDS: Why were they so touched by this story of your carving the tree?

MR. WHITTEN: When I started working I had an audience, people, kids sitting on the ground, people sitting in their chairs watching me work. I became a celebrity.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you make any preliminary drawings or just work intuitively?

MR. WHITTEN: Started directly into it, went right directly into the tree, direct carving. It's a carving of [octopi] winding around the tree, fish winding around the tree, waves from the sea, a fisherman's head, the head of a fisherman looking directly out to the sea is carved, features carved. On the top is a big fish-like form.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you started imagining what you'd be carving before you even found that tree?

MR. WHITTEN: No, the first thing was the tree and when I saw the tree I just used the system of direct carving and those images just came right out of the tree. It was very much like in the painting of seeing the faces in the paint. But this was three-dimensional. This was during the days of the military junta.

There's a branch coming off from the side of the tree with this signal [a 'V' sign] and an old man came up in the village and he says, not that year, the second year he comes up to me and he says – by this time, I came back to New York and I started studying Greek at the New School, had private instructors.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking Greek.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, so he says to me, Jack, I know. I know what you did. He saw the political-ness in [the raised victory sign].

MS. RICHARDS: There was an anti-junta.

MR. WHITTEN: Exactly, but it was hidden. Most people didn't recognize it but this old man came up and said, I know what you're doing. It kind of frightened me really because in those days you didn't mess around with that kind of stuff.

Even the locals there were very careful about what they said. If they spoke it was always [behind] closed doors because there were spies around. You didn't know who was who. So people were very careful about what they said about that.

Anyway, we stayed there and did that tree. It was such a fantastic summer. The second summer came around and I say to Mary, my god, why are we staying in New York. So we picked up and left and went back to Greece and we started renting a house.

MS. RICHARDS: The same place?

MR. WHITTEN: I have to put that in there because that year 1969 started a real adventure that's ongoing today and we would rent houses there. Before tourism came on, old family homes, I could rent – I had a first house, my first house I rented there, \$12 a month.

MS. RICHARDS: In Crete?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah in my village.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh so you've always gone back to the same village?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, same village. So we became a fixture there, right? So we rented houses and going into the latter part of the '70s, tourism became an industry. People started building hotels, tearing down the old houses. So as we say, the handwriting was on the wall.

We realized that if we were to come back there, we would have to build a house. So we put the word out that we're looking for land. This is like 198[4] and we found a piece of land we liked and we bought it and like two years later started building a house. We built a house there.

But the most we ever paid when we were renting, \$20 a month. So we'd rent a house there for the whole year at that price.

MS. RICHARDS: Although you only went in the summer.

MR. WHITTEN: Although we went in the summer.

MS. RICHARDS: That would protect you from losing it for the next summer.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah because by then we'd accumulated a lot of stuff. I'm carving wood there in the summer, got a lot of tools by now, wood sculptures. I'm fishing a lot. I'd bought a boat, all kinds of fishing equipment, tools, you know, things are piling up, household stuff. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: Making a second home, second studio and with the fishing, boy, you quickly collect a lot of equipment when you're fishing, especially the type of fishing I did.

MS. RICHARDS: How close is the house to the water, to the boat?

MR. WHITTEN: Ten minute walk, 15 minute walk, we're right above the sea. So that started a whole new thing, I got involved with olive trees, bought all these olive trees. I produced olive oil.

MS. RICHARDS: Near your home?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, right, I built the house. I bought a whole little hillside. It's 5,000 square meters. It was covered with olive trees and I produce my own olive oil. Remind me. I'll give you a bottle.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow. Don't you have to be there in the fall to do that?

MR. WHITTEN: I have people who take care of it and they pick and do the pressing, all that.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you design the label?

MR. WHITTEN: It's in our mind to do a label and we haven't done it yet. But we have to. That's the plan.

So that became a very important part of what I do, going to Greece. I carve wood there in the summer months. I don't paint in the summer. I carve wood and we've been there since 1969. In truth, this year will be our 40th year.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: So that's another whole part of me, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you think that feeds your work when you come back to New York?

MR. WHITTEN: The woodcarving has been the single most [important] influence on my paintings' plasticity. I know that. By 1970 I'm starting to make a painting. [I make a painting not paint a painting.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I read that.

MR. WHITTEN: I like to construct a notion of a painting, right, as opposed to just painting with a brush. The paintings are becoming more physical. The paintings are being made. They're being constructed, same processes I'm using in woodcarving, you know, laminating, carving, sanding, gluing. That's what's happening in the paint.

MS. RICHARDS: Why do you think you chose not to paint in Greece? You could have done that, rolled the canvases up, brought them home.

MR. WHITTEN: It would have been more problematic in terms of materials. There's no [easy] availability of art materials there. But I could get wood up in the mountain villages. I could get wood and it was a perfect wholesome change from New York to be working outside.

There I'm working outside. In those days in the early '70s my outdoor studio was [under] a clump of trees overlooking the sea, gorgeous. I mean come on, give me a break.

MS. RICHARDS: It's a no-brainer.

MR. WHITTEN: No-brainer, you know, and by now people know me and I'm putting the word out you come up with a good log, I'll buy it.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you sell the pieces there too or anywhere?

MR. WHITTEN: I don't sell them. I have them. All the pieces I've done, except for a few pieces, I brought back to New York, I have here in New York. But a lot of people are interested. A lot of people are trying to get me to show them and I might consider doing that. Even [my] dealer in Germany that I'm working with, he's interested.

MS. RICHARDS: But not in Greece?

MR. WHITTEN: I haven't done anything in Greece. I've never shown paintings or – the only thing I've done in Greece with the woodcarvings is on a local level [I was invited to show my work in the Village of Psari Forada]

They bring me there to talk, show the woodcarvings, things like that, which is nice, or my village of Aghia Galini did a big celebration of their 100-year anniversary. So I did a big outdoor sculpture garden and helped organized festivities, music, local Cretan music, dinners, which is really a gorgeous, magnificent thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Did the political climate in Greece ever affect you personally?

MR. WHITTEN: No. No[t] even during the days of the junta, you know, they tended to leave the foreigners alone, except for across the bay from us, the village of Matala. Matala was a big hippie haven in the early '70s. Kids from all over the world came there. It's a gorgeous area with a whole mountain of limestone literally rises out of the sea, big triangular form, the early Romans did -carved burial tombs in the limestone. They used it as burial sites.

And the hippies came there in the late '60s, early '70s and lived in those caves. So it was a big international hippie scene. The junta government as a pretense used the drug things to break it up.

So soldiers came in there with no notice, disrupted the whole thing, chased everybody out. That's the only time during those periods I know that they actually picked on foreign people.

MS. RICHARDS: In 1970 you had a show at Allan Stone.

MR. WHITTEN: I did two shows with Allan. That would have been '68. It was either 1969 or 1970.

MS. RICHARDS: I think I read it was 1970.

MR. WHITTEN: Okay it could have been February 1970, early, yeah. I did those two shows.

MS. RICHARDS: And if I remember correctly you showed flat sheets attached to the wall. I'm not sure if they were paper or canvas.

MR. WHITTEN: Canvas. Okay, this is important.

MS. RICHARDS: That was a departure.

MR. WHITTEN: This is a big departure for me. I had the opportunity to meet and talk with John Coltrane, my great love in jazz. My brother and I, John was playing out in Brooklyn at a club called Coronet and we would go out there every night to hear him. He was with Eric Dolphy, and I had the opportunity, that's where I met him.

MS. RICHARDS: Sorry, Eric?

MR. WHITTEN: Dolphy, D-O-L-P-H-Y, jazz clarinetist, bassoon. And I was speaking with John and the thing I remember the most was his waving his hands. He wasn't that enthused, you know, I'm a young guy talking about art. I don't think he had much of an interest in art, but my interest in his music- and he said something to me.

He waved his hand and he used the word "wave." He says, "Well, you know it's like a wave." This is what I remember the most, "it's like a wave," and something went off in my head. It identified with what I was feeling in painting. It came directly out of his music, that way of playing that he had. Some people later called it training [sheets of sound] or a way of stretching out the notes but I acquainted that with something that I was working with, which I call "sheets of light."

In Coltrane's terminology it was "sheets of sound." This is very important and I was working with these in terms of sheets of light.

So those paintings that I showed at Allan that year, sheets of light paintings, they were taken off the stretcher. I had a store down the street from me. Its name was Matera Canvas, canvas products, Matera, M-A-T-E-R-A, and I bought canvas from [John] Matera.

See, one of the great things about Tribeca at that period, a lot of places down there the artists could pull from, we had wholesale canvas dealer[s]. A big company was called Astrup, A-S-T-R-U-P. In truth, Franz Kline sent me to Astrup. I went to Franz Kline.

MS. RICHARDS: U-P?

MR. WHITTEN: A-S-T-R-U-P and Franz was saying, how are you doing. I need canvas and it was Franz Kline said, he wrote on a piece of paper, he says, you go to this company. It was in my neighborhood where I was living on Lispenard, Walker Street. You ask for this man, Mr. Antonelli, and tell him that Franz sent you and he will make a deal.

These people were selling [canvas], this is where Franz Klein was buying his canvas, cotton duck, and they would sell end pieces. They called it, when they'd do a whole job with a big roll and something was left over. You know, for five bucks, ten bucks, they would sell you that roll. [Laughs.] So this was a great find.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: [Matera made cotton canvas] tarpaulin cover[s] for trucks, that kind of a thing. So I went to John Matera and I told him this idea I had.

I wanted to take my paintings off the stretcher and explained to him these concepts I had. I wanted it to be flat to the wall like a sheet and John said, well look, why don't you let me do this, and what he did was [take] the canvas, rolled [the edges], put it on his machine and sewed it.

MS. RICHARDS: Stitched the edges.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, all the way around, which allowed me to paint directly to the canvas tacked to a wall, roll it up at show time, take it straight to Allan Stone's gallery, just tack it to the wall, fantastic. So I got this flat canvas right to the wall, those light sheets, and some of my first process-oriented paintings took place in that show.

I made these huge silk screens, a silkscreen process?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: I made mine 8-, 10-foot screens.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you do that?

MR. WHITTEN: I made a whole wood frame covered with - I wasn't using silk. I was using nylon.

MS. RICHARDS: As wide as the nylon would come or you made a seam?

MR. WHITTEN: Sometimes I have paintings from that period [where] the nylon was sewed together if it wasn't big enough. It was so big I operated it with a pulley from the ceiling with a rope.

I would use the rope and the pulley to raise the screen, put it back down flat over the canvas, press the paint through it so the paint is being applied through a silk-screening process. In truth those big paintings were like silk monoprints.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Those are the paintings I showed at Allan Stone, light sheets, and came directly out of that talk with John Coltrane. So that was my big first venture into process. And then I did that show with Allan. Then my mind started working, running. No longer was I involved with any form of figuration. It just went straight into the paint [as material].

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: But after that first show my mind is moving so fast and I'm going into abstraction, I'm losing abstract expressionism. I have lost it really and Allan wasn't that interested. We stayed in touch. He would sell a painting for me, good for advice and so forth. But I realized that my days at Allan Stone [were] over because I'm moving into another direction.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you think consciously that you were seeking to break new ground artistically, conceptually? You were determined?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, I'm following the jazz musicians. The jazz musicians, man, I'm hanging out, I'm knowing John Coltrane, Monk, and all those people. Those people were innovators. I saw myself as an innovator. I'm following the jazz guys. My thinking is, boy, if I'm not good enough to do it in music perhaps I can do [it] in painting.

So I'm wanting, I'm wanting to experiment, innovation. I'm thinking about Charlie Parker. My god, the man is an innovator in jazz. He changed the history. So I had a precedent before me in terms of innovation, not to say I didn't have it from painting too. I did.

But the impetus, impetus was in terms of history was primarily what was happening with the jazz musicians. I wanted to be known as an innovator. That's why I started putting all my [interest] into process orientation and getting from under Bill de Kooning's thumb.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

[END CD 3.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Jack Whitten on December 3, 2009, in Jackson Heights,

Queens at his home for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one [sic] [three].

Can you talk about the evolution of your work after you showed Allan Stone, ?

MR. WHITTEN: Okay the show at Allan Stone were light sheets tacked flat to the wall, fairly large-scale canvases and after that show we move 100 percent into process and the first painting that occurred in 1970 was a slab of acrylic paint.

That series of paintings is known as Slabs, S-L-A-B. It was, quite frankly, putting down a slab of acrylic paint, pulling it across the canvas, leaving it. That's all.

I built a large drawing board on the floor, heavy-duty drawing board, heavy meaning that I could walk across it. It was about 12 feet by about 24 feet, very firmly built, built with 2 by 4s.

MS. RICHARDS: Plywood?

MR. WHITTEN: Plywood, 16-inch centers all the way across, heavy-duty three-quarter construction grade plywood.

MS. RICHARDS: Like a floor.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, it was like a floor but a big heavy-duty drawing board that was built on the floor, laid out absolutely level on top of the construction grade plywood was a layer of industrial linoleum so I could clean properly. The painting, the canvas was tacked to the top of that drawing board.

MS. RICHARDS: Tacked to the linoleum?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, directly to the top of the board, so I'm working down flat.

MS. RICHARDS: So you used large rolls of canvas.

MR. WHITTEN: Depending on the size. I always buy canvas in different size rolls to prevent waste, you know, like 56 inch, 60 inch, 72 inch, 96 inch, 120 inch. So that way I find I can prevent waste. So the sizes of the canvases scale-wise is pretty much accordingly to the size of the canvas and that's proven to be very effective over the years because artist's materials are expensive.

So you have to think in terms of logistics. You have to think in terms of price control. A series of works might be within a certain size, like that painting there on the wall, within 72 inches cut from like 84-inch canvas, always cotton duck.

So the first canvas in the process, that slab of paint was put out and I'm using my Afro comb to comb through the layer of paint. In those days I had a big Afro, natural cut, and the practice was you keep your Afro comb in your hair. [Laughs.]

I'm looking at this comb one day. I said, my god, that's a beautiful tool. I started combing through the paint and there's a series of those paintings. What was started here with this big drawing board was a whole series of experimentations that lasted for 10 years.

MS. RICHARDS: Throughout the '70s.

MR. WHITTEN: From 1970 to 1980. 1980 was the first time that I had done a painting that I could do standing up straight in 10 years, so all of those years, 10 years was down on the floor. The first process was with this Afro comb.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the light that you were using on that flat horizontal surface?

MR. WHITTEN: The -

MS. RICHARDS: The light, what kind of artificial lighting did you -

MR. WHITTEN: Well, the studio had pretty good lighting.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it different then?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, those paintings were done on the studio at Broome Street, 426 Broome Street, big studio, 2,500 square foot studio, big 13-, 14-foot ceilings and I had the whole space as a studio. So the light there was good.

I didn't have that much in the way of natural light. So I had to put a decent amount of money into artificial lighting or floodlights, fluorescents, a mixture of warm and cool. It worked out very well for the light.

All of these series started with the Afro comb and then [after] it went to a carpenter's saw. I cut the handle off a carpenter's saw, mounted the saw onto a straight piece of wood and I'm pulling it across, down on my knees on a big scaffold system.

MS. RICHARDS: It strikes me that the Afro comb and the carpenter's saw, even though they're both common objects, had a personal connection with you, and as your work in the '60s was somewhat autobiographical, you were continuing that aspect.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: a kind of a bridge, using those tools.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, yeah, you could say that, sure because of my background in cabinetmaking and carpentry, sure. Tools, tool making has always been a part of the process throughout the '70s. I have a collection of tools from the '70s and we showed them once.

We did a show at Newburg Gallery, Daniel Newburg on Greene Street and Dan showed the tools, which was I thought a great thing to do because often in those paintings from the '70s people say, well, "How did you do this? I don't see how they are made."

So we showed the tools in that show and I think it helped people to understand the nature of the processes.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about the process as being related to photography.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you talk about that?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. I often repeat this statement that I wrote on my studio wall: "The image is photographic, therefore I must photograph my thoughts" and the first time that I reacted to that statement that I wrote [was] a series of paintings that occurred in 1965, the gray paintings, the first time I did a series of black and white, gray paintings, the first time I had really done process.

Those paintings were made by taking a piece of silk or nylon, stretching it over a cotton-stretched canvas with acrylic paint and I'm trapping a layer of paint between two layers, cotton duck underneath, silk on top, trapping the layer of acrylic and wiping off the excess.

I was with Allan Stone then but Allan didn't show those paintings. He wasn't interested in them and in truth I've never had a full show of those paintings. They're gray. They all look like fuzzy photographs and you could see the most amazing imagery in them but they look just like fuzzy photographs.

I was communicating with a doctor. I read a story about a doctor who was working with a man who claimed that he could take pictures with his brain by using a Polaroid camera and I saw some of those images. The man had images that he claimed [were] taken from the Revolutionary War, the American Revolutionary War. [Laughs.]

He had a whole series of things going back in time and he claimed that he could take a picture by forcing it into his head and pulling the shutter and he can get these images and I saw some of those images and when I saw those images, I says, my god, they're the same as my black and white, gray paintings. So I got in touch with that doctor who - I forget his name but we more than once corresponded.

So the idea of the photograph was a huge influence on my thinking, but not only me, the history of painting. If I had to state the one most important influence on painting, it would be the photograph. When the photograph was invented and artists saw what the photograph could do, it changed the course of history, I'm telling you.

That's where it starts. That's where it starts. I think a lot of art historians will back me up on that. Photography changed the course of art history in painting and it's been an ongoing process.

I came across it out of what I call this eidetic science, eidetic imagery, from eidōs where you see these images down in the paint and again, a lot of painters know about that and I started studying that. So the influence of photography just runs right through my work from the '60s on.

MS. RICHARDS: And you talked about the process that you used to create the images on this large horizontal surface was like a processor or developer.

MR. WHITTEN: That's what I called it. I called the tool that I was using a "[developer]." After I did the experimentation with the Afro comb, with the carpenter's saw, I made a large tool, a big T-square, 12 feet wide, had a long handle on it. The handle was another 12 feet. This tool allowed me to sweep the paint across the surface of the canvas.

Horizontality is what I called it, one horizontal sweep, and as I explained to David Reed when we were going the catalog for the "High Times"[High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975] show, what I was after objectively was a non-relational painting.

I mean, again, painters knew about the notion of a non-relational painting. Several painters had suggested it, especially Ad Reinhardt. Those black paintings were very much about that.

But I wanted to go even further, right? I didn't accept just the vertical-horizontal of that cross and the symbolisms of the cross in a Reinhardt. I wanted that whole plane to be one gesture. In other words I wanted the whole plane to be one line and there were a lot of reasons for my thinking that way.

I was so influenced by Bill de Kooning early on and the Abstract Expressionist gesture, the hand, very influenced by that, and I had to come up with a way to get around Bill de Kooning and I figured the only way I could do that is to think non-relational[ly].

The plane had to be one line. That's the only way I could get around Bill, nobody acknowledged it, but I think it's successful.

The tool I was using was a piece of two- by -four, just a two- by-four that was used to pull the paint across and then later from the 2 by 4 the next stage was I attached a piece of quarter inch neoprene rubber to the 2 by 4.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that something like a squeegee?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, made it into a giant squeegee, heavy duty. Living downtown in Tribeca and SoHo in those days, the artists had access to shops, to materials [but] then all those people were forced out.

The shops were very important to us, plumbing shops, people who sold and did tin metal work, the rag salesmen, people in the fabric industry, like those early '60s paintings when I was making those giant screens came from the industries down on Broadway, people selling fabric, go in there, Jewish guys, they would talk to you. They'd ask me what I wanted to do and they'd say, hey kid, you know you should try this if you're thinking about something like that.

So those shops down there were very important to the artists and that's one of the reasons that forced us out of that area, those places disappeared and the neighborhood became fancy bars, boutiques, and fancy restaurants, which did not serve our purposes. We're a different type of people. That's what basically forced me out of there.

That tool went from the straight piece of two- by-four to a piece of neoprene rubber attached. The next stage was a sheet of 16-gauge sheet metal, just a slab of sheet metal attached.

MS. RICHARDS: What prompted these successive changes?

MR. WHITTEN: The successive changes dealt with pure experimentation. I had to find out what I could do with acrylic paint as a medium. I'm after innovation. I'm corresponding a lot with Lennie Bocour who ran the Bocour paint factory [Bocour Artist Colors, NY] at that time because I'm going through vast amounts of paint doing this, which I couldn't afford.

I went to Lennie. I had met him before. In truth, I had met Lennie back in the '60s. Even in the 1960s I did a little trade. Lennie traded paint with me.

MS. RICHARDS: Paint for paintings?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah and I wasn't the only artist. He did this with more than one artist. It was very helpful for me because I could go to Lennie and I could order what I want. His truck would arrive at my studio door, you know, 40, 50 gallons of paint, made all the difference.

MS. RICHARDS: It would have been massively expensive.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh I couldn't have - I could not afford it. If it had not been for Lennie Bocour I couldn't have done those paintings. I could also deal directly with Rohm and Haas [PA].

MS. RICHARDS: What was that?

MR. WHITTEN: Rohm and Haas is the company that makes acrylic polymer.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that H-A-A-S?

MR. WHITTEN: Rohm, R-O-H-M, Haas, H-A-A-S. That was the name of the company, Rohm and Haas. In those days I could deal directly with them. I would order a 55-gallon drum of AC32. AC32, right, that's the polymer, that's the binder that holds together the acrylic paint.

MS. RICHARDS: The acrylic medium?

MR. WHITTEN: Acrylic medium, yes, [there are different polymers]. My contact with Rohm and Haas, I did experimentations, hell, with all of those ranges, 32, 33, 60, all kinds of polymers that they had available and they would deal directly with the artists and they did that for years with artists until something happened with some artists who complained about health hazards of their product.

I mean it's one of the most stupid things I know of that happened in the art community in New York. So Rohm and Haas figured, my god, I can't deal with these guys anymore. That's a liability. You've got some jerk coming up complaining about health hazard.

We knew about the health hazard. I opened up a barrel of AC32, the fumes, the ammonia, working with vast amounts of acrylic paint. My eyes would turn red all around here. So we knew. We knew that we had to be careful.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever use masks, respirators?

MR. WHITTEN: I've used masks and respirators.

MS. RICHARDS: Create a ventilation system?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, or primarily mine was open the front window, open the back window and just blow it through or when you're pouring large amounts of acrylic paint, I would do it at a certain time of day and get the hell out of there, leave it. Leave the windows open and let it dissipate, that kind of thing. I set up my work habits working around the known toxic qualities.

See it's one thing if you use - you go to the store and you buy one or two tubes of acrylic paint. Okay, believe me it's not going to hurt you. But if you buy a 55-gallon drum and you might be pouring 5 gallons, 10 gallons out at a shot over a 12-foot surface, hey, that's a different thing.

Surface film might be a quarter of an inch or more, three-eighths of an inch. That's a lot of paint. Fumes are coming right up at you, very, very different.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have to experiment with the ingredients that would relate to how fast it dried?

MR. WHITTEN: Drying was a problem. You could speed it up and you could [slow] it down [with] retarders. There are retarders for acrylic paint. In truth, I used to know a buddy of mine, he says, man the shit dries too fast for me. I says, well, you put some retarders in it. It worked. Even that wasn't slow enough. I'd come back to the studio the next week, he's got six humidifiers going. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: He should switch to oil paint.

MR. WHITTEN: It's like walking into a jungle, you know, humidity is in the air, [laughs] that kind of a thing. You throw salt in it. I'm complaining to Lennie. Lennie, I want to speed it up. He said, throw some salt in it. [Laughs.] So we're doing a lot of experimentation, right.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, you're talking about changing the material on the bar that goes across, I mean the edge, the rubber and then the sheets - you said tin or steel?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, well depending on which one it was. Like I said, first it was wood and then -

MS. RICHARDS: You're experimenting with the kind of mark, the kind of line or impression that you'd create.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, what you can get out of it. I could get something different from neoprene rubber than I could get from wood than I could get from sheet metal.[The] experimentation pushing into '70s, '77-'78, was to cut notches into the [metal], like this painting, '78, *Lambda*.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: The mate is in the Museum of Modern Art [NY].

MS. RICHARDS: So you cut a very even -

MR. WHITTEN: Cut notches, by hand, I did it.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: So with that 12-foot piece of [16 gauge galvanized] metal, by 1977 I'm cutting notches and I'm doing a lot of experimentations in terms of increments, eighth of an inch to a quarter of an inch, quarter of an inch to a half inch to three-quarter of an inch. I'm seeking the right increment that I need to do what I want it to do.

Ultimately I decided upon an increment of an eighth of an inch. So think about it, a 12 foot sheet metal notch, eighth inch increments. I destroyed my wrist in doing that. I remember having to go into the doctor. I had to get shots of cortisone just to keep the pain down. So I destroyed my wrist -

MS. RICHARDS: Because of that repeated -

MR. WHITTEN: Damn right, hard, pressure, had to get several shots of cortisone until the doctor said, hey, I'm not going to give you anymore, you know. There's a certain limit because that starts causing bone deterioration.

MS. RICHARDS: What about the fact that a good number of these paintings were black and white?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, when I started that series, that time we're running into '76, '77, I remove all spectrum color from the palette, only black and white.

MS. RICHARDS: And what was that about?

MR. WHITTEN: Restriction, reduction, what's possible if I get rid of the spectrum with[out] all of the psychological symbolisms, what's possible? So I got rid of all of the spectrum color, didn't allow it in the studio, only black and white and of course beyond its formal complications there enters into the scenario obviously, yeah, politics of race, identity.

I have a black paint and I have a white paint. What can I do? Merging, graying out. Henry Geldzahler understood that when we would talk. Henry -

MS. RICHARDS: When did you meet him?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh I've known Henry - I knew Henry since the '60s but we spent more time together - I really loved him.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you -

MR. WHITTEN: Because he was smart, witty, and a great backer of mine. I miss him. I miss people who are smart, who know about painting, who want to engage. See, that's [a] rar[ity] today. Today I'm finding very few people know about painting, very few, including most of our art historians.

They don't know painting. They don't know the history of painting. They know it in terms of a book knowledge but they haven't spent time talking and engaging artists about painting and it's a mistake. It's a waste. It's a real waste.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you meet him?

MR. WHITTEN: Let me think back. Where did I meet Henry the first time? Probably through Ivan Karp, probably, probably when Ivan was working with [Leo] Castelli. I had met Ivan through Allan Stone. Most likely that's where I met Henry, through Ivan, because Henry was a champion that time of Pop Art.

He was one of the major players in backing Pop Art and of course Karp and Castelli. I met Castelli through Allan Stone. In truth, Castelli came to my first show at Allan Stone. Later Allan gave me a lot of good feedback from Castelli, which for a young painter at that time, 1968, meant a lot, not that Castelli ever did any damn thing for me.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have most of your conversations with Henry Geldzahler in your studio or -

MR. WHITTEN: In the studio, yeah, and then we would meet out for dinner, especially when David Hockney was around. He and David Hockney were lovers and I liked David. David was good. I liked talking to David, too.

MS. RICHARDS: What years was that because by that point David was living in Los Angeles.

MR. WHITTEN: This was in the '70s, early '70s, about that time, yeah. But you know he, David, and Henry, they were all over the place. Those guys were real jetsetters from Paris to Tangiers. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Did David – I mean did Henry Geldzahler introduce you to other artists or critics?

MR. WHITTEN: I met a lot of people through Henry, over at his house, over in the West Village, often I would be invited over and a lot of people were there. Probably the first time, yeah, I met Jean-Michel through –

MS. RICHARDS: Basquiat.

MR. WHITTEN: Through Henry, Henry was a big backer. In truth, I remember exactly. Henry calls me up one day and he says, look, I got these paintings I want you to look at. They were being shown at a little gallery on West Broadway. What was the name of that gallery? It's like one flight up. It starts with an S. Just go in and tell them what you –

MS. RICHARDS: Stux?

MR. WHITTEN: No, no it wasn't Stux.

MS. RICHARDS: Earlier than that.

MR. WHITTEN: He says, go over there and look at them and tell me what you think, and I never will forget what I told him. In truth, I think I wrote it to him because he wanted my assessment of what I saw and I remember writing, I says, well, hey man, they are urban folk art. That's what I called them. He liked that. I called them urban folk art, which that's what they were, but of course he was a smart kid. That kid knew art history

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: He did a lot of studying. He was in and out of the museums. So he was a fast learner. He quickly put two and two together. He got his act together quickly. Unfortunately he had so much baggage with him, which brought him down.

But he was like – I remember once I said to him that – see I was friends with Bob Thompson. That's a little Bob Thompson on the wall over there, that oval one.

And Bob was like a precursor to Jean-Michel. He really was and Bob was wild enough but Jean-Michel was like ten times wilder. I mean, like souped up, a souped up Bob Thompson, high off the scale. But Bob was there first with that real street knowledge.

MS. RICHARDS: At the same time as you were doing these works on the horizontal, you're doing works on paper.

MR. WHITTEN: A lot of work on paper.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that also on Broome Street or did you do that in a different –

MR. WHITTEN: Broome Street, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: There was space to do that there too?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, that Broome Street studio was a big studio.

MS. RICHARDS: Using and experimenting with different processes with paper?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, right, different materials, a lot of different materials. First time I'm starting using bronzing powders, aluminum powders, powdered graphite. In truth, those grey paintings from the '70s are made – that paint is my invention. I call it acrylic slip. Mostly medium, translucent, graphite, I'm doing a lot of experimentation with crystalline silica, which is very dangerous.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to say these things sound a little bit dangerous.

MR. WHITTEN: Very, very dangerous, have to be very careful in the studio. But I found silica. I made a – see, one of the problems that painters – why painters didn't like acrylic at first was because of the plastic sheen in it. Painters didn't respond to that. So I found ways to get around that and the best way that I found was silica. I found with silica, I could cut it to any degree I want[ed] and nothing like that was on the market then.

MS. RICHARDS: The kind of silica that absorbs moisture?

MR. WHITTEN: I'm taking about extreme crystalline silica. It's a powder, very fine powder. I'm buying it from - I'm buying it from I think the chemical company McKesson, McKesson, I think so. They sold it to me, which again, in those days - you can't do that today. I call up a company. Who are you? Oh I'm Jack Whitten Company. I hear you've got something on the market. You're talking as official[ly] as you can. We want to try something. Oh you are, we'll send you, how much you want to try? Oh, send me like 25 pounds for now and we'll see what happens, send me 50 pounds for now.

You could do that. It was McKesson and today you can't do that. People are too worried about liability. Crystalline silica sold through the mail straight from the factory, no way, no way. Stuff is dangerous, you know silicosis and what that is. Once that stuff gets in the air and you're breathing it it's in your lungs. You've got problems.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, so you were experimenting with all kinds of processes on paper.

MR. WHITTEN: All kinds of stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: You were also experimenting with rubbing, like a frottage process.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, yeah, sure, or even the paintings that the first scraped paintings, I'm doing things like - there's a beautiful painting from that period. The title of it is *Omalos*.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MR. WHITTEN: O-M-A-L-O-S. That name is taken from a plain region in Crete. In Crete we have a big gorge, Samaria Gorge, and the gorge - it's where the earth just opened up through some sort of chasm. The earth just split opened. Samaria Gorge storage at Omalos, it's a flat plain, fantastic country, beautiful and the earth opens up and you walk down through this gorge to the sea at Aghia Roumeli.

MS. RICHARDS: Spell that.

MR. WHITTEN: Aghia A-G [-H]-I-A Roumeli, R-O-U-M-E-L-I and when I first went there, Aghia Roumeli and the gorge, there was nothing there, nothing.

There was one old man there that would make us a little cup of coffee on a little fire and we would go there and walk down through the gorge and at the bottom of that gorge and I'm talking, keep in mind, I'm talking about a place where the earth opens up over 300 feet, closest width dimension is like 20 feet.

So you're down walking in a slab of stone with a river in the bottom, cold, ice cold. I remember taking a swim. It was unbelievable [laughs]. I'm telling you it took your breath away. Ice, it was like swimming in ice cubes but it goes down to the sea. At Aghia Roumeli, that beach was covered with these black pebbles.

I brought them back to New York. I took those pebbles, placed them beneath the canvas, poured the acrylic paint on top of the canvas, took my processor and pulled it across, [wet] frottage. So I'm getting a print of the stones. Terrific painting. David Shapiro has that little painting, sure does. David Shapiro is a poet here in New York, well-known poet.

He did the essay for my Whitney show. The Whitney produced a little folder and I gave David that painting. It was nice. He wrote something really - he's good, smart guy, haven't seen David in a while, smart guy. But he has that painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you exhibit the drawings or works on paper with the paintings or separately? Was that an issue? Did you want to exhibit them?

MR. WHITTEN: When I did the Studio Museum [of Harlem, NY] show from that period, Henry Geldzahler curated.

MS. RICHARDS: That was in the early '80s.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, '83 and it was that period from 1970 to 1980.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, '83.

MR. WHITTEN: Mary Schmidt-Campbell was director of the Studio Museum at that time and she invited Henry Geldzahler to do the essay in the catalog. They were planning a catalog and Henry wrote the essay and in that show we included a lot of drawings along with the paintings from that period.

There's a lot of paper work from the 1970s because the way I was thinking so conceptually, it required a lot of paper work. So a lot of those experimentation that was taking place on canvas came first out of the paper, paper

being more flexible, more mobile.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you put the paper down on the horizontal surface as well?

MR. WHITTEN: Most of the time, not only did I put it down on the flat surface but I'm using different materials on what I put it on. For example, sometimes it might be working on a sheet of glass, half inch thick glass.

MS. RICHARDS: So on top of linoleum you put a sheet of glass.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And then the paper.

MR. WHITTEN: The paper, right.

MS. RICHARDS: Did it slide?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, that hard, hard surface of the glass, absolute surface, right, allowed for certain things to take place. Then at times I would remove the glass and put a whole sheet of neoprene rubber, soft.

I'm going to get something else out of rubber as opposed to glass or maybe a sheet of plywood that sort of exists in between. I'm doing all kinds of experimentation. I had to find out what was possible.

Also I'm using pressure as an element. The 12-foot processor, as I called it, had – I was using angle irons that went across and I had weights. I had metal bars, 10 [foot], 12 [foot] long metal bars, each one carrying different weight. I had a bar, might be 30 pounds weight. Another bar might be 10 pounds weight.

MS. RICHARDS: And where did you place those bars?

MR. WHITTEN: I had just a very simple angle irons attached to the processor, just put them in place. Another example of living downtown at that time, we had metal shops. We had people selling all kinds of different metal.

If I went in and got an iron rod that might be an inch or an inch-and-a-half diameter, over 10 foot length, damn thing is going to weigh like 40 pounds or more. But if I got an aluminum rod, two inches, 10 foot long, it might weigh 10 pounds of different alloys.

So I could calculate the weight. The whole reason for this is when my processor was put in place before I'd pull, I would calculate the weight. Let's say I would try 40 pounds of weight, 50 pounds of weight, which meant that I'm removing a bunch of paint. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: It's going to affect how much point is removed–

MR. WHITTEN: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: And the smoothness of the line–

MR. WHITTEN: The quality of the film. Yeah, and if I'm placing something underneath, I'm using these stones underneath, I'm using a piece of sheet metal underneath, I'm using a piece of wire, like a coat hanger.

So depending upon the weight I could control the quality of the image. Whatever I'm placing beneath the canvas is strategically placed according to the drawings I've already tried this with. So you're talking systemic conceptualized abstraction, purely process.

MS. RICHARDS: During those years in the '70s, were there any other artists who you felt were thinking in the same way and whose work you would look at or who saw your work?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, we were aware. We were aware quite often of people engaged in this kind of activity. Oh, we can list them. We know exactly who they were in different degrees and in different qualities. We have to mention David Diao. We have to mention Harvey Quaytman. We have to mention Ed Clark. We have to mention Edvins Strautmanis.

MS. RICHARDS: Edvin?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, Strautmanis.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MR. WHITTEN: Strautmanis, oh my god, my man is Lithuanian, no Latvia.

MS. RICHARDS: Latvian.

MR. WHITTEN: Strautmanis, S-T-R-A-U-T-M-A-N-I-S, first name is Edvin, E-D-V-I-N[-S]. We lost Edvins. But there was a lot of people. There was something in the air about this horizontal thrust. I call it firmly horizontality. That was my word.

But sure, there were people doing – not in the same sense and so concise as I was doing but there were people participating in these horizontal sweeps. I think I defined it down to an extreme notion of line, one gesture, extreme non-relational, like you take somebody like Clark or Strautmanis, still relational, coming out of abstract, like Clarke is a second generation Abstract Expressionist. The relational aspect of the gesture is still very prominent, both he and Strautmanis.

MS. RICHARDS: That was Edward Clark?

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, Edward, he's still alive. In truth, Ed Clark today is probably the last survivor of the second generation Abstract Expressionism. We lost Mike last spring.

MS. RICHARDS: Michael Goldberg?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. Herman Bloom we lost before and of course [Joan] Mitchell. Clark is probably the last of that generation, which would make him about '83, '84, somewhere in there.

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned the show at the Studio Museum in '83. In the '70s, you're working in this purely abstract, nonobjective vein. At that time, what was the political reality that you felt in terms of being a black artist working non-objectively?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh that was severe, severe in the sense that you couldn't get [any] action either from the black community or the white community. The idea of a black abstract artist doing those works and thinking that way, nobody paid attention to you.

From their point of view, that is the white community, they would just say, ah, they're aping white artists and that was it. Nobody paid any attention to you.

And from the black community, oh they're not doing black art and they're not dealing with black people so why bother? So if you look at it politically, you're caught between a rock and a hard place.

So once you realize that, you have to make very strong decisions and you have to develop your own agenda about who you are and what you're doing. So I've known from the beginning [that] my whole agenda was always painting. I'm talking about affecting change in the course of art history through painting.

That's my agenda. I've never, never had anything. I don't care what it's about, any form of politics or whatever, to disturb my agenda. I have – Jack Whitten has an agenda. My agenda right from the beginning is to change the course of painting through innovation. But neither one of those communities paid no attention to me.

But you have to remember through all those '70s, I'm doing these paintings, no gallery dealer would show [them].

MS. RICHARDS: You had a show at the Whitney in '74, a small show.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, because of Marcia Tucker, god bless her. It was Marcia Tucker who came to me. Well, at first – at first Larry, Larry Aldrich.

MS. RICHARDS: What was his role?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, Larry Aldrich owned the Aldrich Museum, right.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Larry Aldrich bought paintings from me in the '70s.

MS. RICHARDS: From Allan Stone?

MR. WHITTEN: From me directly. I wasn't dealing directly with Allan then. For the Aldrich collection and put me in more than one group show there, okay. Larry opened a – it was called the Soho Center for Visual Arts, Larry Aldrich, his money, no public money. He did it.

MS. RICHARDS: It was on Prince Street or Spring?

MR. WHITTEN: Prince Street, invited me to do the first opening show along with two other artists. It was a three-person show and that was the first time those paintings were shown in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: The process paintings of the '70s.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, first time they were shown and then immediately, that would have been Mr.[Thomas] Armstrong at the Whitney through Marcia Tucker. Marcia came to me and said, Jack, I want to do a show of those paintings at the Whitney.

Now primarily because of Marcia Tucker, she convinced them to use that ground floor gallery at the Whitney to show artists' work that was not represented by commercial galleries. That was the criteria.

she placed an emphasis on people like me, people like Al Loving, Alma Thomas, [Frank Bowling] - that the minority artists are being totally left out of the commercial mainstream solely because of race.

Marcia approached me and she said, look, I want you to do a show there. I was most grateful. We did a Whitney show and we have the installation shots of those paintings and then right after that show, a gallery dealer from Paris and his partner, his name was Roger d'Amecourt.

MS. RICHARDS: D'Amecourt, how do you -

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, in French, D

MS. RICHARDS: Apostrophe?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, hyphen, D-A-M-E-C-O-U-R-T, Roger d'Amecourt. His partner, her name was Marguerite Lamy, L-A-M-Y. They opened a gallery in the rue Beaubourg district before the museum was built.

The museum was just in the process pouring the foundation [for the building when] he and his partner came to New York, bought several of those paintings from me directly from the studio, took them to Paris and put them in a show.

MS. RICHARDS: Did they know them because of the Whitney show?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, the Whitney show and Roger had seen them at Larry Aldrich. But that was the only time those paintings were shown.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that your first show abroad?

MR. WHITTEN: That would have been the first time I showed abroad. Now I didn't go because at that time - I don't know why I didn't go. But my buddy at that time Red Grooms was there with Mimi and they had just come back and he says, man, those paintings really look good over there in Paris. I really want you to know that. Mimi, that was Mimi, he was with Mimi Gross at that time.

He [said], we saw that show and it was really terrific. Evidently it caused a little stir. See at that time in Paris at the rue Beaubourg galleries were springing up. So that became an attraction for all young artists [in Europe].

People often ask me about my relationship with [Gerhard] Richter. I've never met him but obviously the imagery in those paintings at that time - maybe it's like 10 years later when Richter did that.

More than once the Germans have asked me how is that possible. My feeling is that he saw them. He either saw them in Paris or he saw them in New York, that was my feeling, one or the other. I don't know. I really don't know. But it's possible that he saw them on the continent. But I'll leave it at that when people question me about the - even today people say things like, I noticed recently some of the bloggers are saying, oh, he's copying Richter.

MS. RICHARDS: What? You were copying Richter?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, yeah more than once now. I mean come on.

MS. RICHARDS: Do they look at the date of the painting?

MR. WHITTEN: They don't know the history of painting. They do not know the history of painting.

MS. RICHARDS: You showed at Allan Stone '68-'70 and then in '78 there's a show at Robert Miller. I'm getting into your relationships with galleries.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, Bob's first gallery, Bob Miller, I had met Bob through Andre Emmerich. Bob worked for Andre and Bob came to me and he says, hey, I'm starting a gallery. I would like to show what you're doing. I couldn't believe it. I really could not believe it [laughs] but we did it.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that connected with Henry Geldzahler?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, he knew Henry. Maybe Henry could have put a good word in there for me. I never knew that. But you might have a point there. Maybe so. But Bob gave me a one-man show at his new gallery. His first gallery was on Fifth Avenue, that building where - who's in that building now.

MS. RICHARDS: David McKee? That building or below?

MR. WHITTEN: No, 724 Fifth Avenue. There's just one or two galleries in that building now but that was where Bob's gallery before he moved to Fifty-Seventh Street and we did that show. But again, the same thing happened [in] that those paintings were so advanced people didn't know what to think about them.

Even the Whitney show, I got one little blurb. I mean about four lines from John Russell. In fact I can remember sort of like what he said. Well, they're strong, and he loved to say I don't know what I'm looking at. He said it's a lot of gambling going on but he knew there was something there but he couldn't place it. They were way ahead.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, he was being open-minded.

MR. WHITTEN: He was being open-minded and he was being positive and he says when it works it's great. It's terrific. I've got a copy of it. And the show at Miller, we got reviews and positive[feedback]. They tried to tie them to Agnes Martin. Give me a break. We're talking process. Martin is sitting there with a line, drawing lines, totally relational. I'm doing like 10,000 lines in one shot, process painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you expect to continue showing at Robert Miller Gallery?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, it didn't work out though. It wasn't for me. I think it was like maybe a little clash in personality and so forth but it didn't work and Bob's mind was changing, too, about what he wanted to do.

It was obviously that he was making adjustments in terms of what he wanted to show. So all the people who first showed in that gallery, myself, Nabil Nahas, , my good friend at that time Stephen Posen. But he was changing. So I only did that one show with Bob.

MS. RICHARDS: So as you enter the '80s -

MR. WHITTEN: But a good thing happened from that show with Bob.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yes?

MR. WHITTEN: My attorney at that time, Larry Levine, who was a great supporter of mine from the '60s on, I had met Larry Levine through Allan Stone. That's a good story. Here I was, a poor black kid, I'm divorcing my first wife and Allan says to me, I'll call Larry. He sent me to see Larry. Larry says, yeah, you give me a painting, I'll do it. In that time you could not get a divorce in New York City or New York State.

MS. RICHARDS: Unless you provide infidelity or some other -

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, it was nasty to get a divorce in New York, the chances of getting a divorce in New York at that time in the '60s, no not in New York State. So they sent me to Juarez, Texas [sic] [Chihuahua, Mexico]. But Larry did all the paperwork- and even the first show with Allan Stone in '68, Larry belonged to the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], so did Allan, and the first group show we did in 1965[? 1968?] at Allan Stone was supported by the ACLU.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you mean supported?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, they funded the show, backed it-

MS. RICHARDS: Did Allan need that?

MR. WHITTEN: There was some sort of arrangement with Allan that through the sales, contributions would be made to ACLU. Make a long story short, when I did that first show and I told Larry, I said, oh you're coming to my opening right, oh yeah, we'll be there, dig this.

Here I am all duded up, girlfriends and stuff, having a good time, [first] one man show, commercial gallery, big event, lot of people. [Laughs.] Larry comes in the door. Guess who's with him? Jackie Robinson. Boy I thought I

would just faint.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, my God.

MR. WHITTEN: I mean we're talking one of my heroes from early boyhood days and Jackie Robinson walks into the show with Larry Levine and comes over and Larry introduced me to him, shakes my hand, said, very nice kid, very nice, mighty proud of you, he says. I thought I would just faint. It was so sweet.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you learn how Larry knew Jackie Robinson? Was he his attorney?

MR. WHITTEN: Through the ACLU.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, at that time in the community you had blacks and progressive minded Jews working together, absolutely. It was much later [when] that bond was broken but at first you had progressive Jews and blacks actively doing things together, which was fantastic. We have to say that.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, so you said that - oh so and you went to Juarez, Mexico, and got divorced.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, we landed in El Paso, Texas, a new hotel there and crossed the border into Juarez.

MS. RICHARDS: With your wife? Is that how it works?

MR. WHITTEN: No, no it was only I, only one person had to go.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MR. WHITTEN: And that's where you got the legal papers to be legally divorced in New York State because you couldn't do it in New York.

But at that show at Robert Miller, Larry intervened again and he says, "What can I do here?" I says, oh it would be nice if a museum owned one of my paintings from this period.

So Larry said, well what if I buy a painting and we donate it to a museum? Who would you like it donated to? I said, well shit, you can donate it to MoMA. So I called Kynaston McShine.

MS. RICHARDS: You knew Kynaston?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I said, Kynaston, we've got a collector here who's interested in donating a painting to MoMA. So Kynaston said, oh I'll come see the show tomorrow. Kynaston came to see the show, picks [out] a painting, done deal.

There was some friction between Bob at that time because and something happened with money there.

MS. RICHARDS: Between Bob and whom?

MR. WHITTEN: And Levine, yeah, something I really never understood really fully. But as a result of that with Levine's intervention, MoMA has that painting. That's how they got it.

[END CD 4.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Jack Whitten in Jackson Heights, Queens, on December 3, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc five.

So we're up to after the show at Miller, coming out of the '70s and you said earlier that at that point you moved off the floor.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, now there's one thing I have to state before we move off the floor. The last group of paintings, there was a series called "Annunciation." In truth, I just got a letter in the mail from a museum down in I think North Carolina who's putting a show up and they got one of the paintings from that period.

Some collector had given it to them. They just notified me and it's going to be on view. I think the show is opening -

MS. RICHARDS: What's the title? Which painting is that?

MR. WHITTEN: Excuse me, *Annunciation*.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh yes, I know that painting.

MR. WHITTEN: And it's a series of them. I think that one is maybe *Annunciation Number 12* maybe. I forget how many I did. I must have done at least about 14 or so of them and they just sent me a paper, which I just put in the mail. They're wanting to know about that painting, about the title, the period that it came out of.

MS. RICHARDS: What is the date of that painting?

MR. WHITTEN: That would be late 1979. The end results of all of those experimentations on the floor, that whole 10-year period, the end results is what I call *DNA* [1979]. That's when I developed the terminology "molecular perception."

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Does this relate to the paintings that look like a herringbone pattern?

MR. WHITTEN: No, these are a grid. I mean, a horizontal thrust, I'm using acrylic slip that I've made, lots of graphite, silica, [acrylic] medium. [One horizontal pill placed over a vertical pull.]

So you get this grid extremely translucent and each time it cross you pick up the physical transparency of the eighth of an inch, beautiful optical, form suspended down into that opticality. That was the result of 10 years of work and then that's what pushed me to another level. [The *DNA* painting from 1979 is the best example of this period.

So I had to explain to them that painting "Annunciation" [series], I realized that I had made a fantastic breakthrough, fantastic breakthrough.

MS. RICHARDS: You said you did around 14 paintings in that series?

MR. WHITTEN: I did about that. Those were smaller scale - I think they're only like 14—16 inches square. But I realized it was a big breakthrough and that's why I used the title *Annunciation*. I wanted the world to know, using art world symbolism of the Annunciation, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: I said, well, why not? Why not appropriate that title, "Annunciation." They just asked for it.

MS. RICHARDS: I just wanted to go back for a second actually to earlier in the '70s. I wanted to ask you about the title: *Omikron* [1977]?

MR. WHITTEN: *Omikron* yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: *Omikron* and *Taf* [1978], T-A-F?

MR. WHITTEN: *Taf*.

MS. RICHARDS: And then the *DNA*. What were those titles?

MR. WHITTEN: When I threw away all the spectrum it was my way of like reducing the psychological content, the symbolisms that associated with spectrum color, only black-and-white.,

I laid out a plan that I would deal with the Greek alphabet. I would start with alpha and I wouldn't stop the series until I worked all the way through to omega.

all those black and white, the Greek [alphabet] series we call them, starts with alpha and works through the whole alphabet. That's why you have alpha, beta, gamma, delta, zeta, eta, epsilon, kappa, so forth, unto so when I finish omega, that completed the series and then that led into the 1980s.

In 1980, starting with *Dead Reckoning*, it's the first time I stood up to do a painting in 10 years. It felt good. It felt good to come up off the floor and stand straight.

MS. RICHARDS: You felt that after the "Annunciation series" you had reached the ultimate point in that direction?

MR. WHITTEN: Of that period, yeah. There's a little brief intersection there for a lot of little basket weave things.

MS. RICHARDS: That's what I was referring to.

MR. WHITTEN: But other than that it moved directly into 1980 with *Dead Reckoning*, which is the painting that is used on the cover of the Studio Museum catalog, big bold, like a big target.

I'm developing systems where I cut through acrylic paint using a lot of retarders and thickeners, acrylic thickeners which allow me to lay down a slab of paint vertically without it moving, [with] gravity pulling it and making instruments using – what do you call those things.

What do you call the tool, [trammel]. You want to make a circle. You put it on a long pole, attached to. Is the word [trammel]?

MS. RICHARDS: Protractor.

MR. WHITTEN: No, not protractor, [trammel], they clamp on. It allows you to draw a big circle and you can make a circle a hundred feet if you want. But I was using these things, laying out the painting very conceptually based on a drawing.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you developing the image before you started painting?

MR. WHITTEN: [Yes], these things were laid out. The first time I used the idea of acrylic collage occurred in 1973 from the paintings that I did using the neoprene rubber.

The acrylic paint was built up first, big clumps of it [and left to dry]. [Neoprene rubber attached to the developer was used to pull watery mixture of acrylic paint across the plane.] After the painting dried, I went back with a carpenter's jack plane, very sharp, and cut through the acrylic to reveal the color. That was in '73.

The pieces that I removed with the carpenter's plane I realized, my god, I can do collage with that. So this is the first time I did acrylic collage.

MS. RICHARDS: Collaging with paint? Paint was the binder?

MR. WHITTEN: With paint. Paint as collage. In other words we're talking about a skin of paint, a slab of paint.

MS. RICHARDS: And it was paint?

MR. WHITTEN: [Paint, yes. Anything can be used as collage; paper, rags, leather, newsprint...whatever. I use paint as collage.]

So going into the '80s I feel like – I realized I could use that. So I would take [paint] and laminate it to the canvas.

MS. RICHARDS: Is what you're saying related to *Dead Reckoning*?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Where does that title come from and what does it signify?

MR. WHITTEN: *Dead Reckoning*? Dead reckoning is something I was taught when I was in the Air Force ROTC [at] Tuskegee. Dead reckoning was a terminology – well it has two terminologies. We'll go through one first.

In navigation, let's say you're in an airplane, you're a pilot, navigate[ing]. The route has been laid out. You start from A. Destination point is B. Somewhere along that route, let's say something happens. Your ass is shot or something. [Laughs.] The pilot has to make a decision. He has to calculate what's the most feasible chance of survival. Do I continue? Do I try to turn around and go back or do I accept my fate and ditch it? Those are your three options.

This is navigation, basic navigation, right? All pilots are taught this. Like Mr. Sullenberger [sic] [Pilot Chesley Sullenberger, successfully ditched US Airways Flight 1549 into the Hudson River, January 15, 2009] there, it just happens he knows this. [Laughs.] He has to make those decisions. He has to calculate.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Do I go back this way, do I try to make it over into the next airport, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Mr. Sullenberger said, "What's the chance of survival here? I've got 200 people on board. What am I going to do?" But [inaudible] said, ditch the mother. I've got the best chance to ditch it. It's dead reckoning, first terminology taught at Tuskegee.

The second I'm learning from my buddies the fishermen in Aiga Galini; I go out with these guys at night, black sea. You don't see nothing. It's like you're [floating on black ink]. You're offshore. You're in blue water. [You cannot see the shore.]

I said, my god man, you look like you're out in a bowl of black soup. Guy says, oh, over there. I say, what the hell is going on?

The guy, yeah, yeah, dead reckoning, no instrumentation.

MS. RICHARDS: But using the stars?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. He can calculate [his position on the stars, so dead reckoning had two big terms for me, both fitting.

MS. RICHARDS: For this painting?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. So in *Dead Reckoning* I'm zeroing in on something.

MS. RICHARDS: And you're relying on a body of knowledge.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, big body of knowledge by then, all that 1980s stuff including all this 1970s stuff, including the '60s, big body of knowledge. So I'm zeroing in on something. That's what *Dead Reckoning* is about: target, big bold target, big circle. There's the phone.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay, we'll pause.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: You were talking about after *Dead Reckoning* or part of it and -

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, *Dead Reckoning*, right, all that body of knowledge from the '70s, including the '60s, I got this notion of the molecular perception in my mind. I'm creating this target where I'm trying to pinpoint and zero it in right down to [the] subject matter. *Dead Reckoning* becomes subject matter.

MS. RICHARDS: And you're also starting to bring things off the street—I don't know what year exactly that was—that you used in creating images.

MR. WHITTEN: Not off the street, like *Dead Reckoning* is totally studio practice. There is nothing found in *Dead Reckoning*.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh I guess I meant after that.

MR. WHITTEN: Except the subject matter, the title, but that's from culture, yeah. It's about two or three of those. How many *Dead Reckonings*, maybe three? There was a short series, the reason being, now 1980 is an important year. You know what happened in 1980?

I'm teaching a class at SVA [School of Visual Arts, New York City]. I get a call. They send somebody from the office, "Jack, you've got to go home immediately, big emergency". I said, what's happening. They tell us the building is on fire, 36 Lispenard Street. I drop everything, run to the street, grab a taxi. I get to Lispenard. The building is up in flames. [Laughs.]

I mean the flames are shooting across the street. The whole top is burning off, five or six fire trucks, big action, big action.

MS. RICHARDS: And you had a lot of flammable materials.

MR. WHITTEN: Well, at that time my wife Mary and Winnie [Bendinder] were doing their restoration business on the [third] floor. We were living on the [second] floor. My buddy Paul Binder -

MS. RICHARDS: Binder?

MR. WHITTEN: B-I-N-D-E-R, Paul Binder is the founder of the Big Apple Circus and he was my partner. Paul Binder and I formed a partnership to buy the building, the two of us. We went to the landlord, Manny Sindell.

MS. RICHARDS: Manny?

MR. WHITTEN: Manny Sindell, S-I-N-D-E-L-L, and he said to us, great idea. I've been telling you all the time you should buy something. You know Manny was this little Jewish guy, fantastic. He always hollering at me, you should buy something. I told you, come out to Brighton Beach. I'll sell you something nice. I said, Manny what am I going to Brighton Beach for?

So Paul and I went into partnership to buy the building. Would you believe it? The damn building catches fire up

on Paul's floor, destroyed the whole roof, all the windows gone, most of the floor is gone, the walls, everything.

MS. RICHARDS: How old a building is it?

MR. WHITTEN: That building dates back to – red brick front building, dates back to like late 1860s. I mean, big time disaster. We had to salvage a little bit of stuff, like clothing or whatever that we could take that was usable. At that time I had a studio on Crosby Street.

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't have the Broome Street studio anymore?

MR. WHITTEN: No we had moved from there.

MS. RICHARDS: When did that happen?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, just as my wife became pregnant with my daughter Mirsini, and we decide to renovate Lispenard for living and I kept the studio at – we had gotten rid of Broome Street and I kept the studio – at that time I had a studio on Crosby Street with two other buddies of mine.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the number?

MR. WHITTEN: It was a huge floor. It was Broadway. The address was [482] Broadway. The Broadway address would be what? I remember the Crosby Street address would be [40], [40] Crosby Street, but Kaare Rafoss –

MS. RICHARDS: Carter?

MR. WHITTEN: Kaare, K-A-A-R-E, Norwegian painter, Rafoss, R-A-F-O-S-S

MS. RICHARDS: R? I'm sorry?

MR. WHITTEN: R-A-F-O-S-S, Rafoss, Kaare Rafoss, [and] Donald Llewellyn, Llewellyn, L-L-E-W-E-L-L-Y-N, we took the lease on a whole top floor, Broadway, went from Broadway all the way to Crosby I'm talking like 10,000 square feet.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: We took the lease on it and divided it up into three areas. Fantastic space, huge freight elevator, passenger elevator on the Broadway side [and freight on the Crosby Street side].

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember what year that was?

MR. WHITTEN: That would have to be the late '70s, yeah, like '78, '79. The fire occurred 1980, [March].

Paul Binder, whose dream was to start a circus, had to make a decision. Both of us had to make a decision. Paul comes to me and he says, look man, my dream is my circus. I can't do this. There's no way I can do this.

MS. RICHARDS: He can't do this and redo the building?

MR. WHITTEN: Redo the building, buy it.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there fire insurance?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, Manny, the owner, we didn't own it at that time. We had just a contract with Manny to buy it.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. WHITTEN: We didn't own it. We were just about to buy it. We had a contract in our hand to buy. We had put money together, Paul and I formed [a] partnership, gave Manny a downpayment to buy this building, but then the building catches fire, burns off the whole thing.

So Paul comes to me and he says, look man, there's no way I can do this. My dream is my circus. Now this is a good story, a New York story, because Big Apple Circus, huge success, huge, and Paul loved his dream.

So he says, look man, I have to walk away. Okay, I'm thinking, my god, what am I going to do, what am I going to do. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: You could get the money – the deposit back?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah I could get the money back and we could split it with Paul and walk away from it, stay the hell away from it. I'm thinking though, shit, this is my chance to own some New York real estate. So I said to Paul, I said, look, Paul I'll buy you out. I gave Paul his money back, went to the landlord. I mean, things are just coming together, right?

Manny has just gone to the hospital with pancreatic cancer, on his deathbed, expected to live two or three days at the most. Whoa, talk about cosmic forces coming together.

I said, Manny, I want to buy the building as is [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: So are you temporarily living on Crosby?

MR. WHITTEN: I moved to Crosby Street.

MS. RICHARDS: You and Mary?

MR. WHITTEN: Mary and my daughter Mirsini, we moved to Crosby Street because I had a studio there. We had a bath there, had a little kitchen set up. So we moved the little bit that we could salvage there and that's where we lived.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you lose a lot of paintings in that fire?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, luckily I didn't have that many paintings there. I lost a lot of paperwork and drawings.

MS. RICHARDS: And tools?

MR. WHITTEN: I wasn't painting there. I was painting there at Crosby Street then. So we put a few things together and lived in the studio.

Manny agreed to my idea on his deathbed. He had two sons. He told his son Allan, Allan I want Jack to have the building, you hear me, and Manny died.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean he - he gave you the building?

MR. WHITTEN: No, no I bought it with a contract. My lawyer, Larry Levine, I went to Levine again, said, Larry, I want to buy the building. Larry says, oh my god man, do you know what you're doing? He came down, he said, man, forget about this, fuck it, walk away [laughs].

But you know now I'm thinking I've got a lot of knowledge in construction. I can build anything I want. I went to my earlier mentor who had taught me cabinetmaking, Jeff Waite, I had mentioned Jeff Waite.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: I said, hey Jeff, come over here, horrible thing, Jeff comes and my god man, terrible devastation. I said, Jeff, would you serve as my contractor. I pay you. Would you work with me to put this damn thing back together? Jeff went [laughs] -

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say it was 50 percent ruined or 70?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh god, more.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're almost building a building from scratch.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh man, whole roof is burned off.

MS. RICHARDS: With the exterior walls.

MR. WHITTEN: The walls were intact. Exterior walls were intact. The main thing, the stairwell was intact. Part of it was burned out but most of it was intact. The top floors was really messed up but the rest of the floors, patch them back together, make another assessment. My accountant says, forget about it, walk away.

My Uncle Thomas, you don't know what you're doing. This is a piece of shit, walk away. Even Bruce Trauner, the other lawyer, walk away from it.

MS. RICHARDS: Who?

MR. WHITTEN: Bruce Trauner, who was a guy working in Larry's office at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: Bruce Turner?

MR. WHITTEN: T-R-A-U-N-E-R. Nobody was advising me. I went to an art dealer that I know. He says, if you think you can do it I'll give you the money but I want half of it. I said, no I don't want to do that. I'm thinking fast, right. I'm talking with my wife Mary. I says, look, we can do this. If I can get Jeff to serve as my contractor we can put this damn thing back together.

MS. RICHARDS: Obviously, the price had gone down since the fire.

MR. WHITTEN: Well, yeah, we negotiated, we're buying a burned out building, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: So we drew up a contract making some fast estimates what it's going to take. I bought a five story building in Tribeca for \$75,000, [laughs] sure did, sure did. But I -

MS. RICHARDS: Taxes must have been fairly low then.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, something like \$3,000. But it took me three years of hard labor to put it back together.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other tenants who had been in -

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, there was another guy up on the top floor which was Paul's partner and lighting man and of course he had to move out. He ran out of the building naked with just nothing on, lost everything he had.

So I bought a burned out building for \$75,000, which meant that I had to do some fast thinking and some fast hustling, a dollar from here, a dollar from here, a dollar from there.

We had a lease on the Crosby Street place. In those days artists would have a lease. You did right with your landlord you could sell the lease, sold my share of the lease, got some cash for that. Sold some paintings, got some cash from that.

Ivan Karp put me in touch with Patterson Sims. You know Patterson, who was working for Ivan at that time. Put me in touch with the Lewises down in Virginia.

MS. RICHARDS: Sydney and Frances Lewis.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, shit yeah, did a trade with them.

MS. RICHARDS: A trade? Oh, they traded appliances.

MR. WHITTEN: Paintings for appliances and stuff, gave them a painting, get all the appliances we need for the new place after we did the renovation, refrigerator, washing machine, dryer, stereo equipment, anything you want, appliances.

I think Ivan did something else for me, sold a painting, [I] took that money, bought a table saw, contractor's table saw which I knew I would need, set it up right on site, got started doing the [demolition].

MS. RICHARDS: What was your idea of how you would use the five floors?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, I hadn't even gotten that far yet. The main thing, the first thing was to get the roof on. The first thing we had to do was the demolition, nasty, nasty, nasty.

I'm hiring people right off the street, big [dumpsters], had to do the demolition first before we could do anything. The whole parapet was hanging down. [Local] landlords are doing everything they could to set up obstacles.

MS. RICHARDS: Why?

MR. WHITTEN: Because you're sitting on a fortune.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean they wanted to buy it from you?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, you don't know what you're doing, you've got all kinds of violations here, look at that damn [parapet]- one of them came to me, [Herbie] Schwartz, I'll never forget him, look at that, you're going to get a \$10,000 fine. Just move that damn thing off of there, that kind of shit, you know? I'm thinking think outside the box. I call my good buddy Chris Gianakos, I say, Chris, I need some help.

Next Sunday morning it's the Fourth of July, ain't going to be nobody on the street, I want you to come in and I

want you to stand on the street. I'm going to [tear off the parapet] I want you to keep people away.

I climbed to the top of the building, tied a rope around myself, tied the rope to a chimney, took a hatchet that I had bought at the hardware store. I says, Chris, I'm going to go up there, I'm going to tie myself, and I'm going to lean over and cut that fucking parapet off. I said, when it starts falling I'm going to call timber and I want you to keep everybody, all the people out of the way. [Laughs.]

I leaned over with my hatchet, dangerous right, very dangerous. At this point I'm like, I'm in survival mode, had no other place to go. Leaned over, started cutting that parapet away by hand, started getting to the end and you could hear it going, crack, crack.

Chris, it's getting ready, she's going to fall, and I heard again louder and louder, crack, the more I cut the more it would start giving away. Toward the end I heard something like, "crack." I said, "timber, timber!" Cut the last thing and that sucker came down. It took the whole, what do you call it, traffic signals with it. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Oh my god. The wires?

MR. WHITTEN: All the wires, the traffic signal, the roof, the whole parapet. I'm talking about a whole parapet.

MS. RICHARDS: How wide was the building?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh we're talking about something like parapet stretching out over [20 feet by 80 feet,] now those old-fashioned [metal parapet.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, those decorative -

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah we're talking a lot of stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: 20-feet wide building or wider?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah like 20 feet, over

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't want to save it, architecturally?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, it would cost a fortune and I wanted to get rid of it before the inspectors showed up and the only opportunity I had was early Sunday morning which it was Fourth of July. Perfect, I knew I would never have another chance, got to do it now.

That damned thing came down, covered the whole sidewalk with debris. Old man Schwartz , one of the landlords, he comes by, he said - I said, oh it fell, the wind blew it down. [They laugh.] Then we started demolition in earnest, right, bringing in big containers.

We were borrowing money from everywhere, borrowed a few bucks from Demi, my wife's sister, a few bucks from my brother [Billy], sold a painting here.

MS. RICHARDS: What's Demi's last name?

MR. WHITTEN: Wait a minute, she was married at that time, Demi, short for Demeter, D-E-M-E-T-E-R, Glennan, she married Paul Glennan, Mary's sister. So they helped. They gave us a little loan. You know, I just borrowed money, wherever I could get it, literally, a hundred bucks here, a thousand bucks here, another thousand here, that kind of a thing. I think I sold the lease oh for like \$20,000.

MS. RICHARDS: So you weren't going to take out a loan for the building?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, I had to take a mortgage.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean a mortgage, yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, regular mortgage, I had to have something so set up the mortgage.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, but for the renovation?

MR. WHITTEN: Larry set it up through people that he knew, allowed us to get a mortgage and so forth. No, wait a minute. We got the mortgage. Right before Manny died he tells Allan, his son, he wants Jack to have the building. I went to Allan. Allan held the mortgage. Great people, great people.

MS. RICHARDS: Very nice.

MR. WHITTEN: Here you have another thing of Jews and blacks working together to do something. Allan holds the mortgage, set up a payment plan, what I could afford. So I figured once we get the roof back on, I'm home free, stop the water from coming through because from the month of April all through the summer, water is pouring through the building.

Jeff worked with me side by side by side. Boy we hauled up huge 20-something foot Douglas fir beams by hand. I couldn't do that today.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you do that? With pulleys?

MR. WHITTEN: Pulleys, wench and pulley, Jeff and I, huge. It's a wonder those damned beams were over 200 pounds apiece, hauled them up to the top, got the rafters back in place, laid down construction plywood, got the roof back on, sealed it off.

I hand-made some temporary windows out of a bunch of plastic that I found on the street. That area down there at that time had a lot of plastic stores. Luckily a guy had thrown out a lot of plastic.

MS. RICHARDS: Canal Plastic was there.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, shit yeah, made some makeshift windows from [wood and plaster], sealed off the windows because there was no windows. All the windows were blown out, didn't have the money to put the replacements in right then. Main thing was just to seal it to keep the water out. Got to work, start rebuilding the walls back, mounds and mounds, tons of sheetrock.

So three years I couldn't work. *Dead Reckoning*, right after *Dead Reckoning* I didn't work for three years. The only time in my life [that I could not paint.]

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about the gap.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, right, the only time I couldn't paint. I was rebuilding Lispenard, long hours, 10, 12 hours, 16 hours every fucking day, every day. I thought of my father during those periods. [I] looked like [I was] working in coal mines. You would be black [with dust from the fire].

MS. RICHARDS: And all that time you were living?

MR. WHITTEN: At the studio on Crosby.

MS. RICHARDS: Crosby, yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: But we got it back together slowly but surely, step by step piece by piece we pieced it back together. But you can understand what I'm telling you. My options, SoHo was changing, has changed. We're talking 1980. No way in hell I'm going to go pay \$3,000 for a floor.

I'm used to paying \$100 for a floor, \$125 for a floor. So what are my options? I'll be forced out of Manhattan, literally forced out of Manhattan and I wasn't ready to leave Manhattan at that time.

So the opportunity was to own a piece of Manhattan real estate down in Tribeca. That was the best option, my knowledge of construction, which I had a lot, and I figured when I got Jeff to help me, no problem.

Main objective, to get the roof back on. I was in that building for 40 years before I eventually sold it, sold it in 2002, from 1962 to 2002, right. It's a good story, good story of artist survival in New York, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: We have stories like that from artists in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MR. WHITTEN: People doing what they can do in order to keep their work together.

MS. RICHARDS: So it took you three years and then you moved back into the building.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, moved back into the building.

MS. RICHARDS: And you let go of Crosby Street?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, yeah I had sold it.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah I had to move out because I had sold the lease. I needed the money.

MS. RICHARDS: But you were still able to live there while you were doing the construction.

MR. WHITTEN: Right. That was the contract with [the person] I sold it to. You receive the keys when I can move back to Lispenard, worked out.

MS. RICHARDS: And then how did you divide the space in Lispenard, the five floors. How'd you use those?

MR. WHITTEN: We came up with a really neat design. We had an architect working with me, Shael Shapiro, who had done a lot of work, had offices down in SoHo.

Shael Shapiro is the first pioneering architect down in SoHo, big transition from an industrial area to all the condominiums. [I] gave Shael a painting, he worked with me, drew up all the plans, submitted the plans to the building authorities. It was Shael that stood by me.

MS. RICHARDS: S-H-E-L?

MR. WHITTEN: S-H, Shael, S-H-A-E-L, Shael Shapiro Associates, that was the name of his company. But Shael did all the architectural plans for me, submitted all the plans to the city, the whole works.

So the artist's barter system throughout the years we have used that system, doctors, lawyers, accountants, architects, the works. I come from a long barter system in New York. Whatever you need, you go to somebody, trade a painting, restaurant tabs, Mickey Rustin. You know Mickey Rustin?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Max's Kansas City, I had tabs with Mickey \$3,000, \$4,000, give him a painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Of course, that was based on the fact that your paintings had a record of selling and a price record.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah and people knew who I was.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, you couldn't have done that if you hadn't had shows and a track record of selling.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, exactly.

MS. RICHARDS: And you had your work in museums.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, that's why, but it puts you in a position to trade. We're not talking about a lot of money but at that time if I could trade a painting for like \$3,000 or \$4,000, I'd go to Max's Kansas City or Terre Haute.

He had two restaurants at that time. I might not have a dollar in my pocket but I could go there with my wife or three or four guests, order a bottle of champagne, lobster. He had a dish called "ship and shore" which is lobster and steak of one platter, neat theme, right?

MS. RICHARDS: "Surf and turf" it's also called.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, you know, you can live good, old St. Adrian's, same thing, \$3,000, \$4,000 tab.

MS. RICHARDS: St. Adrian's?

MR. WHITTEN: St. Adrian's, a big artist bar on Broadway, late '60s, early '70s.

MS. RICHARDS: When you finally got started painting again, you used one floor of that building for your studio?

MR. WHITTEN: Let me think back. How did we do that? When I got back to work where was I working? That was a good question. Oh yeah, it was on Lispenard.

What we did, the renovation with Shael's plans, we made a duplex on the top two floors. The top floor was an open space, living room, dining room, kitchen, beautiful gorgeous space, the whole top floor.

The [fourth] floor was a big master bedroom, a bedroom for my daughter, and a big bath. That was the plan. The third floor was a studio for my wife, Mary, Winnie Bendinder.

MS. RICHARDS: Winny, W-I-N-N-Y?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, my wife's partner.

MS. RICHARDS: Bendiner?

MR. WHITTEN: Bendiner, B-E-N-D-I-N-E-R. Their company name now is known as Whitten Bendiner. They're restorers, paper [conservators]. So we made their studio on the third floor and I took part of it for a little storage space for paintings and then the second floor became my studio. I took the whole second floor for a studio. The ground floor I had a tenant, Pete, Pete Sourbis, Greek.

MS. RICHARDS: Sourbis?

MR. WHITTEN: Sourbis, S-O-U-R-B-I-S, he was my tenant, great guy who ran a luncheonette. So the luncheonette gave some income that paid taxes, insurance, fuel bill, stuff like that.

Pete was a good guy, another good New York story, Greek immigrant, luncheonette business, kids, sending all his kids to college, luncheonette business, fantastic, real American story. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: Real American story.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you got back to work that's when you started attaching acrylic paint molds to the surface?

MR. WHITTEN: That came later, late '80s. Yeah there's a whole kind of transition period there taking off from *Dead Reckoning* and I did the first show after the big renovation at Onyx Gallery with those paintings right after *Dead Reckoning* when I got back into business.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you get the connection with Onyx Gallery [New York City]?

MR. WHITTEN: Onyx Gallery came through a fellow by the name of Frank Stewart who was a photographer and had been a student of mine at Cooper Union. He was working with the guy [who] was [Swiss, Larent Inkel].

MS. RICHARDS: [Swiss]?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, [Swiss] fellow whose name was - how can I forget that. It was his gallery but Frank was his manager. Frank comes to me and says, we want you to - [do the fist show.]

MS. RICHARDS: Is Stewart S-T-U or S-T-E-W?

MR. WHITTEN: S-T-E-W-A-R-T, Frank Stewart, he's a well-known photographer. He has a beautiful position now at Jazz at Lincoln Center [New York City]. He's the official photographer [for] [Wynton] Marsalis.

MS. RICHARDS: Anyway, his partner, the [Swiss] man.

MR. WHITTEN: It'll come to me. He's [Swiss], gave me the first inaugural show at Onyx Gallery. [Laurent Inkel]

MS. RICHARDS: It was 1984.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, Gramercy Park location, beautiful townhouse, gorgeous space, two floors in a townhouse, beautiful show, had a lot of really decent press, sold some paintings. But that's how that connection came.

MS. RICHARDS: So talk about the evolution of your work then in the second half of the '80s.

MR. WHITTEN: Then we went into the '80s when the idea of the paint as collage was really taking hold. It went back to the early '70s, '73 when I first did that, and realized, boy, I've got to do something with this because by now I'm thinking this is entirely new, innovative. Nobody has done paint as collage.

We're talking skin, reducing the paint to a skin. You can pick it up, hold it in your hand, lay it back down in the form of a collage, big breakthrough, big breakthrough. Those paintings are known as "Site" [series] paintings, S-I-T-E, heavy acrylic surfaces.

A lot of them were made from molds. I'm exploring illusion versus non-illusion, like messing with pictorial illusionism I'm doing things like making Plaster of Paris molds of manhole covers in Manhattan, molds taken from the sidewalk, Plaster of Paris molds taken from a tree in Central Park, from stones, you know those big boulders in Central Park, molds made from that, molds made from my running shoes, molds made from fish when I'd run

out on Canal Street to the fish market, take plaster of Paris, pour right directly on the fish, get a mold of it, take the fish and have it for lunch. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: What do you think conceptually caused you to bring all that into your work?

MR. WHITTEN: It was a move for me to test pictorial illusion and the real thing. It's like if I made a mold of this – it's one that that we see this now. If I take a mold from that and I present it to you in a painting, your first thought would be, oh it's a found object.

But it's not a found object, it's the negation of that that picks up the positive and we cast that thing with acrylic paint, put it on.

So your mind is like what's illusion, what's non-illusion here. So it's a great tension between that, a very great tension. If we had to trace that kind of an idea in art history we would have to list Jasper Johns' *Flag* [1954-55] as the beginning of that, the object-ness, the painting as object. That's where we would have to push it.

If we went further, we would have to go back to, oh, Picasso's use of collage. That little painting of Picasso's [*Still Life with Chair-Caning*, 1912] where you have the wicker from the bottom of a chair glued into the painting and then a little sketch of it. That's where it starts. That's where it starts.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say propelled your painting from the nonobjective process work of the '70s to –

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, referential, the notion of referential as opposed to non-referential.

MS. RICHARDS: You felt you'd reached the end of that period and you did "Dead Reckoning," did the construction work, and when you started again you're bringing all these outside sources to the studio.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, now what's the application? I've done all this work in the '70s, going through early '80s, *Dead Reckoning*. What can I apply to? So I'm doing something. I'm going back to like early '60s, notion of found object really and for the first time in abstraction I'm using referential material.

I can go out on the street and get the sidewalk and bring it into the canvas, get the tree, bring it into the canvas, stone, bring it into the canvas, molds made from bubble wrap, molds made from supermarket packages, which I love.

You look at the packages that you get meat in, has those funny shapes to it, made molds, a lot of molds of that. I had stacks of molds from all different sources.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were creating the compositions in each painting, was it entirely intuitive or did you plan it out? What kind of process led you to the final forms?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, at that point I'm not doing that much drawing because the drawing and the painting had merged. When I'm building those paintings, the drawing is such that it's all this material I've got all over the whole studio floor. I don't have to draw it. It's right there before me.

So I'm taking the freedom of just taking it and putting it right into the thing. At the most I would have like a brief sketch. I mean even that was kind of a zone. But other than that the material that was on the floor is the drawing. So I could be very direct with it.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say intuitive?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, brief conceptualizing how you lay it out but beyond that pure intuition, which was up at that point was giving me a fantastic freedom to work, fantastic freedom. See, always I had worked from a basis of what I call 50-50, the conceptual versus the perceptual. That's always been a basis.

Like the school of thought that I come from in painting like de Kooning and Pollock and people before me from that era, those people did not separate the conceptual from the perceptual and I was taught that they were welded together.

It was later when the conceptualists came along that they separated it. Conceptualists said that, oh I don't have to make that thing. It can exist as an idea.

MS. RICHARDS: Get rid of the perceptual.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, then the idea coming from my understanding of German philosophy, the idea becomes the object. So it's a neat thing. But that drove me the wrong way because I still maintain that I want that conceptual to be locked into the perceptual. I don't want to separate. I don't separate the idea from the action, very

important, this. Don't do that. Don't do that. The idea is locked in the action. That's very important to me.

This is what prompted Jackson Pollock to say, my paintings are not the illustration of an idea. He's right. What he's saying is that [idea] is locked in. We don't separate it. That means a lot to me. Don't do that. Hell, Martin Heidegger did a critique of Western civilization, had the balls to say the Greeks made a big mistake. [Laughs.]

He's talking about Ancient Greek philosophers. He said they separated the idea from the action. Martin Heidegger said that, big critique of Western civilization. You know, the man's got a point. It's just like Christianity.

Christianity also separates, let's separate flesh from this and then the minute you do that you're creating these binary systems, binary structures. I hate that kind of thinking, hate it. But that separation done by the ancient Greeks led to capitalism.

MS. RICHARDS: Among other things, yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, hell yeah, no doubt in my mind. You wouldn't have had capitalism without Christianity.

MS. RICHARDS: In connection with what you're saying, you were quoted I think in the late '70s to say that anything abstract has to have a basis in reality.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, it's concrete. At first the notion of concrete in abstraction was purely our mental device, mind as object or as we say in my background "mind as matter." So I'm finding out now, like, today right now, if I had to explain my thinking further, the concrete can be literally stated as physical.

MS. RICHARDS: Would -

MR. WHITTEN: Before the notion of the concrete was purely a mental notion, a mental object. But I'm seeing now that the notion of concrete can be purely physical as much as a concrete sidewalk is physical.

MS. RICHARDS: We talked about the paintings you did in the late '60s, memorials for Martin Luther King. In '83 you did a Norman Lewis triptych. I don't know if you'd call that a memorial.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, I did more than one, sure. I have more than one.

MS. RICHARDS: So the idea of doing a memorial continues.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, oh yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Has continued.

MR. WHITTEN: Norman Lewis. There are memorials to Romare Bearden.

MS. RICHARDS: These were all in the '80s I think?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. [Norman] died in [1979], Bearden in [1988], memorial to Jacob Lawrence, which is a more recent one in the 1900s [sic][2001].

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I have that.

MR. WHITTEN: Before 2000, the date of that painting, *Black Monolith*.

MS. RICHARDS: Ninety-Eight.

MR. WHITTEN: "Black Monolith" [series], yeah Jacob Lawrence, memorial to Barbara Jordan.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to the late '80s, I think you used the word [keloid], a scar, talking about the surface being kind of a scarred.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, yes, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: How did that -

MR. WHITTEN: The scarification is where it comes from. Scarification is a practice that was used with prehistoric societies, African, a lot of different cultures where the scarification [is] done directly to the skin, was a pattern [to] signify rank, status, identity.

I'm interested in that, even here walking the streets of New York occasionally you can see a black African with

scarification patterns on the face. There's a hieroglyphic to that. If you can read those patterns you know a lot about that person.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that was true in your paintings?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, I was taking that from the African source and using it in painting as sort of a coding. I'm interested in codes. Even up until recently I've been working through a series of codes, investigations of codes. My electronic stamp painting is about that, what we call data glyphs.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: Tracking codes.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I want to get to that.

MR. WHITTEN: Bar codes, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Taking a brief side trip before we get into the '80s, let's talk about studio practice. Do you generally start in the studio first thing in the morning, and work straight through the day?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I'm a morning person. I like to be in the studio early.

MS. RICHARDS: And you talked about getting assistance in terms of carpentry. If you had had the resources would have you wanted to have studio assistants? Have you had studio assistants?

MR. WHITTEN: It's difficult. I use them when I have to but it's difficult. I can only use assistants for a few things, certain things, certain processes that's related to what I'm doing and then if I have a need I have two people that I depend upon. Jim Barden.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell his last name?

MR. WHITTEN: B-A-R-D-E-N, Jim Barden is always on call when I need assistance. Patrick, what's Patrick's last name, sometimes names escape me. [Patrick Corsetti]

[END CD 5.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Jack Whitten in Jackson Heights, Queens on December 3, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc six.

What about light? I'd asked you about it before. Do you need or want to maintain constant light and therefore only want to use artificial lighting, or do you welcome natural light when you have it?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, I like natural light. I'm a morning person. I work in the morning. I have a good lighting system in the studio but I prefer working in natural light.

MS. RICHARDS: Some artists think about working in the light in which their paintings are going to be seen in a gallery.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I'm aware of that. A lot of artists talk that way and they [have] a point. I prefer natural light. First of all, I'm thinking about my needs. You don't get tired under natural light. I'm always thinking long term, even in investments.

If I give my investor, the guy who takes care of my money for me, I say, hey man, do something with it. I don't want to see it, seriously.

MS. RICHARDS: Very trusting.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I don't want to see it. I don't even want to know. Do something with it. Something happens 20 years, 30 years from now, tell me about it, seriously. Warren Buffett talking. I've got a little Warren Buffett in me.

MS. RICHARDS: In the studio, do you always listen to music, just at certain points, and if so, what kind of music?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, jazz, jazz and Cretan.

MS. RICHARDS: And that's always been the case?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, well, yeah, always jazz, always jazz and Cretan, my good buddy [Psaradoni] from Crete.

MS. RICHARDS: Say that name again.

MR. WHITTEN: That's hard for you to catch. [Psaradoni, Cretan lyra player.]

MS. RICHARDS: I'll let you put that into the transcript when you get it.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, we have a lyra player, right. Crete has an indigenous instrument, the lyra, is one of the best contemporary [player] today. I primarily listen to Margarits, a dear friend of mine, lyra player on Crete. I have all their tapes, and jazz. [Xilouris, Skoulas and Margaritis]

MS. RICHARDS: Not the radio, always CDs?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, the radio, [WBGO} [88.3 FM, Newark], I send them money every year to let them know I appreciate what they're doing because listening to WB[GO}, right, you get surprises. A lot of times they get a bit academic and so forth but you do get surprises. [And the Columbia University Jazz Station]

You'll be working and all of a sudden they would play something that I wouldn't necessarily play with my CD, right. I've got a stack of CDs that I program. But the advantage of like WB[GO], they're going to play something that you wouldn't ordinarily play. All of a sudden I'm there and they might - they have something called "The Blues Hour" and then Joe Williams come up, which is a favorite of mine from that period.

The other day I was working and they played Lou Rawls. I don't have one Lou Rawls record but I remember going to see Lou Rawls in nightclubs here. But it's not a record that I would keep. But hearing that, I'd say, wow, I haven't heard that guy in a long time and that was neat.

MS. RICHARDS: You had a studio on Lispenard below your living space. Before that it was in a separate space. Is your preference to live in the same building or on the same floor as your studio, or to go to a different place to work?

MR. WHITTEN: I'd rather go to a different place because when I go to paint, when I go to the studio, it's going to work. That's what it's about. I prefer that. I prefer going to work. That's why I keep a separate studio from where I live.

I prefer the idea of getting up in the morning. My day starts with *The New York Times*. Mary and I get up. We have our coffee, go downstairs, the *Times* is delivered downstairs. I don't go anywhere. I don't start the day off without having a coffee, reading *The New York Times*, even if it means getting up at six o'clock in the morning. I can't get up and rush outside. I don't do that.

I get up, have my coffee, talk, read my paper, then I go outside. That's daily practice, daily practice, even in the summertime in Crete.

If I'm not out on the sea. If I'm going out on the sea fishing I'm out at five o'clock before the sun comes up on the sea. If I'm not going out fishing, the weather's bad, we have a beautiful porch outdoors.

We sit, have our coffee, read, for me usually a book on philosophy and Mary's a big, big time reader, watching the birds. We have a big birdbath. Birds come in the morning, eat my damn figs [laughs] and they play in the water. I enjoy that.

So before starting the day I'm going to be reading. I'm going to have my coffee. I'm watching the birds. We have those little animals. We call them kaligenoussa. It's like a little weasel, fantastic little things. They come up. They do their little act in the morning.

Lizards, we have these beautiful - sauras we call them. They come up and do their thing, [lie] in the sun, fantastic, watching nature.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: I enjoy that. So I believe in that transition thing from sleep to activity.

MS. RICHARDS: And rituals.

MR. WHITTEN: Which is what the morning - yeah, a ritual - that's what the morning's about. I have my fresh ground coffee. I don't buy coffee ground. I grind it. I buy the beans. I grind it. In the summertime we buy crates of oranges. We have the best oranges in the world on Crete, fresh squeezed orange juice, not the crap I have to buy in New York, fresh squeezed. I believe in ritual.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about ringing a bell to start the studio day.

MR. WHITTEN: Absolutely, the studio day, the first thing I do, I go to my family shrine. I light a candle to my family, place oil on the sculpture.

MS. RICHARDS: Describe that oil.

MR. WHITTEN: It's olive oil, my olive oil, oil that I produce from my trees. I have a three-dimensional sculpture, which is my – I call it my black Christ. Oil is placed on the head of that. Incense is lit and I ring the bell to let them know of my presence and that I'm honoring them. That's how I start the day off, ritual.

MS. RICHARDS: Do those components of your ritual come from different religious practices that you've brought together?

MR. WHITTEN: Most people all over the world that I have visited have forms of ritual, yeah, whether they're Jews –

MS. RICHARDS: So it's a little bit of Catholic Church, a little bit of Buddhist, a little [of Africa.]

MR. WHITTEN: Whether they're Catholics, whether they're Buddhists, whether they're New York Puerto Ricans, whether they're Greeks, whether they're Cretans down in my village. All the Greek homes have their little family ritual and icon. All cultures do this, African sources, in my case. So it's a human thing, right. Humans have found out that ritual plays a role in who we are and our culture.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you feel that your studio is private to the extent that you don't want anyone to visit to see your work while it's in progress?

MR. WHITTEN: That can be a little difficult because a lot of times I don't have a clear [idea] of what the work is about for someone from the outside. But there are people who are close to me. People only come to my studio when I invite them. I don't have people walking off the street ringing my bell. I don't do that. I don't have that.

You come to my studio, you're invited to come. You don't walk off the street and show up.

MS. RICHARDS: Especially in the current location.

MR. WHITTEN: And in the current location, of course, but even in those days I never did like that.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: I mean all artists have different studio practices. I think about my buddy Bob Thompson. Bob Thompson would have a party going on, people smoking, getting high, eating, dancing. He would be there painting. [Laughs.] I couldn't do that, no way I could do that.

Painting for me is a private affair. Even having assistants around, there are certain processes [that I use], I don't want [anyone] around because in my mind it interferes with the spirit.

When I paint I believe in a transference of the spirit into matter. That's what I call it and if somebody's there, another presence there, it hinders that transference. One of my critiques of contemporary art and painting practices in general is that, do you realize today that there are a lot of painters don't do their own stuff? There's a bunch of artists that do it. I don't like that.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of transference, is it valuable, important, or necessary for you to have past works, immediate past works or earlier works, in the studio while you're working on new work or actually you'd prefer they not be there?

MR. WHITTEN: I'd prefer they not be there. I keep two or three examples of recent thing[s]. But if it's not, it either goes to storage or I have a storage area in the studio behind closed doors. I can pull it out when I want to see it because I want the intensity of the moment to be intact.

MS. RICHARDS: Does that mean that you're working on one piece at a time?

MR. WHITTEN: One piece at a time. The way I work, I can only work on one piece at a time. My medium, the way I work, the process, does not allow me to work on several pieces at once. The degree of concentration that it takes to do what I do, the best you can do is one piece at a time.

MS. RICHARDS: Has it mostly always been that way, that you've worked on one piece at a time?

MR. WHITTEN: Absolutely, from the '60s onward.

MS. RICHARDS: Once you begin a work –

MR. WHITTEN: I don't work in – I hate what I call cookie painters, or cookie-cutter painters. I walk into a show and I see 20 paintings all the same, change a color here, change this a little bit. I don't do that. I despise that. I don't like cookie-cutter production paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: We talked about intuition. What part do chance and accidents and mistakes play, or not mistakes, that's different, but chance and accidents play in the work?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, Bill de Kooning, I asked that question to Bill de Kooning once as a young painter. He looked at me and he says, "kid, there ain't no such thing as accidents. Don't believe that shit." [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Does that mean, unconsciously we –

MR. WHITTEN: Oh no, it's there. It's incorporated. I mean, at some point, especially with early surrealist practices, people made a big deal of the notion of accident and automatism. Bill, don't believe that shit, that's what he says to me. It's incorporated.

MS. RICHARDS: What happens if the work is not going where you intended? Do you change the concept as you're going, or ditch the painting and consider it a failure?

MR. WHITTEN: I have experience[d] – I'm a woodcarver, you know. In the summer months I don't paint. I carve wood. Often I have the experience in carving wood I've got a decent log. I've invested a lot of money in it. It might be sitting for 30, 40 years. I'm working on it. Weather change, humidity conditions between dry and damp, log splits, "checks" we call it. What am I going to do?

Am I going to throw that expensive log away? No, I'm going to incorporate it. So those kinds of practices, you know, I'm very much aware of. You have to have a fast eye. You have to cultivate, right. It's like I start from a point of view of laying out a conceptual framework to work in but within that conceptual framework I make allowances for what I call "shit happens." That's part of my thinking.

After laying out this acute conceptualized notion, you know, shit happens. It's incorporated. I insist upon that because there's a value to spontaneity and in painters, especially from my tradition, understands the value of spontaneity and understands what happens with spontaneity and in my particular case it comes directly out of the philosophy of jazz. We depend upon it. We want it, right.

Philosophy of jazz, to take it right down to a nut, jazz philosophy is the expansion of freedom. In jazz, freedom must expand. That's what it's about. This is what attracts people to it all over the world. This is what attracts artists to it.

This is what attract[ed] [Piet] Mondrian to it. Jazz is the expansion of freedom and when we realize the philosophy built into jazz, spontaneity, extremely important ingredient, not that it's the only ingredient. It's an important ingredient and we depend upon it.

But for somebody to say you have to depend upon it and you're thinking conceptually, you have to learn how to use it. You have to learn how to use it.

For a guy, let's say a musician in jazz, to be good at spontaneity, improvisation, their conceptual framework has to be intact. Only when the conceptual framework is intact, in the case of a musician, in terms of if you're a saxophone player, which I'm a sax player, breathing techniques, chords, music, all that conceptualized stuff has to be intact.

When I try to explain this to people I tell them it's like a diving board. Think of yourself as a diving board. That's the conceptual framework. We design that diving board at what height we want it, depth of water and when we walk on the diving board – if you have done this you can understand exactly why I'm using this analogy.

All of us know, who have jumped off a diving board, the real action that turns us on is when our foot leaves that tip. It's that gap that happens when my foot leaves the tip and before I hit the water.

I work in the gap. With everything I do, I work in the gap. The gap is what excites me the most. In painting, it's the gap that exists between form and meaning. That's where I work.

MS. RICHARDS: There was a brief period of time when you went to Rochester and worked with Xerox techniques. Was that back in the '80s?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh no, early, early '70s.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh earlier? '70s?

MR. WHITTEN: '73.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that worth discussing?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, very much so.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MR. WHITTEN: Sure. Xerox Corporation gave myself, I think four other artists grant money. It wasn't that much. I think it was like \$4,000 [each] to come to Rochester [NY] and all they wanted from us is to interact with their engineers and play with their equipment. That's all they told us.

MS. RICHARDS: Over what period of time?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, they brought us up to Rochester and we stayed up there for like a day or so and then after that they said, whatever you want to take back home, equipment, feel free. So I jumped on the chance. I brought a ton of stuff back. I was at Broome Street then.

My interest was the original Xerox, what is called the flat plate equipment. Originally Xerox, you had to do it manually, step by step by step. Today when you go and press the button, you're not aware of it because it works all automatically. But there are specific steps that are taking place.

But my interest was what is called flat plate where you had each step [done manually] and in particular the toner, which is a dry powder. Now keep in mind, Xerox process is a dry printing process. They use the word Xerox because it's Greek. ζηρό [iros] in Greek means dry. That's where they get the word from.

Okay, now they have patented it. That's their trademark, which I found out. At the end of the project I had titled a piece "Xeroxed," X-E-R-O-X-E-D.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MR. WHITTEN: With a line under it. They said, oh no, you can't do that. I says, what do you mean I can't do that? Oh no, that's our trademark. That's a trademark infringement. I protested. They had planned that when we finished our project they were going to take the works and do a show, exhibit it. Because of that painting and my titling it caused them to say, hey, well maybe we should reconsider this. These guys are destructive.

Steven Antonakis was one of the other participants. Antonak[o]s is A-N-T-O-N-A-K-[O]-S.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: He gave them a box, tied up, just says don't open until, I don't know, 1,000 years from now or something. Bob Whitman did something with some lens stuff, like real crazy stuff. By this point they say, oh no. [Laughs.] We never did the show. I mean, I still have the piece and I still have the title on it.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you what's been your method of titling works and has it changed, the method?

MR. WHITTEN: Not really. My titles are not arbitrary picks. They are tied into, for my case, being a painter of matter, they are tied into the material. They're tied into the matter or by the way, you were in the studio the other day and you were asking me about that painting that I'm working on and I tried to give you a description. I didn't have a title. But I told you that, oh, I know what it's about. It's about time. It's about memory and I went through a whole thing which I knew it was about. Last night as I awoke during the night the title came to me. It's *Pieces of Time*.

[Telephone rings.]

[Audio Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: As you've been working over the decades and using sometimes rather unconventional materials, have you been thinking about archival issues of "How long is this going to last?" or has that been very much secondary?

MR. WHITTEN: No, no, no, no, in truth, it's interesting you would ask that. The Museum of Modern Art, when they accepted that painting from the Robert Miller show, sent me paperwork asking all kinds of questions, I mean like - and they're not the only one. The Whitney, the Metropolitan, Wadsworth [Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT], they want to know about this material and what your processes are, conservational things that they can

use.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: And just recently when a year ago the Museum of Modern Art here in New York included that painting they own of mine in a show. It was up for quite a long period of time. But I had to go through this whole thing again, even going there to meet with their conservator, asking all kinds of questions about this.

See, acrylic is relatively new. We're talking late '50s at the most and it wasn't up until the '60s that artists started using it extensively.

It's really not that much information on it. What they do is go directly to the artist to ask what are you doing, what are you using, and especially in my case that you can't say it's Golden, it's Liquitex, it's Bocour, it's Utrecht, because by the time I get through it, it's Jack Whitten. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: A lot of what I do involves raw material. The saving grace is that the binder itself, the acrylic polymer, has proven to be extremely stable, extremely so.

That's why for my purposes doing the amount of experimentation that I do, it's most suitable for experimentation, tough film, tough surface films in it, right, not affected, so tough, outer atmospheric stuff doesn't bother it that much. It tends not to move.

I mean it's a few things you have to think about. For example when people are picking up paintings, especially if it's cold outside, I have to tell them, I have a written form that tells them, look, below 32 degrees, freezing point, acrylic will break. A lot of people don't know that. It will break. I mean [it] snap[s] like glass.

So I'm not being fussy, but if it's cold the day your truck is picking up, is your truck heated? I'm helping them. Not only am I helping myself I'm telling them something that they don't know. You've got to have a heated truck moving this stuff around. The slightest bump or something, it's freezing, pop!

Severe changes in [temperature], now a lot of times I use that fact in the work. I take acrylic -in the studio, I keep a deep freezer. I put, depending upon the subject matter that I'm working with, I take the acrylic film, the sheet of acrylic, put it in the deep freezer, let it sit two or three days, take it out. It's brittle like glass. It's like hitting glass with a hammer because I want that fractility.

Geometry is important to me. I play between fractal geometry and Euclidean geometry. So your question is quite fitting. They have to go to the artist to ask the artist. We know the general notion and they can explain to us the chemical properties and the standards that they work to. But when it gets in the artist's hands, a lot of stuff is [happening].

But it is tough. Like Lennie Bocour, I put the question to him once, hey man, what's going to happen to this stuff in 50 years, 100 years. He says to me, he had just put the first gels out on the market and those gels came [up] in a lot of discussions that we had.

When Lennie would come to your studio and ask you what do you need, what are you thinking. Lennie made the first gels. I says, how good is this stuff Lennie? He says, at my country house, I just used this stuff as masonry with some stone walls I made. I said, get out of here, [laughs] that kind of a thing.

The stuff is tough. So from a conservational point of view with proper - the usual care - so far, so good. I don't think we have anything to worry about.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Right. There are limits though to how far you can push it and it will interfere in terms of conservation, that I can tell you.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: I can give you an example. Al Held did a series of works called "Taxicab" series, very bright. It was the last period of his Abstract Expressionist period, okay. They were done on photographic backdrop paper, acrylic paint on photographic - you know photographic backdrop paper.

Bob Miller had acquired those things, came to my wife Mary and Winnie and says, look, I want you to take these things and I want you to mount them to canvas as paintings. Insane. Now we're talking structures that are like nine, nine-and-a-half feet by 20 feet. I think the largest one was over [40] some feet. Can you do it?

MS. RICHARDS: Because he was afraid that paper wasn't going to hold up?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, the paper, it wouldn't. You couldn't do anything with it. You couldn't even hang it on a wall. Can you do it? This is the first time that I've worked with Winnie and Mary as a collaborator. I said, let me think about it. I've had a lot - I've probably got more experience working with acrylic than anybody on the planet.

I figured out, shit yeah, we can do it. It's a good chance to make some decent money. [Laughs.] We accepted the job. They hired me as a consultant. We had to go out and rent another whole floor just to do these things.

We built that platform that I worked on, the big drawing board. We built it to those same specifications as an area to work on. We mounted acrylic paint on paper to number 10 cotton duck, one continuous flow, over [40] feet.

The Metropolitan bought the big one. Go up and look at that painting and you can see our mark on the side.

MS. RICHARDS: So Bob Miller made a good investment.

MR. WHITTEN: Hell yeah, very good, but we saved it, otherwise - just to give you an example though, the resilience of acrylic paint. We soon found out that the paint film itself was stronger than the fucking paper it was on.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I'm not surprised.

MR. WHITTEN: The paper was falling off in your hand, tearing. So as far as we know, using examples like that conservational wise, I don't think we have a place to worry about with acrylic.

MS. RICHARDS: Moving back to your work for a minute, we were up to the late '80s and wanted to get into the '90s and talk about your work during that time.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, the '90s were a big change. After the '80s paintings that were purely referential, meaning that I'm going outside of my head, out to the outside, using things that I've taken molds of from the street, I'm thinking, wow if I can do that with referential material, what if I pushed it back to non-referential?

So what I did, I took those acrylic films I was working with. You see, the way I work now from the '90s on, I work with a dry palette. What's different about me, I work with a dry palette. I don't work with a wet palette anymore. Painting up to that point was always a wet palette. The whole history of painting was a wet palette.

I come along, first paintings in 1990 coming out of the Site paintings, it's a dry palette, meaning that it was wet at one time, then I made the material and then that material is reacted to as a dry substance, big difference, big difference in painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Still mostly black and white.

MR. WHITTEN: The first ones, 1990, highly colored, beautiful translucent films as thin as that sheet of paper, so thin I mounted them down on a grid structure onto canvas, laminated to canvas. They were so thin, when I dealt with them I had to wet the tip of my hand and pick them up.

MS. RICHARDS: Like gold leaf.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, like gold leaf, and put them down. They were so thin. Thin films of acrylic paint laminated to canvas on a high, very specific quality of ground, meaning that the quality of ground - well, you're talking 10, 15 layers of acrylic gesso, sand down, absolutely smooth ground, very specific quality of ground and then thin films of acrylic paint laminated down to that.

There are drawings from that period. Studio Museum recently bought one of them - are ink, rice paper laminated to like Rives, yeah; again, extremely difficult technically to do. Rice paper, you can image, laminated down to that.

MS. RICHARDS: So you started doing works on paper again.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I had to.

MS. RICHARDS: This is before you came up with the idea of the mosaic?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, it was leading up to that. At first they were very thin films, like a thin photographic film and then they got thicker and then I realized - see, I've always been a student of studying ancient mosaics, Byzantine period especially interests me, and working in Greece, at [my] house in Greece, by this point I'm

working with stone. I'm learning how to work with stone. I'm hiring people to do stonework for me. I'm working with them and I'm learning how to cut stone, working with marble, granites, and then [I met Miotto].

MS. RICHARDS: M-I-O?

MR. WHITTEN: M-I-O-T-T-O, who is the contractor who does all the tile work for the MTA subway. He's the man. I went to see him. At first I went to see Mr. Cavallo who was the first one.

MS. RICHARDS: Cavallo?

MR. WHITTEN: C-A-V-A-L-L-O. He was so sweet. He comes in[to] my studio. I'm talking about mosaics that I've seen of course and he comes in and looks at my paintings. He says, you don't need me. He was such a sweet guy. [Laughs.] "What do you need me for?" But he didn't realize that he was looking at paint. He couldn't believe his eyes. I said, wait a minute, this is my problem. This ain't stone. He says, what are you talking about?

Then I took it and did that to it and it didn't break. This ain't stone Mr. Cavallo.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: So he sent me to Miotto and Miotto told me that he knows a source in Italy where you can buy the original tools that was used to do direct mosaic. Direct mosaic, the tessera was originally cut by hand. There's a tool, a special tool, right. It's like a little adze axe, double-sided axe [and] piece of steel.

Then there's a shaft of steel that must be placed down into an upright log end-grain, can't do it across the grain. You have to do it end-grain. You have to cut down into the ingrain and then insert this tool. So a chunk of metal a piece of carbide metal [welded] on the top and the axe you are using also has a piece of carbide.

You have to learn how to hold the stone, place it on that chunk of metal and you have to strike it like striking a diamond. Now when I was first learning to do this, my hands were bloody. You have to learn to hold that damn sucker like that, bop, and you can twist it and you can cut square [or angle].

The first time I attempted this, the first [outside] floor mosaic I made at [my] house in Greece, it's a big compass, marble, black marble from Mozambique, white marble Dionysian from the island of Páros, [Petra Karistou] we call it.

It's from the island of Karistos . It's a sedimentary stone, gorgeous. So I'm cutting this stuff and making these tessera. So I'm thinking you can do it with stone, you can do it with paint. They get thicker.

[It's important to include to following in relation to these paintings: Three processes are involved. 1. Construction - Construction of the acrylic painted skin. 2. Deconstruction - Cutting or breaking of the skin. 3. Reconstruction - the structuring of the picture plane.]

So the first tesseras are about quarter inch by quarter by quarter. The tesseras are cubic, right, originally cut from stone. But I started making tessera from acrylic paint. So the painting was built with these tessera.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you do drawings to plan those paintings since this is such a laborious process.

MR. WHITTEN: A lot of those paintings have drawings but again, very brief. I didn't want to get too conceptual into the nature of the form. So it was sort of a layout of a form and then pulling directly from the cut tessera that I have before me. Again, the tessera is a collage. Tessera is a paint collage. It's just that in this case it's a cubic. It's a cubic.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about color then at that point?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh then I could experiment with a whole range of color, whole range of possibilities. A lot of those early tessera paintings, sometimes you think you're looking at granite. Sometimes you think you're looking at marble.

In truth, one of the first shows I had up - I'll never forget one beautiful young man. He comes up to me and he says, Mr. Whitten, who cuts your glass for you? [Laughs.] It was so sweet.

I say, it's not glass, and then he says, but who cuts it for you. I says, you're not hearing me. It's not glass. He still didn't get it. So what I do when I had those first shows, I kept a few in my pocket.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: I would say, hey look. Amazingly so, right, experimenting with a lot of different materials, a lot of

different substances as opposed to just dry pigment, you get amazing results, different things, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So the works you've done in the '90s were primarily using a mosaic technique.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, right, the first of the tessera, we first showed those at Stuart's place, Stuart Horodner.

MS. RICHARDS: There was a show in '92.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, Sullivan Street, first show.

MS. RICHARDS: Horodner Romley [Gallery].

MR. WHITTEN: Yep, Horodner Romley. That was when we first showed the tessera paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: And during that time in the '90s you were doing again a number of paintings in memory of important people.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, the Black Monolith paintings, the Black Monolith was conceived as [dedication] to important black figures that I commemorated in the form of a monolith. You know a monolith, out of nature, huge stone, and that term came from my house in Crete [where] we've got a fantastic monolith out in the back of the house up the hill from us, gorgeous, huge.

MS. RICHARDS: Man-made or completely natural?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh no, nature, this is a real natural monolith out of nature, a bulge of rock coming up out of the earth that stands over 300 feet or more, base is probably hundred or some feet, one lump of stone coming up out of the earth.

We call it [Lenikou Xarakas] the Greek name and that damn thing influenced that Black Monolith series, just viewing it is so impressive.

So my mind said, well, I guess they can - "Black Monolith" and that kind of a presence, all of those Black Monoliths had this massive presence about them, Barbara Jordan.

MS. RICHARDS: Most, but not all, African-American?

MR. WHITTEN: African-American, yeah, all those Black Monoliths are African-Americans

MS. RICHARDS: But you did something for Joe DiMaggio I think too.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, that's not one of the Black Monolith. DiMaggio was not black.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: Barbara Jordan [1998], black monolith, Jacob Lawrence [2001], black monolith, right, it's a bunch of them.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: James Baldwin [1987], Black Monolith series, Ralph Ellison [1994], Black Monolith series.

MS. RICHARDS: And also - is this part of Black Monolith, the Bobby Short and Miles Davis?—and there's Marcia Tucker or is that different?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, it's different. It's a different - all the black monoliths have a recognizable form, usually kind of an almost V-shaped or like that sitting within them.

MS. RICHARDS: An upside-down or right-side-up V?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, very, very precise. It's always a presence of a form though, sort of an architectural presence. And in the James Baldwin case that black monolith - you ever meet James Baldwin? The man had an enormous head on a small body.

So when I was planning that black monolith to James Baldwin I'm going back to his head and the memory of his head. I met him more than once, talked to him quite a few times, big enormous massive head on a little body. So the Black Monolith [series], in terms of the form, comes out of the head, the presence of the head.

The '90s covered a lot of work, went back to unstretched canvas, developed a technique of building the tessera

directly to canvas that was attached to the wall, that this was an amazing technique which allowed me - there's a whole series of paintings that allowed me to get off the stretcher.

Found out by putting a layer of plastic to the wall, which would act as a release, the canvas was tacked directly to the wall on top of the plastic and I could make it any shape I wanted it.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean you could put something underneath?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, no, I could cut the canvas any shape I wanted.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. WHITTEN: I no longer was bound by the rectangular or the square. [This technique allows me to use irregular shaped canvases.] Mount it directly to the wall, a great technique. The canvas is stapled to the wall, right, on top of this sheet of plastic used as a relief. The painting is built on top of the canvas. When the painting is finished, with the help of the assistant, the whole thing is pulled from the wall, which reveals all the staples going through the canvas. With the face of the canvas flat to the floor, we take a pair of pliers and release the [staples] by pulling them out. It was like pulling sutures from a [surgery].

MS. RICHARDS: The staples?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: And then what did you do?

MR. WHITTEN: We took it down and we just took the whole painting. We'd take it for view wherever we were going to show it and just mount it to the wall.

MS. RICHARDS: But did you have to trim the edge, do something to the edge?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, no, the edge is already built. I put the tessera right to the edge.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. WHITTEN: So you've got a definitive edge but a shaped canvas.

MS. RICHARDS: Does that kind of work stand up by itself or does it need -

MR. WHITTEN: It's flat to the wall, no stretcher bar.

MS. RICHARDS: But it will fall down if they take it off?

MR. WHITTEN: It's stapled to the wall.

MS. RICHARDS: But when you take it off, it does not -

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, you can just roll it up, take it where you want to take it. Take it to the galleries, staple it to the wall. I have more than one up now in different collections stapled right to the wall.

It's an amazing sight once you see this very physical thing, right, no stretcher bar. It goes back to the old light sheet paintings done at Allan Stone's but this having more physical presence about it because of the tessera. It works.

MS. RICHARDS: During that whole time when you were using the - and you still are I believe - using the mosaic technique, did your technique change for making them? Did it evolve over this long journey?

MR. WHITTEN: The techniques keep evolving. They're all kinds of changes going on in terms of the material and how I build them. They're built in layers. When I'm making the tesseras, it's a whole sheet of acrylic that's built in layers and I'm using the word evolution more.

I'm talking about the evolution of painting, the evolution of materials, right. It's becoming more and more aware that painting is an organic process.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you making a supply of the tessera and then figuring out what to use or are you -

MR. WHITTEN: Oh I have hundreds, hundreds of them, sheets of [acrylic] that are just sitting for use. I can adopt them any time I want. Now the system has become [100%] recyclable, meaning that I don't lose a scrap of acrylic from the studio anymore. I've found ways to recycle it, goes right back into the system.

MS. RICHARDS: When you say recycle, you mean find a future project that it's right for?

MR. WHITTEN: No, meaning that I've got - when you work in this way a lot of scrap is left over.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Now I have found ways to take that scrap, incorporate it back into the system, techniques like freezing it, putting it in like a large mortar pestle, grinding the hell out of it, throwing it back into the medium, that kind of a thing.

Now 100 percent recyclable, nothing leaves the studio, no waste. Every piece of [paint] film, every piece of [paint] film in the dry bucket is reincorporated and of course in doing this you can build different subject matter. when I'm building the tessera, it's always unique to subject. The subject is built into the paint, like that interview I did with Jeanne Siegel for her book in there [*Painting After Pollock: Structures of Influence*].

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: We explain how I was involved with - yeah, I was building the Barbara Jordan painting and Jeanne is asking me questions like this in terms of subject matter and the paint. Jeanne, the subject is built in the paint. In truth, I was just in the middle. That's when I pointed to the bucket. You see that bucket of paint over there? Barbara Jordan is in that bucket, Jeanne. [Laughs.] She liked that.

Firsthand information at the beginning, she comes in at a time when the painting is just in process where the subject matter - that's what's really hard with what I do. How do you get that subject matter in the paint?

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: Which extends abstraction. We have always known about paint as matter, matter painters. Abstract Expressionists came out of matter painting. But to take a subject, and build it into the paint medium, that extends the meaning of abstraction. It's an extension.

MS. RICHARDS: As you've been talking about your work, and you're very articulate, I wanted to ask about teaching. You have done some teaching.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, a lot of teaching.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you done it on a regular, permanent basis?

MR. WHITTEN: I've never done full-time teaching. I've always done adjunct.

MS. RICHARDS: And where have you taught?

MR. WHITTEN: My first teaching position was at Queens College [NY]. It was because of Mel Edwards, damn it. Mel Edwards came to me. He had a position -

MS. RICHARDS: Mel Edwards?

MR. WHITTEN: At Queens. He was leaving Queens to accept another position that was more of a full-time position and he asked me to take this class and I told him, man, I'm not interested in damn teaching.

MS. RICHARDS: He's a sculptor.

MR. WHITTEN: Sculptor. [Mel works with welded steel.]

MS. RICHARDS: Was it a sculpture class or a painting class?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, no it was a class on American art.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean a lecture class?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, more of a lecture class.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. WHITTEN: I said, man, I'm not - I have no interest in teaching whatsoever. He convinced me to do it. So I went to Queens College. They had a program there called the SEEK [Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge] program. It was especially designed -

MS. RICHARDS: That was an acronym? S-E-E-K?

MR. WHITTEN: S-E-E-K, SEEK. It was especially designed to attract inner-city kids, white and black, Hispanics- as a junior college idea. Get these kids into college but introduce them at the junior level. And I did it.

That's how I got involved with teaching. I took Mel Edwards' class at Queens College. I think I did that class for about two years maybe, three, and then I get a call from Cooper Union.

Jack Stewart was a painting professor of mine when I was a student at Cooper Union, at one point became chairman of the fine arts department and he calls to say, "I want you to teach a class at Cooper Union." I couldn't believe it. Now up to that point, Cooper Union did not allow graduates to teach.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh really?

MR. WHITTEN: No, if you were a graduate of Cooper you couldn't teach there. So me and Christopher Wilmarth, I think I'm correct in this, we'll have to do some research there. But as far as I know, myself and Christopher Wilmarth were the first people who had graduated from Cooper and [were] later called back to teach.

Now I was called to teach painting by Jack Stewart, adjunct position. I think I did two classes in painting, advanced painting. The course was advanced painting and I was promoted to associate professor, adjunct. I stayed at Cooper for 26 years.

MS. RICHARDS: Would that be teaching two days a week or both classes in one day?

MR. WHITTEN: No, I did like two days separate classes. Now that was only an adjunct position. The schools get away with murder with the adjunct people. You know that.

MS. RICHARDS: Absolutely.

MR. WHITTEN: So at one time just to make ends meet, at one time I taught at Cooper, I taught at Manhattan Community College [NY], and Pratt, three adjunct positions. I was going crazy.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember when that was?

MR. WHITTEN: Hmm?

MS. RICHARDS: When was that?

MR. WHITTEN: All through the '70s, early '70s.

MS. RICHARDS: Early '70s?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, up to mid '70s and then still doing like sometimes occasionally carpentry jobs on the side.

MS. RICHARDS: Because these adjunct positions paid so little.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, adjunct positions.

MS. RICHARDS: What did you teach at Manhattan Community College and at Pratt?

MR. WHITTEN: Painting.

MS. RICHARDS: All painting?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I taught a drawing course at Pratt, one year. I only did that one year. I was teaching once at Fordham University, Cooper Union, and Manhattan Community at the same time and then Jeanne Siegel calls me and says, look, I want you to teach a class. You should be at SVA. I want you to teach a class here.

MS. RICHARDS: But this is while you are teaching at Cooper.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, so I taught both at Cooper and a class at SVA at the same time. But later I gave up Cooper because Jeanne Siegel brought me to SVA and she says, look, you should be here. That's how she put it.

Plus we can give you hospitalization insurance, which Cooper did not offer to the adjunct people and Jeanne convinced me. We can give you hospitalization insurance. We can offer a little IRA investment thing. Yeah, she made it like, hey, we want you.

MS. RICHARDS: But it wasn't a full-time position.

MR. WHITTEN: No, no, not full-time.

MS. RICHARDS: It was still an adjunct.

MR. WHITTEN: I never sought a full-time position.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: I mean I've done things like invited professor, graduate departments, Hunter College, Brooklyn College, but I've never accepted a full-time position. I didn't have any interest in that.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say is your teaching method?

MR. WHITTEN: The advantage of Jack Whitten teaching is experience, years of experience in studio practice, big background in art history, number three, huge history of working with people, like in my days in carpentry.

I've worked with Italians, I've worked with Polish, I've worked with Puerto Ricans, I've worked with Portuguese, you know what I'm saying, gives me a knowledge of different sensibilities and people.

I'm coming in into New York City like the first wave of the so-called multicultural experience and I'm in a position to bring it to the schools. We didn't have that before.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: We didn't have that. So that made me a pivotal figure in teaching that I could do that. I was one of those people because of my background coming out of the South through segregation, coming to the North, the people I met, I can bridge the gaps. That's the importance of my teaching.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that you adhere to a particular curriculum when you taught painting or was it advanced painting and you just basically responded to what each student was doing?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, I'm teaching in the period, and still do, the period of pluralism, all of us, anybody who's teaching -

MS. RICHARDS: Pluralism, yes.

MR. WHITTEN: In New York today and indeed the country, unless you have a conceptualized program that limits, we're in a position that because of pluralism we're in a position that all of these different sensibilities [are] placed in one room. I can do a class of 10 people, 10 different sensibilities coming from 10 different positions. Think about it.

MS. RICHARDS: Absolutely, yes.

MR. WHITTEN: That kind of a thing. So we're still in the grips of pluralism.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

[END CD 6.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Jack Whitten on December 3, 2009, in Jackson Heights, Queens for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc seven.

You don't teach right now?

MR. WHITTEN: I do.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, you still -

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I teach at SVA still.

MS. RICHARDS: At SVA.

MR. WHITTEN: Sure.

MS. RICHARDS: So you've been teaching at SVA a decade or two.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh since 1980.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And so part of the time overlapped with Cooper.

MR. WHITTEN: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: And then it stopped.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, but I was at Cooper for a continuous 26 years.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you teach graduate students at SVA?

MR. WHITTEN: No, no I don't teach that, no.

MS. RICHARDS: Undergraduates, do you prefer the undergraduates?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah. I prefer the undergraduates.

MS. RICHARDS: Why is that?

MR. WHITTEN: Because I think what I have to offer, meeting with young people of all different sensibilities, I see myself as being able to provide my teaching philosophy is I don't teach art. I don't teach art. I come from a point of view which says that no one teaches art and surely Jack Whitten does not teach art.

My philosophy in teaching, I teach the means to acquire art. The person[s] themselves discover art. But no one – I claim that no one teaches art and surely I don't. I teach the means to acquire it. So I place emphasis upon what I call basic concepts that drive art, focuses on plasticity along with content.

Earlier in my life as an artist it was pointed out to me that the art making process is like a coin. On the one side of that coin we have plasticity and on the other side of that coin we have sensibility. Between plasticity and sensibility produces art. That's my tradition in art.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that teaching has affected your work one way or another?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, hell yeah, absolutely. In teaching, it places a demand on the person who's teaching to clarify your thinking. When you teach a group of people and you have to communicate, a necessity sets in through communication that you have to clarify. You cannot teach if you are not clear in your own mind on what you are trying to get them to do.

So it forces a clarity on your thinking and to communicate and it forces you to learn to listen to people. You have to listen. If you're not capable of listening to someone, you can't teach. Oh you can come in and you can be this dogma – dogmatic and say, blah, blah, blah, but you know, who wants to do that. You have to learn to listen.

MS. RICHARDS: Over the years of teaching, you've come in contact with your peers, others who were teaching. Has that been another aspect of teaching that's been beneficial, the community, the expansion of the community?

MR. WHITTEN: Absolutely, exchange of ideas, sure. Also, reciprocity among the teacher, the pupil, like I tell students, I'm giving you something but I also want you to give me something. If I'm in a situation and there's no reciprocity, I get fucking bored. [Laughs.] I let them know that and if I don't feel I'm getting enough back, I start screaming and yelling and hollering. They think I'm crazy.

You're not giving me nothing. I'm giving you.

MS. RICHARDS: To provoke them.

MR. WHITTEN: You know, I've got to feel like I'm getting something back here now, all right, because you've got to remember, I'm learning too. This is not a one-way street. I'm learning. Learning is always a process, continuous organic process. There's no such thing as I learned that amount and it stops there, bullshit.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you feel when your students want to see your work? Do you feel that they should or shouldn't become acquainted with how you approach your work and is that an issue at all?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, you can't prevent it today. If anybody wants to see what you're going, they're going to Google you.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, but I mean some artists, some teachers bring their artists in the studio or bring their work or talk about their own work and some strictly avoid that.

MR. WHITTEN: I don't strictly avoid it but I limit it. It's not 100 percent avoidable but I limit it, like usually in the spring semester if I feel good with a group of students, I'll bring them down to the studio for lunch, like especially now with the firehouse. I have a big Weber [grill]. If I want to have lunch, open up the doors, take the Weber outside, grill some hamburgers, grill some steaks and frankfurters.

MS. RICHARDS: Sardines?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, that kind of a thing, sure.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Switching gears a bit to talk about critical response to your work, have there been times when writers have misunderstood your work, or taken the wrong approach, and you've wanted to respond? Have you responded or are there things you want to put on the record now to correct misunderstandings?

MR. WHITTEN: You know, I've been pretty lucky. By and large people who have reviewed my shows can be pretty smart. Like recently, the show at Alex's, I don't know - I haven't met her yet. Her name is Carrie Moyer. She's a painter and she also writes, reviewed my recent show at Alexander Gray for *The Brooklyn Rail*, fantastic review.

The woman has such an eye, such an understanding of where I'm coming from. I was really quite taken aback.

MS. RICHARDS: Have there been differences in the critical response to shows in Europe as opposed to the U.S.?

MR. WHITTEN: We don't have that information yet from Europe. Like part of the press in talking with Jochen [Kienzel] today, the press has been by, a lot of people. So we'll soon find out. A lot of answers come up in Europe, especially in Germany, about the Gerhard Richter connection. The Germans want to know what happened here, what is this, and boy they ask you directly.

I don't make a big deal out of it. I say, hey, man -

MS. RICHARDS: This is 1972.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, you know, you do your history lesson. It's not for me to say.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're saying you haven't had enough shows to have enough reviews outside the U.S. to be able to compare the responses?

MR. WHITTEN: Right, yeah, in group activities, like there were a few responses but we don't know that yet. But over the time, the reviews I have had, a lot of times is that people just don't know what you're doing. They just don't understand what you're doing. But occasionally somebody hits it on.

I remember Roberta Smith once did a review of a Romley show, Horodner Romley, and she stared off by saying - her title was "Trying to Paint Beyond Painting." That's very interesting. She hits it right on the head. It's been more than one case like that.

Early reviews of Peter Schjeldahl, early reviews of Stephen Westfall, Jeanne Siegel, where people spend time to get more of a penetrating notion of hey, what is this guy doing, and then a lot of times it's just that I don't know what he's doing. At least you be frank about it. It's like John Russell with the Whitney show. He knew it was something there but he didn't know what it was.

MS. RICHARDS: This brings me to a question about galleries. When you are showing at a gallery, do you want to take part in the process, in the marketing to the extent of working on the press release, on the materials that will explain if people ask what you are doing?

MR. WHITTEN: If it comes to that, if we find that there is somebody there who is really not understanding, then it's best if they talk to me

MS. RICHARDS: But when you're -

MR. WHITTEN: I did an article recently, an interview for *Art and Antiques* magazine and I really had to spend a lot of time with the interviewer because at first she was not understanding the processes, to really walk her through step by step to get a clearer understanding before she attempts to write. It helps.

Even with collectors, a lot of times in terms of selling, a collector will approach a gallery and say, can we meet him, there are things here that's' not - I can't fill in the gaps, and a lot of times it's been extremely helpful.

MS. RICHARDS: When you've sought out representation, what's been your method of doing that, finding a dealer? You've shown with a number of galleries, some for a good number of years. Is there any particular way that you've approached that age-old dilemma of finding representation?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, it's been extremely difficult for black artists, for black, especially black abstract artists, to get anybody interested to back you commercially, very difficult. The history will prove that.

MS. RICHARDS: After the early shows we talked about, you had a show at a gallery, at N'Namdi.

MR. WHITTEN: N'Namdi, George N'Namdi.

MS. RICHARDS: It was in Detroit and then I saw that it was in Chicago [IL] and then -

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, he has galleries both - [Doorbell rings.]

[Audio Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: Talking about N'Namdi, I was saying it's in different places and you had a number of shows with them and also in Birmingham [MI]?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, he had a gallery in Birmingham, Michigan, in Detroit, in Chicago.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were showing with him quite a bit.

MR. WHITTEN: Quite a bit, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And then there was a show at Daniel Weinberg [New York, NY] that I think you had mentioned.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes, in truth, that was - we did a show at Daniel Weinberg and I did two one-man shows at the same time, opened at the same time here in New York, which was terrific, at Horodner Romley and at Daniel Weinberg.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Which was very good for me.

MS. RICHARDS: When Stuart Horodner closed the gallery what happened with your representation?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, Stuart's partner, Paul Romley, decided he no longer wanted to have anything to do with the gallery business and there was no way that Stuart could do it by himself because most of the money was coming from Paul.

Paul Romley's wife had a men's shop here in New York. They made their money in clothing and later real estate and they moved to Florida. They wanted to leave New York and they sort of left Stuart hanging.

So he had no choice. He had to dissolve the gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: And then there's this big gap until you started showing with Alexander. Was that was the tough period?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, right, I was not showing. I had no commercial representation. I was dealing primarily through art consultants and selling directly from the studio and then I realized that I had to make a move to get the work out commercially. You're leading up to the time - even up to the time of the "High Times, Hard Times [New York Painting 1967-1975]" show [traveling exhibition, curated by Independent curators International, NY] , I was not commercially represented.

Again, I was only dealing through art consultants or an occasional dealer that would sell something for me, do an introduction, something like that. David Reed brought Udo Kittelmann, U-D-O, Kittelmann, to the studio. Udo Kittelmann was director of the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt, Germany.

David had said, oh I want you to meet this guy. Udo came to the studio. I pulled out a lot of work he wanted to see. He was very enthusiastic and he says who's your gallery. I said, well, I was just getting ready to make some moves and Udo Kittelmann says to me, I just met a guy, you should meet him. I think the two of you are going to get along great together. How would you feel if I called this guy up, Alexander Gray. I didn't know Alexander Grey. He says, you've got to meet this guy. He immediately got on the phone, called him up. He says, look, are you free two or three days from now. Sure, I'm just working. That's how it happened.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow, that's wonderful.

MR. WHITTEN: Alex immediately comes down. I guess he had done some fast research on me. We hit it off like that, good chemistry. I said, hell yeah, I'll do a show with you.

I'm a people person. I can tell when a certain chemistry in people that I can work with. I can't do any business if I can't react with people.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, in all your relationships with galleries, have you wanted to be involved in the decision making in terms of the promotion? Should there be ads, what should the announcement look like, what should be in the press release, or have you been very hands-off?

MR. WHITTEN: I tend to be hands-off, tend to be. I tend to let them. I give some information in terms of what I want but I tend to be hands-off. I'm not really that tight on that kind of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you plan your installations yourself and want to be involved in that?

MR. WHITTEN: Usually with the director. Every time I've had a show it's always me and the director using our eyes and it's worked out well that way. I realize a lot of artists have to have total control. But I depend upon the dealers to make decisions. Beside, the dealers have - the dealers' job - I make the paintings. The dealers' job is to sell them, right.

You know, the artist [pays] the dealer to do this. We pay the dealer 50 percent. The dealer takes 50 percent of the sale. I take 50 percent of the sale. That's why I often I have to tell people, I say, look, we just had a \$75,000 sale but I get \$35,000 of that.

On top of that I have to pay the IRS [Internal Revenue Service]. I have to pay the state. I have to pay the city. So if a painting sold for \$75,000, considering those percentages, I'm lucky, lucky, even after figuring out what I can do with my accountant in terms of deductions, I'm lucky out of a \$75,000 sale if I can put [\$15,000] - \$20,000 clear in my pocket. I'm lucky. That's the way the system works.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: A lot of people don't know that.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. What about the Berlin Gallery? How did that connection happen?

MR. WHITTEN: The dealer saw the "High Times, Hard Times" show, fell in love with that painting, met Alex at [Basel Art fair in Switzerland], and bought a painting from that period, from Alex. That's how that started. He wanted me to do a show.

There was a spinoff show from the "High Times, Hard Times" show, a small group show that was put together and that painting was in that show.

MS. RICHARDS: Where was that show?

MR. WHITTEN: That spinoff show, I think it opened in - it opened in Dusseldorf, Thomas Flor, F-L-O-R, nice gallery, nice man, very nice person, Thomas Flor Gallery. But just Jochen, not Joseph, Jochen.

MS. RICHARDS: Y-O?

MR. WHITTEN: J-O-C-H-E-[N], saw that painting and purchased it, Kienzle, K-I-E-N-Z-L-E.

MS. RICHARDS: I have that.

MR. WHITTEN: And now he's forming a foundation for his collection, Kienzle Foundation, and that's why he was calling today. Another show has spun off from the one-man show. We now have a group show up at Potsdam, which is outside of Berlin. It's a state museum. Germany is filled with kunst [art].

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to your work again, as you left the '90s you continued to use the mosaic technique and I wanted to talk about some of the work you've done in the last nine or so years and in particular talk about the big memorial to 9/11 that you did.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: But we can start before that—that ended in 2005—if there were things you want to talk about before that, in the early part of the decade

MR. WHITTEN: See, there's a little gap of time there. I decided to move out of Manhattan.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I wanted to talk about that.

MR. WHITTEN: I decided to move out of Manhattan before 2001. We made the decision to move out of Manhattan 1999 leading into 2000. I had my reasons. I didn't like the noise down there. I didn't like the people who were moving in. It was not my neighborhood anymore. I wanted a bigger studio so I could function better. I needed a shop. So we agree to sell the building down on Lispenard. we put the building up for sale working through a real estate agency.

Then we had to look for a place to live. We found this place in Jackson Heights, which we bought immediately and then we had to do a renovation. This place required a big renovation. That took time. Then I needed a studio. I had to find a studio.

I found the building that you were in, the old firehouse. That took more time. So there's a big gap of time there that I couldn't work.

While the building was up for sale, 9/11 happens.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Minor compared to other issues, but that certainly affected the property values.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, yeah, 9/11 happens, couldn't turn back because I'd already purchased this place. If 9/11 didn't happen I probably would have waited another year or so. But 9/11 happens right in the middle of selling the building, which affects the price. Things like that always do. Still did okay but it still affected the price. Finally found a studio, took time to put together.

Now I was in the street that day when the planes came over. There was a gas leak in the street and I went out with the firemen, which I always do. It's always a policy of mine when I hear fire trucks to go downstairs and see what's going on, especially in that area of Manhattan.

MS. RICHARDS: Especially since you had a fire.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, and as I'm talking to the firemen, that sound came over our head, huge, loud, tremendous sound, and all of us looked up. The young Frenchman that was doing the documentary [9/11, 2002] with the fire department swung his camera up. As he comes up, half of my body is in that shot. This is the first shot of that, what happened.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you just say that Lispenard is about a mile north of the Twin Towers?

MR. WHITTEN: About that, or less, yes, quite close.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Lispenard is a block below Canal Street.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. WHITTEN: We looked up just in time to see this plane over our head, low, wobbling, making a beeline to the World Trade and ramming into it. On that first video when you hear somebody say, "Holy shit!" that's me. [Laughs.] That was my expression, "holy shit." That damn thing rammed in there and a big gaping hole.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I read you said you had no doubt that it was not an accident.

MR. WHITTEN: My gut feeling, I'm there, the [fire] captain I remember was there, my tenant downstairs was there, and I remember the captain said, it's a horrible accident. I said, "man that ain't no fucking accident." Excuse me word, but that's what I said. I said, "no, that ain't no fucking accident" and I remember my tenant, "what do you mean, you saw what I saw, you saw what happened." I said, "damn right I saw what happened but it ain't no accident, no way." That was my gut feeling. I had no logical reason or whatever to say but that was my gut feeling. It ain't no accident.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, he could have steered slightly and missed the building.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I mean okay I've had a little bit of pilot training, enough to know that I can muscle the damn thing. The captain and his men jumped in the [fire truck] and just went, didn't even think twice. They took all of their equipment, men, jumped in the [fire truck] and went straight downtown.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there a gas leak on your street?

MR. WHITTEN: [Yes, they] left one or two guys there still investigating. We still [had] the problem with the gas

leak.

Two things [are] going on in my mind, right. We're there still arguing with my tenant about whether it being an accident or not. While we're arguing, the second plane circles around to the south tower and then hit.

Then I looked at him straight in the face poking him in the shoulder, I said, "you still think that's an accident" and that time he [and] people were crying, people were yelling on the street. Nobody knows what was happening. But my gut feeling proved to be correct.

MS. RICHARDS: True.

MR. WHITTEN: Nobody could question my gut feeling at that point and then of course the flames. I hate to admit it but I often tell the story about when that plane hit, that was a clear day in Manhattan. The sky was filled with this fantastic chandelier of glass, fantastic. It was totally sublime, glittering.

Before you saw the smoke, before you saw the flames jutting out, you could still see the plane of this thing tucked into the hole. [The tail.] But the breaking of the glass just formed this big chandelier.

I assume[d] that the firemen that went down were just automatically killed. That's what I assume but I was in my local bar like a few days afterwards and I was telling the story of what I saw and I thought these guys were dead and somebody came in the bar and said, "I remember you were telling that story. He says, those guys are not dead. They lived."

I felt such relief. [Laughs.] I remember I just broke - I couldn't control my tears because I was talking to them, you know, and they just took off. I just assumed they all died. This person came and says, "no, those guys did live. They're alive man." It was such a relief.

Now we were moving out. I had to clear the whole building out, four floors I had to clear out.

MS. RICHARDS: Did the diner stay there?

MR. WHITTEN: [Yes].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, he didn't transfer that.

MR. WHITTEN: Middle of the [sale], you know. But no, he was there, right, sure because he still had time on his lease, forcing, pressuring me to give him a lease, which I didn't. It wouldn't have [not] been to my advantage to do that.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: So he held on with the person who bought the building.

But I made a vow when that happened in the street that when I got another studio, I made a vow. The first painting I will do will be a memorial to 9/11. That was my vow and I stuck by that vow.

In truth, I was there telling Aggie [Agnes], Mrs. Gund, about my experiences and about - Aggie, I'm going to - I'm doing a memorial painting, first painting I do is going to be about that because she had been out to see the firehouse [during renovation] and when I finished the painting and I figured I was ready to show it, Aggie was the first person I called and said, Aggie, I finished that painting. I want you to see it.

She came down to the studio to see it and she was quite impressed with it and I'm thinking I want to show this painting. I figured she would be the person that could set it up. She sent Alanna Heiss to the studio.

MS. RICHARDS: Alanna Heiss.

MR. WHITTEN: And Alanna Heiss came with Phong Bui, her curator, and said, oh god, yes, we'll show it. So I'm thinking, you know, like in a year I'll have an opportunity to show this painting. Alanna says, oh no, we're going to show this right now.

I says, come on, you're kidding. She says, oh no, that's the way we do business. [Laughs.] I said, come on, you're kidding. She said, oh no we're going to do it right now. Wow, I'm having to stop everything, get this organized, working with the curators. The curator wanted to see my work, Phong Bui. You know Phong Bui?

I mean things are going so fast it'd make your head spin. Alanna said this is the way we do business. This is what makes us who we are, P.S. 1 [Contemporary Art Center, Museum of Modern Art, NY]. We curate on the spot. It was like take it or leave it. [Laughs.]

To make it more difficult I'm having - I already had tickets for Greece. But boy, I had to jump on it, hire an assistant.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was in the summer or the spring?

MR. WHITTEN: Right before, yeah, they were going to put it up immediately.

MS. RICHARDS: What did you still have to do, finish the painting?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, the painting was finished.

MS. RICHARDS: But you're saying hire assistants. What was that for?

MR. WHITTEN: There was so [many] logistics connected with that painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Just because it was large?

MR. WHITTEN: The way it was built, right. You're talking 10 feet by 20 feet. The thing is built in eight 5-foot sections, eight five-foot squares and developing a system of how to show a large-scale painting, 10 feet by 20 feet, big scale painting.

So I have to develop a system of how to present it. I'm talking logistically how do you get it out of the studio, how do you get it on the truck [and onto the wall at P.S.1?]

I came up with a system of eight, five-foot panels, five-foot stretches apiece that would lock together with metal plates in the back which made the whole thing into one unit which was put to the wall. That's how I worked on it.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you arrive at the form, at the image of the painting?

MR. WHITTEN: From the dollar bill. I'm sitting in the bar one night drinking, thinking about this painting, knowing that I had to have something to start with conceptually. I'm paying my bar bill and I happen to look down at the dollar and I'm thinking, my god, petroleum, oil, money, not a bad place to start, not a bad place to start.

MS. RICHARDS: The image of the pyramid on the dollar bill?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, came off the dollar bill, notion of power, symbol.

MS. RICHARDS: And the blackness?

MR. WHITTEN: Right, petroleum, a lot of blood in that painting, gallons of blood.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I've read that. What kind of blood did you use?

MR. WHITTEN: Out here where I live with the Spanish, they make blood sausages. It's pig's blood. So I can buy it directly from the butcher shops. They sell it frozen. I had already done experimentation with blood in acrylic. It holds.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: For what work? When was that?

MR. WHITTEN: For paintings that I was done during a lot of experimentation and I had to use blood just to see what would happen. So I had paintings already that I had made with blood in it. It's an amazing color, by the way.

You're talking pure iron oxide. It doesn't fade or nothing. Acrylic sets it. I had already done some experimentation with blood but when I came up with the theme that was the guiding conceptual principle for the painting, blood, petroleum, money, which I think are the three components that caused 9/11, the politics of that.

MS. RICHARDS: Ideology, yes.

MR. WHITTEN: That's your ideology behind it. But things are moving so fast, right, and then Phong comes up with the idea, wow, the paintings from the 1960s you're talking about the same thing. So he insisted that we show the 9/11 painting along with paintings from the 1960s, violent political uprisings, Vietnam, [Kent State, Birmingham].

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have that in storage?

MR. WHITTEN: I had one or two that he saw and then he wanted to see more. Then I had to go to storage, pull them all out, condition reports, a lot of them had to have stretchers built, restretched.

MS. RICHARDS: So that's the work that you were mentioning.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, so boy, it was a lot of work, intense work, and I had the tickets. I couldn't afford to lose like \$3,000 in tickets. So boy, I had to move fast. I had to get all this stuff together, shipping, getting it to P.S. 1, or setting up so they could get it. By the time I got all that stuff together, it was like down to the last minute. I'm rushing to the airport totally exhausted.

MS. RICHARDS: But you made it.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah. They had the paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you feel about that earlier work being shown with the new?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, at first I thought it was a bad idea. I mean, I never made that – he said, look, it's the same thing. It worked. We got a lot of press on it. That last part of the '60s, '68, that period, I don't have to tell you what was happening in America.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, you had the Martin Luther King painting.

MR. WHITTEN: The violence, Martin Luther King [memorial] paintings, assassinations, so it made a powerful statement at that show, a powerful statement. But my coming up with that system of doing large-scale panels and because of the tessera the system works because of the tessera, the construction of the tessera.

With the tessera, you've got like a slight less than a 30 second, sixty-fourth of an [inch] space there. I can hide that in the panels. That sucker comes apart, you can't see where it goes back. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Right. That's right.

MR. WHITTEN: It's a great idea for doing a large-scale painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: It really frees me in terms of scale.

MS. RICHARDS: You recently did a large series of square memorial mosaic –

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, those electronic stamps, E-stamps, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, how did that idea come to be?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, coding, I'm interested in codes. I'm looking everywhere for codes.

MS. RICHARDS: And the barcodes, I wanted to ask you about both of those series.

MR. WHITTEN: Yes. The E-stamp series came first and when I discovered the E-stamps as a system of code, then the –

MS. RICHARDS: That was 2007.

MR. WHITTEN: The next logical thing was barcodes and then tracking codes like UPS, they've got these tracking codes. So it's a whole bunch of those.

MS. RICHARDS: So what interested you in these codes?

MR. WHITTEN: Coded information. That's information coded there. That's how they keep track of all this stuff, like they're getting ready to send all of those guys over there, 30,000 troops. You have any idea what that is logistically? Every piece or item's got a fucking code on it. They know exactly where it is.

MS. RICHARDS: I don't remember previous work that was thinking about codes.

MR. WHITTEN: Well, I was always familiar with, of course, art as symbol. I mean, art as symbol is the great – the German philosopher. He codified the notion of [art as] symbol. .

Then a lot of other people, art historians, have written intensively about it. So we have always known that down in painting, the history of painting, there are elements of codes working. So I'm desperately looking for something to make painting signify contemporary thought. I've often thought of science as an analogy.

So the code system, even though they're mechanical codes, fits my purposes to make painting contemporary. When you look at those electronic stamps, they're amazing. Visually, they're exciting. So I adapted them to painting and to a specific subject matter.

One [is for] Bobby Short, one [for] Al Loving, one [for] Al Held, [for] Marcia Tucker, those are the E-stamps, Harvey Quaytman. And I got such good mileage out of the e-stamps, I said, let's try barcodes.

New York Times, I'm reading my *Times* in the morning, front page of the *Times* have their barcode in there. Painting in this show that was at Alex, *Lateral Shift*, comes out of *The New York Times* barcode.

The title comes from my dentist. [Laughs.] I had some bridgework done, caps, porcelain caps done, and I don't know if you've done this, where they have to make a mold. It's a whole process of fitting.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: The key thing is getting to fit properly. When you put it in, how does it feel, tap, tap, tap, bite.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Right, little shift, and he says, oh a little bit off of here. He says, oh it's just a lateral shift. I say, Dr. [Lehrer] [ph], would you repeat that again, because I'm into this painting. It hasn't become cognitive yet.

MS. RICHARDS: Lateral.

MR. WHITTEN: I say, lateral shift, I say, lateral shift, I said, thank you. [Laughs.] *Lateral Shift* is a political painting, by the way. [President] Obama's being elected, the whole thing about his presidency, what this is, what does the man stand for, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: I'm thinking, oh yeah, revolutionary, and of course for me, black. You know what it means for me and I'm thinking, yeah, but this is still American politics. No, this is not vertical. This shit's lateral. That's where *Lateral Shift* comes from.

So where do we find ourselves today, right? He has no choice. He just said 30,000 men are going to Afghanistan. President Bush could have said that; ain't no vertical. It's lateral.

MS. RICHARDS: Right. When you did the barcodes, they look like military honors.

MR. WHITTEN: Well, now that's different. That's a set of paintings -

MS. RICHARDS: Oh I see, "Ribbons of Honor," yeah.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, "Ribbons of Honor," right, I'm watching a lot. I sit here in the evening and I watch this TV, the Lehrer Report [*PBS NewsHour*].

MS. RICHARDS: Jim Lehrer's "NewsHour."

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, he makes a statement. We have tonight nine more. We make their names available. When we get their photographs we'll notify their family. I watched that shit every night. Whatever we're doing stops, whether we're eating or whatever. You have to stop. As brief as it is, you have to stop.

MS. RICHARDS: I think it's every Friday. Is it once a week?

MR. WHITTEN: I think it's once a week.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: So that's where the "Ribbons of Honor" came from, another notion of memorial, commemorative, another system of codes.

MS. RICHARDS: Moving on to what you're working on now, the paintings I saw on the left wall, the horizontal bars, those are new?

MR. WHITTEN: Those horizontal bars- in the past year I have worked with three themes. One was the "Ribbons of Honor." One was "Cosmic Postcards," where I'm reaching way out into an inner space.

I'm getting images that looked like they came out of the Hubble spacecraft. I call them Cosmic Postcards, and the third theme was "[Surface] Events", intervals of time where things are taking place. So I did three themes in one year.

MS. RICHARDS: Why do you think you did that? Isn't it unusual?

MR. WHITTEN: It's unusual because it's such a complex notion, but obviously in my mind I'm picking up on the zeitgeist and what's going on.

MS. RICHARDS: You think those three things connect?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I think they connect. There's some sort of a big system operating out there. Information is getting through, right? So at this point, when people ask me what I'm doing, I have coined a word. I say I'm a perceptualist.

If there's a movement attached to me, it's perceptualism. That's what I say. I'm a perceptualist. And now I know with being a perceptualist, I'm connecting with things that can be determined philosophically as a priori. I'm dealing with shit now that occurs, and I'm using a priori in the classical, in the most pure, classical Kantian sense.

Before the advent of experience, I'm connecting things that have not even occurred.

MS. RICHARDS: So this, the big horizontal painting.

MR. WHITTEN: That big horizontal painting which I'm working on right now.

MS. RICHARDS: Which is almost finished, perhaps?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I've almost got - if I can get through it by the end of Christmas, end of the year, I'll be pleased.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you start earlier today telling me that you had a title?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, yeah the title finally came to me. I've been fishing around and fishing around. I know what it's about. I know it has to deal with time. I know it has to deal with memory. I know it also is commemorative in a lot of ways. But I couldn't tie it down, right, and I know that these things that I'm working with.

MS. RICHARDS: The soft black spots -

MR. WHITTEN: Those black shapes in there, okay, *Pieces of Time, Pieces of Time*.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that also constructed in the modular system that you talked about?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, this is tessera, but those forms [are] actually built.

MS. RICHARDS: No, I mean, the five foot by five foot because it's so -

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, right, it's three. It's three sections, three sections.

Now, the beauty of this system, when I finish the painting, I have to very carefully take a very sharp knife, very sharp blade and I have to cut the painting loose.

MS. RICHARDS: So behind the painting is this structure, these three parts?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, three canvases.

MS. RICHARDS: But you made the painting one -

MR. WHITTEN: Continuously.

MS. RICHARDS: I see.

MR. WHITTEN: I keep a laser in the studio and the painting is laid out with a laser. That makes it extremely exact.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you cut it apart it'll come back together exactly.

MR. WHITTEN: When I cut it apart it's going to go back the same fucking way it's up there, beautiful system.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Simple, no hassle.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that there's a dream project that you haven't done that you'd like to do?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, a dream project for me right now is somebody give me a commission[ed] painting with an exact subject matter to deal with.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so a dream is to have someone else tell you what to -

MR. WHITTEN: I would like somebody to come to me and say, look, I've got this commission. I'm looking for a large-scale painting. I want it to be in the range of 30 to 40 feet. I want to test every skill that [you've] got and I'm going to pay you up front for it. That would be my dream project, a real commission.

MS. RICHARDS: In a very public space or does it matter?

MR. WHITTEN: Well, I would prefer a public space. I would prefer that someone come and give me a commission dealing with a specific subject matter, very much like what Mr. Bill Jones just did with Abraham Lincoln, very much something like that. That would be a dream situation.

MS. RICHARDS: And given the way you work, it would need to be indoors or would you -

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, it would have to be indoors, sure, interior. But my knowledge of mosaic, if they let me do it myself, I had a run in with the MTA. I put a bid in and they loved it but when it came down to doing it they want Miotto to do it. I said, look, I know what I'm doing. I have knowledge. I can do this. Oh no, we can't do that, too many liabilities involved, couldn't do it.

MS. RICHARDS: So that killed the idea?

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, only their guy can do it who is Miotto. But if somebody gave me a commission to do, but not the stuff's that's going on the subways. I hate that shit. Direct method, that's what I want to do, direct method. Each tessera cut by hand, set into wet masonry. Same way I've done at [my] house in Crete, that's what I'd like to do.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say keeps you going?

MR. WHITTEN: Love of painting, I mean, I've got a destiny with the history of painting. That's what keeps me going.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you continue to be inspired by your summers in Crete?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, very much so. Crete - my summers in Crete [are] my safety valve. I've always known that. People used to ask me, even years ago, oh you're going to Crete again, why are you doing that? You know what I tell them?

When people ask me that I used to tell them, and I still do, I'd rather give the money to Olympic Airlines than give it to a psychiatrist. [They laugh.] That's what I tell them.

MS. RICHARDS: I didn't ask if you have you done any other traveling that was meaningful to you.

MR. WHITTEN: Oh, God yes.

MS. RICHARDS: That impacted your work?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh man, man, man, man, I went to Egypt and took a trip across the Sinai to Mount Sinai to St. Catherine's. St. Catherine's is the oldest running monastery in existence, okay? It's intact.

It only stands intact with the original icons and things because Mohammed himself issued an edict which said hands off of St. Catherine's. That's why it's still there. I went there and we got there in time for the Greek Christmas with the old calendar which occurs in January. I forget the exact date.

MS. RICHARDS: When did you go there?

MR. WHITTEN: We went there before 9/11, so like [Christmas and] the year [2001], and man, Mount Sinai itself is one thing but we were there for the Orthodox, the old calendar Christmas. Cold, cold, the mountains there boy, Mount Sinai at night, the temperature drops. You're freezing.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, December or January.

MR. WHITTEN: January. Huge chandeliers with candles built in tiers, tier after tier after tier, I'm talking about circumferences six or eight feet across, monks are lighting as the services progress they are lighting them with these long poles that they light the candles with.

So as the services progress it's getting lighter and lighter, brighter and brighter I should say, and the back of the apse at St. Catherine's is a mosaic, direct method, Justinian period, covers the whole apse.

I'm watching this thing from the beginning of the services, right? From the first candlelight until they start reaching the tier to the top, I'm looking at this icon – I'm sorry, the mosaic, Justinian period mosaic of saints, this thing starts coming alive. I'm not bullshitting you. It's moving. My head goes bingo. Now I've seen a lot of mosaics but I had never seen that.

These things were built to be shown in candlelight. They were not built to be shown in incandescent light or outdoor light. They were interior space, monasteries, churches. In the candlelight, each tessera, the master who's making them, his stone is directing the light.

Boy, boy, boy my head went off. I had a revelation. I thought I would start screaming. This thing is coming alive because of the candlelight.

The master's thumb is [setting the tesserae into wet mortar deliberately to reflect the light] – fucking light's being thrown off it, gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous!

MS. RICHARDS: You can't see that in a museum because the light is totally different.

MR. WHITTEN: No, you can't see it [in] incandescent light. You can only see it in candlelight. But at St. Catherine's, I saw it in candlelight, big revelation.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. WHITTEN: So that convinced me that I was on the right track, totally convinced me. The use of acrylic as tessera to build the image, right, opticality, spirituality, able to address any subject your little heart desire.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think your work has been influential on – I mean, besides Richter – on other younger artists now?

MR. WHITTEN: We're seeing more and more evidence of that and we also see more and more evidence over the years that it has affected people, which is good, which is good. So something is shaping up. Something is in the air, which puts me in a good position, right?

It tells me that the next phase of abstraction, like the extension of abstraction or the next phase – I speak of modernism now in phases, right? First stage modernism, European; second stage modernism, American; post-modernism, which wasn't – I call it an intermission; [the] stage has been set for third stage modernism.

This is my thinking. This is Jack Whitten talking. Third stage modernism is global. It will be built on a body of global aesthetics. This is what I think. Think about it.

First stage modernism came as a result of European imperialistic forces colonizing countries to their, whatever they wanted for, their raw materials, brought it back. As Mr. Anthony Appiah claims, and I agree with him, contamination took place.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry, Anthony who?

MR. WHITTEN: Anthony Appiah, A-P-P-I-A-H.

MS. RICHARDS: A-P-P?

MR. WHITTEN: A-P-P-I-A-H, Anthony.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh yes.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah, I met him, the curator of my Newark Museum [NJ] show [Beryl Wright] brought him to

speak. I was very much impressed with him [at the] Newark museum, that's where I met him. [Second stage Modernism is strictly American. Postmodernism is a brief intermission.]

Shit's shifting now globally. Aesthetics are shifting global because of globalization, which means that the original people who were exploited out of first stage modernism [and second stage] will come to the foreground and that will exert third stage modernism. That's what's going to happen.

MS. RICHARDS: Is this a good spot to end?

MR. WHITTEN: Oh yeah, it's a good place to end.

MS. RICHARDS: Any other concluding thoughts?-

MR. WHITTEN: No, that's a good point.

MS. RICHARDS: Excellent. Thank you.

MR. WHITTEN: Yeah.

[END CD 7.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]