

Jack Whitten, ‘Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963–2017’

The Baltimore Museum of Art, USA

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We stand before a huge picture that suggests an aerial view of urban sprawl – yet this is no regular city. What we see here, from a bird’s-eye view, is a futuristic megalopolis, more organic than orthogonal. It resembles Wakanda’s Birnin Zana, the fictional African home of Marvel’s *Black Panther*. Only, it’s not: as the wall text explains, this picture is an abstract painting composed of thousands of acrylic paint-tiles, or *tesserae*, that create an abstract composition which only appears to be a city seen from above.



JACK WHITTEN (American, 1939–2018)

Atopolis: For Édouard Glissant, 2014

Acrylic on canvas, 8 panels

The late American artist Jack Whitten created *Atopolis: For Édouard Glissant* in 2014. It is the final piece in ‘Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963–2017’, recently on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art and currently at the Met Breuer in New York. As its subtitle suggests, *Odyssey* emphasizes the three-dimensional output of the artist since 1963. Whitten, who is known more as a painter, created these works privately while vacationing in Crete with his Greek wife. The sculptures in *Odyssey* are mostly figurative and reflect Whitten’s interest in traditional forms. Greek artifacts loaned by the nearby Walters Art Museum and several traditional African pieces from the BMA supplement the exhibition.

Like the ancient Greek and African works that inspired him, Whitten’s sculptures are not simply formal explorations; they hold meanings and serve functions beyond their role as art objects. A row of wooden sculptures referred to by the wall text as ‘guardians’ protects the members of his

family; his ‘containers’ consist of reliquaries with hidden drawers and secret meanings. Many of Whitten’s sculptures blend Western and African traditions, such as *The Afro American Thunderbolt* (1983–84), a dynamic zigzag of black mulberry wreathed with rusty nails, capped at each end with squarish copper plates. The accompanying text explains that this work was created ‘for the protection and empowerment of all Black people.’ Its blocky, wooden thunderbolt recalls the divine weapon of Zeus, while the embedded nails refer to the *nkisi nkondi* figures sculpted by central African artists in the 19th and 20th centuries, an example of which stands next to *Thunderbolt*.



JACK WHITTEN (American, 1939–2018)

The Afro American Thunderbolt, 1983–84
Black mulberry, copper plate, nails

To get a fuller picture of Jack Whitten, it helps to travel beyond *Odyssey*. After exiting the show, we find ourselves in the museum’s Antioch Court, named after the ancient Roman city where its early Christian-era mosaics of animal motifs that line these walls were extracted. The *tesserae* of Whitten’s *Atopolis* are echoed here. Rounding the corner, you make your way to the museum’s contemporary wing, where Whitten’s painting, *9.11.01* (2006) is displayed. A dark, cosmological pyramid sits amid swirls of colour. Though technically not part of the exhibition, the work acts as a cultic mirror to the hope and spirit that animates *Odyssey*, particularly *Atopolis*.

Whitten, who grew up in the southern US during the Jim Crow period and met Martin Luther King, Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama, travelled widely: he attended art school at the Cooper Union in New York; in the late 1960s he began what would become regular visits to Crete with his wife and daughter; and in 2015, he was awarded the prestigious National Medal of the Arts by President Barack Obama. Whitten passed away this past January at the age of 78. A self-described 'time traveller', Whitten's work has an almost science fictional quality to it, blending the disparate forms and materials of past and present. Perhaps utopia is always out of reach. *Odyssey* suggests that it's worth striving for anyway.

This essay was selected as the winner of the [Frieze Writer's Prize 2018](#).