



# JACK WHITTEN

For the Für die **Nationalgalerie—Staatliche Museen zu Berlin**  
Edited by Herausgegeben von **Udo Kittelmann, Sven Beckstette**

# JACK'S JACKS



**Nationalgalerie**  
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**PRESTEL**  
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|     |   |     |   |
|-----|---|-----|---|
| 6   | Gabriele Quandt<br>Vorwort  | 7   | <b>Gabriele Quandt<br/>Foreword</b>                                 |
| 32  | Udo Kittelmann<br>Gefühl und Hoffnung                               | 31  | <b>Udo Kittelmann<br/>Emotion and Hope</b>                          |
| 46  | Sven Beckstette<br>Die Bedeutung der Abstraktion<br>erweitern       | 45  | <b>Sven Beckstette<br/>Extending the Meaning<br/>of Abstraction</b> |
| 90  | Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.<br>Das musikalische Auge von<br>Jack Whitten | 89  | <b>Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.<br/>Jack Whitten's<br/>Musical Eye</b>    |
| 130 | Zoé Whitley<br>Brüderlichkeit                                       | 129 | <b>Zoé Whitley<br/>Brotherliness</b>                                |
| 182 | David Reed<br>Two-Eyed Jack   | 181 | <b>David Reed<br/>Two-Eyed Jack</b>                                 |
| 194 | Stanley Whitney<br>Universell und zeitlos                           | 193 | <b>Stanley Whitney<br/>Universal and Timeless</b>                   |
| 202 | Jack Whitten<br>Ausgewählte Schriften                               | 201 | <b>Jack Whitten<br/>Selected Writings</b>                           |
| 224 | Jack Whitten<br>Chronologie   | 223 | <b>Jack Whitten<br/>Chronology</b>                                  |
| 231 | Werkliste   | 231 | <b>List of Works</b>  |
| 234 | Autor*innen   | 233 | <b>Authors</b>  |

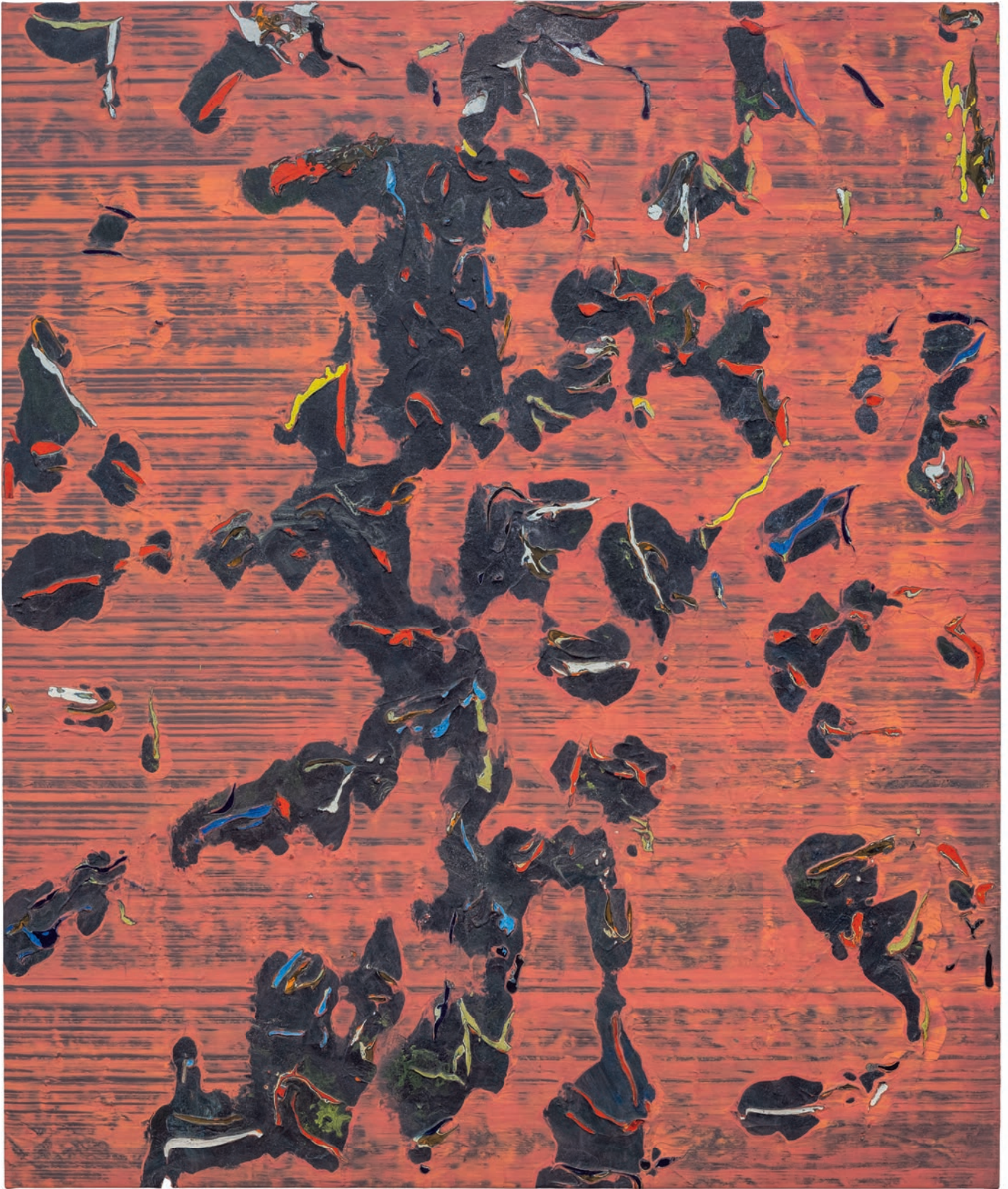
























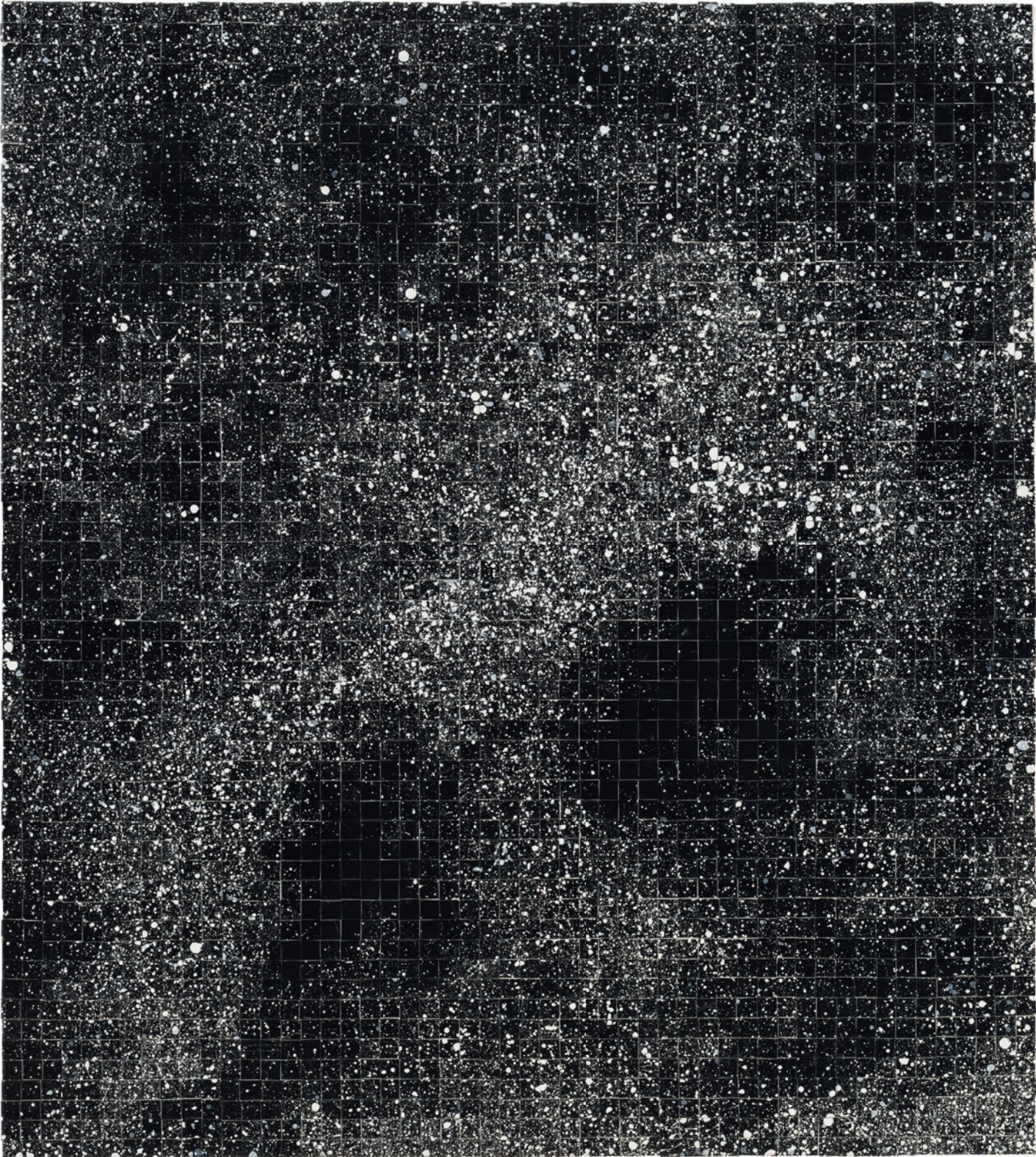














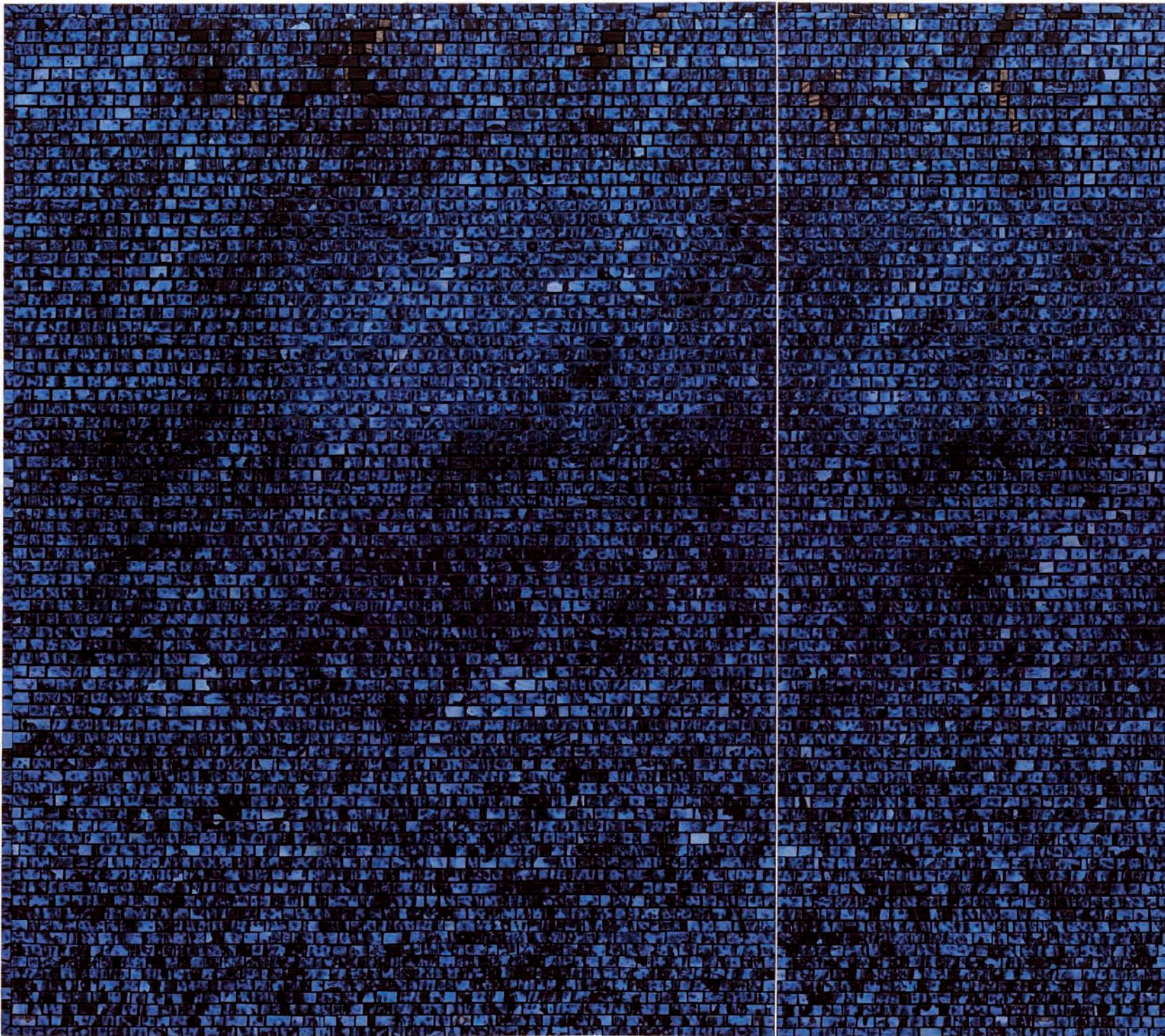
My cosmic guides are: John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, Kenny Dorham, Bud Powell, Ron Carter, Fats Navarro, Dexter Gordon, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, Coleman Hawkins, Eric Dolphy, Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, Clifford Brown. ... I am so blessed.

J.W.

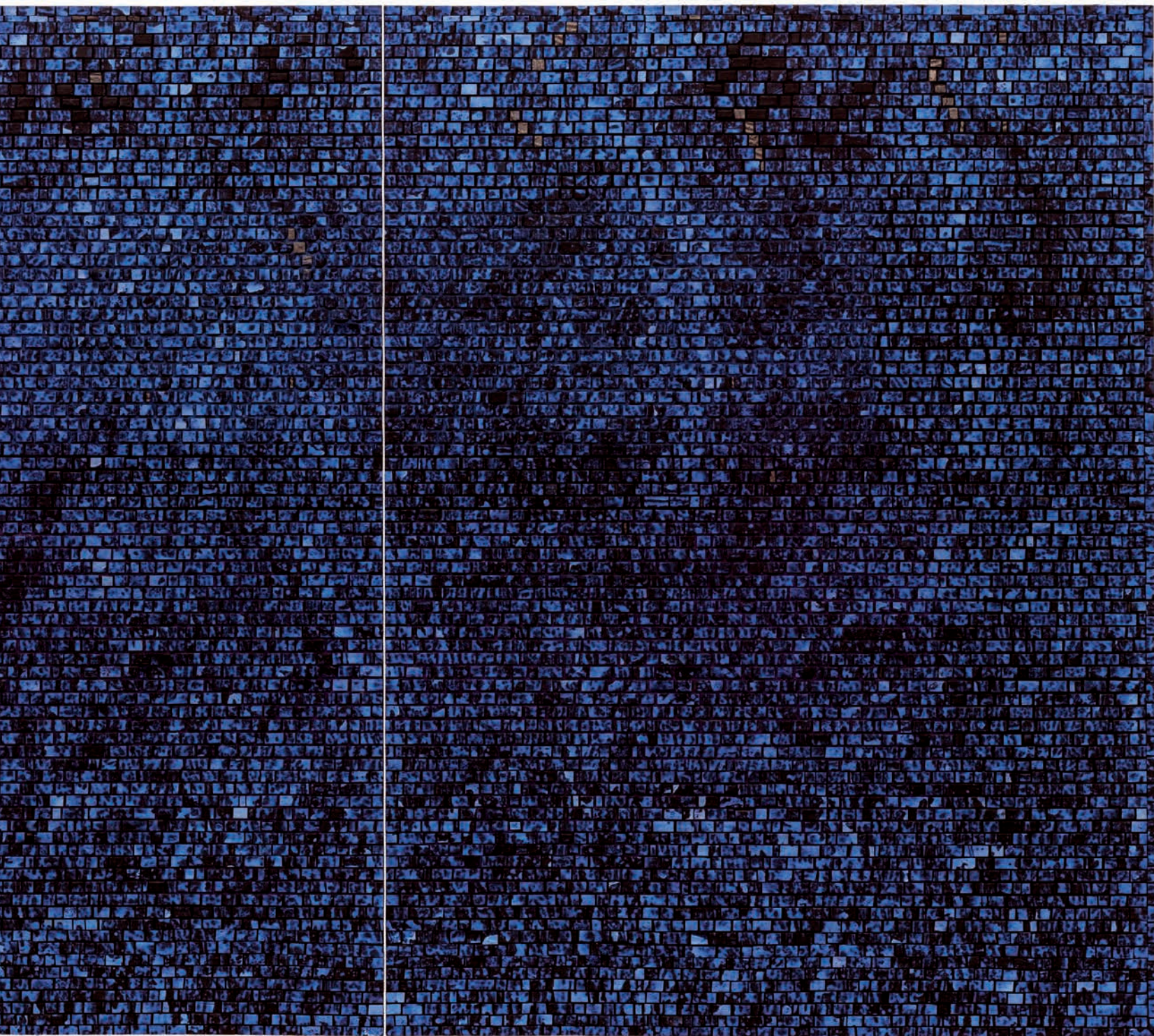






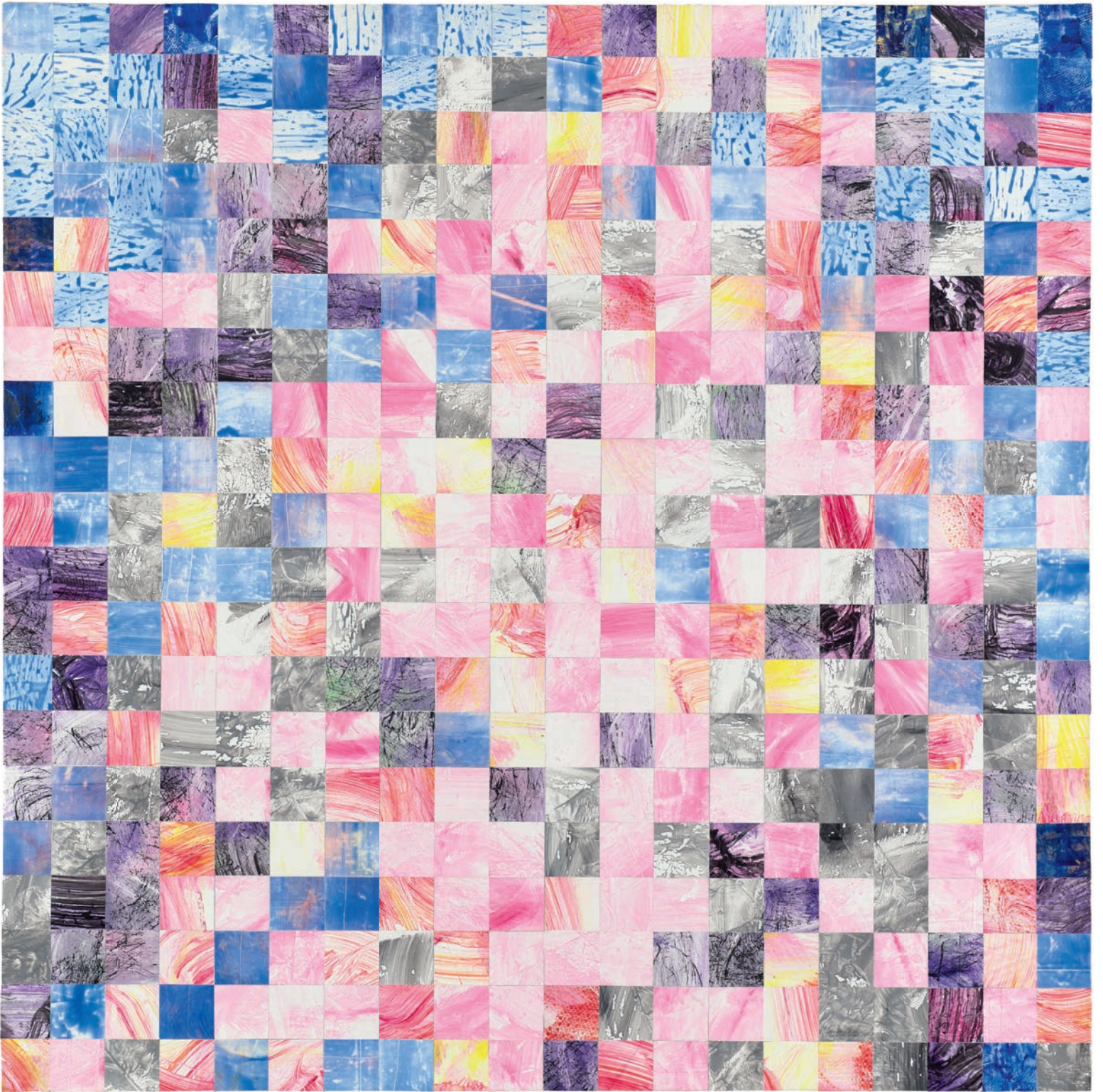




















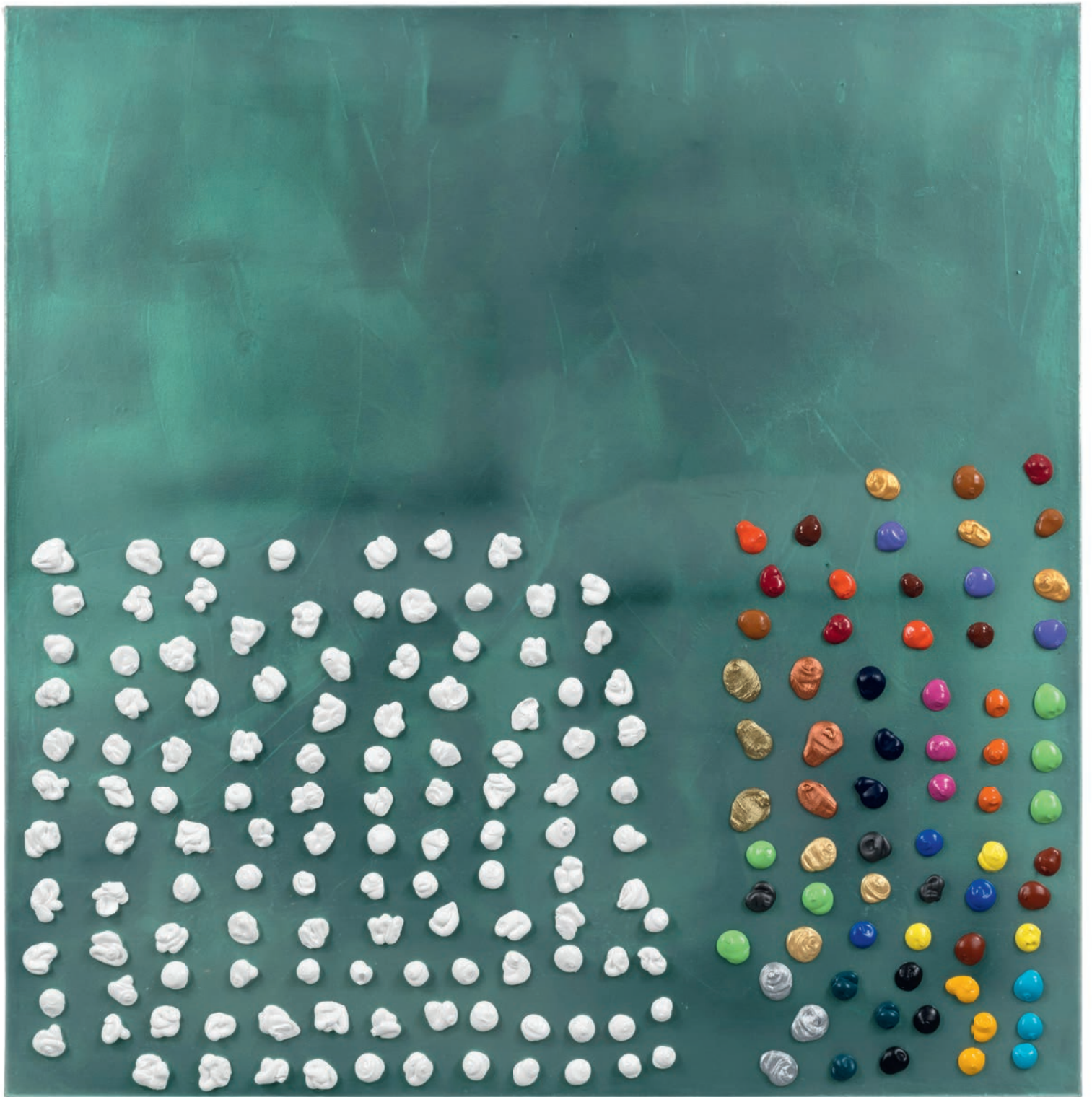














My African American identity shaped by the politics of racism in America makes it extremely difficult for me to experience the leisure of being apolitical. Every artist recognizes the “immediateness” of being apolitical as a selfish narcissistic defense mechanism. It is an existentialist right to reject the world in order to commune with the self. History has proven that the apolitical is a dangerous political choice and that there is a price to pay under certain circumstances.

J.W.







# Ausgewählte Schriften

## **A Circle of Blood – Ein blutiger Teufelskreis**

Über die Kunst in Zeiten unbeschreiblicher Gewalt

Ich bin Künstler, und meine Aufgabe ist es, das menschliche Dasein in all seinen Facetten zu entschlüsseln. Das Atelier ist der notwendige Rückzugsort, ein Ort der Ruhe und der Reflexion, der es mir ermöglicht, meiner Arbeit als Maler nachzugehen. Meine Schwierigkeit bestand schon immer darin, den Glauben nicht zu verlieren: Was rechtfertigt, dass ich weiter in meinem Atelier bleibe, wo doch die Außenwelt mein Vertrauen in die Kunst ständig auf die Probe stellt?

Die Sommer in Bessemer, Alabama sind drückend heiß und schwül. Während meiner Kindheit und Jugend durften die Schwarzen Kinder dort nicht ins Stadtschwimmbad gehen, es war den Weißen vorbehalten. Die älteren Jungs in unserem Viertel haben aus Schlamm, Ästen und Steinen einen Damm gebaut und den Bach Parson's Creek aufgestaut. Damit hatten wir eine perfekte Badestelle. Wir haben sogar einen Autoreifen mit einem Seil an einen überhängenden Ast gehängt und konnten uns damit ins Wasser schwingen. Das war ein Riesenspaß! Der Spaß endete eines Morgens ganz plötzlich, als das erste Kind, das in die Badestelle gesprungen war, schreiend und mit blutigen Füßen aus dem Wasser kam. Offensichtlich dachten die Weißen Leute, die Nigger würden sich ein bisschen zu gut amüsieren, weshalb sie im Schutz der Dunkelheit haufenweise zerbrochene Glasflaschen in unsere Badestelle geworfen hatten.

1946 schoss ein Straßenbahnschaffner fünfmal auf Timothy Hood, einen 23-jährigen ehemaligen US-Marinesoldaten aus dem Norden von Bessemer, weil er das Schild des Wagens entfernt hatte, auf dem „Weiße/Farbige“ stand. Hood kam mit dem Leben davon, nur um später durch den Polizeichef des Nachbarorts Brighton mit einem einzigen Schuss in den Kopf getötet zu werden. Juristische Konsequenzen gab es keine. Timothy war ein Schulfreund meiner ältesten Schwester Martha. Ich werde den Trauerzug nicht vergessen, der sehr langsam durch unsere Nachbarschaft zog, und ich erinnere mich an seinen mit der Flagge bedeckten Sarg, den man durch die Fenster des Leichenwagens sehen konnte.

I have never witnessed a lynching, but I grew up with stories from people who had. I have never served in the military, but I do know what a bullet sounds like when it passes close to the body. I am a parent, and I have personally suffered from the availability of guns in American society. The murder of twenty children at Sandy Hook Elementary School—three years ago this month—was particularly painful: the loss of innocence touched a raw nerve, and it exposed how vulnerable people are to violence. [...]

The African American community in particular has suffered and continues to suffer the regularity of systemic acts of violence against our people. The psychology of racism is a deep pit composed of descending layers of historic fears—fears that are ancient and lie deep in the psyche of people. It is an archaeological stratification of complex, calcified mental deposits of collective myth, signified through stereotypical visual images of the Other, which has solidified into a mass of material doom. Racism is a poisonous sickness.

In European myth, the whiteness of skin was symbolic of “purity” either of a sexual nature or of holy perfection within the eyes of God. For some stupid reason, the whiteness of skin automatically allowed one closer access to the Godhead! This notion of purity was easily translated into aesthetics, which is OK: aesthetics had to start somewhere. The problem is the translation of aesthetics into the political. Once aesthetics becomes political, we have a problem. The imposition of one’s feelings onto the Other, simply because one has the power to do so, upsets the social balance. America experiences social unbalance on all fronts: economic, political, identity, gender, spiritual, etc. Social unbalance is a circle of blood, and must be corrected.

In America, our legacy of racism was expanded through an institutionalized system of slavery resulting in a seriously damaged worldview. Worldview is a cosmic declaration of being; it guarantees us our place in the universe. The structuring of a viable worldview is hard work, and filled with risk. Ultimately, we Americans must ask the most basic question: “What kind of a world do we want?” I know what I want. I want a world without the poisonous sickness of racism, without romantic fantasies of being Black or White!

Artists are demolition experts. We destroy stereotypes. Film, dance, photography, theater, painting, sculpture, video, installation, performance ... all the known mediums, even those not yet discovered, are historically proven effective in the destruction of stereotypes. Stereotypes, imposed by one group on another, are fixed cultural patterns designed to maintain the status quo. [...]

Art is the only thing I have to offer, the only thing I trust. My firm belief in art is grounded in personal experience. I am a product of American apartheid. Racism and violence are something I have dealt with all my life, and I am fully aware of their poisonous effects on society. My art is an antidote used to counteract this poison. Art has the power to heal and restore balance both in the individual and society as a whole. Art has the power to break down barriers erected by simple-minded fundamentalist thinkers who attempt to maintain power. If fundamentalists are afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue, then Red, Black, and Green, or Pink and Lavender must give them nightmares! [...]

December 3, 2015\*

\* Originally published online as “A Circle of Blood: Jack Whitten on Art in Times of Unspeakable Violence” as part of Artist Op-Eds, the Walker Art Center’s ongoing series of commissioned essays by artists. [walkerart.org/magazine/jack-whitten-art-violence](http://walkerart.org/magazine/jack-whitten-art-violence)