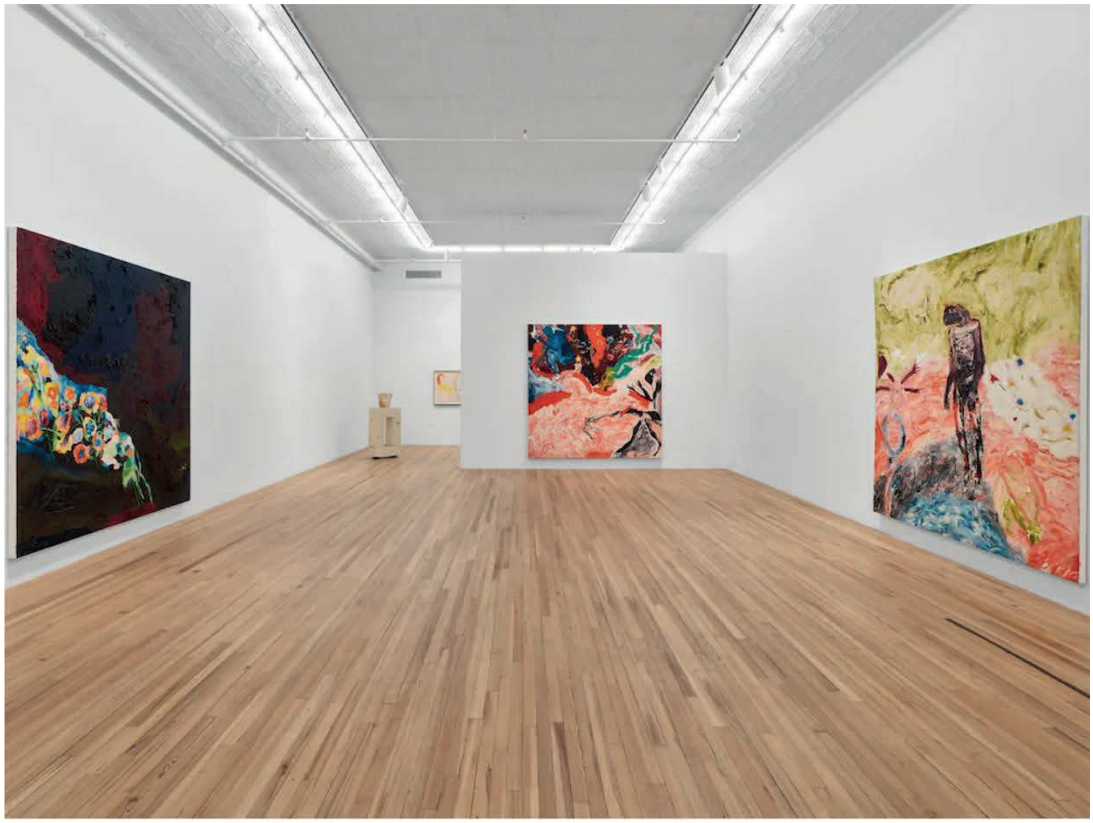
ARTnews
10 April 2025

ARTnews

After Years of Figurative Painting, Abstraction Roars Back in New York's Galleries Better Than Ever



Oliver Lee Jackson's show at Andrew Kreps Gallery.
PHOTO KUNNING HUANG/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ANDREW KREPS GALLERY, NEW YORK

New York is a city that quickly cycles through artistic trends, so it's been surprising that figurative painting has hung on for the better part of a decade. But now, there are signs that abstraction is roaring back in galleries after a period of relative dormancy. Gestural strokes and off-kilter color fields are becoming the norm, slowly replacing the portraits and surrealist tableaux that have for so long been a fixture of storefront spaces and auction house salesrooms.

What kind of abstraction is this? It's not quite **zombie formalism**, the name that critic Walter Robinson gave to the largely rote output of bad-boy painters during the early 2010s. It's not quite Neo-Neo-Expressionism either, nor is it Neo-Neo-Geo or even neo-anything, because some of it is actually quite old.

Here's where a New York–specific obsession with painting collides with an international fascination with "rediscoveries," or artists who have thus far failed to achieve canonization and are now being given a second chance, whether in their late-career period or posthumously. A cynic might say these current shows in New York are a money-motivated attempt to cash in, while an optimist would suggest that dealers' interest in the under-recognized of art history reflects a welcome global interest in widening the canon. Because commerce and canonization are so deeply intertwined in this city, both viewpoints are probably true.

Whether the current abstraction moment will last will depend on whether dealers can make hay from it. Who knows, given the way the economy is trending. But for now, at least, the abstraction entering New York's galleries right now does feel fresh, exciting, and worthy of attention. Here are three shows of abstract painting in New York that merit a visit.

Oliver Lee Jackson at Andrew Kreps Gallery

Oliver Lee Jackson, *Painting (5.23.89)*, 1989.

Photo : Photo Kunning Huang/Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Need some proof that figuration is slowly fading away? Consider shows like Oliver Lee Jackson's at Andrew Kreps in Tribeca, where people melt away into dense agglomerations of wobbling paint strokes. To say that Jackson is disinterested in the figure is not quite true—his paintings are being shown alongside beguiling sculptures of body parts, including one in which two carefully chiseled eyes emerge from a rough slab of marble. Yet in his paintings, Jackson allows his figures to nearly go invisible before allowing them to come back into view once more.

This isn't pure abstraction to be clear as his paintings develop in time, revealing their secrets gradually. That effect is most pronounced in *Painting (1.5.88)*, 1988, in which a row of flowers cascades through a dark void. Only through extended viewing does one realize that within all that blackness are areas of deep blue, reddish brown, and mucky grey. Look even longer, and one discovers that each of those areas corresponds to a faceless person. Paintings like this one shows that the eye sees what it wants to see, selectively cutting through visual overload and ignoring a lot in the process.

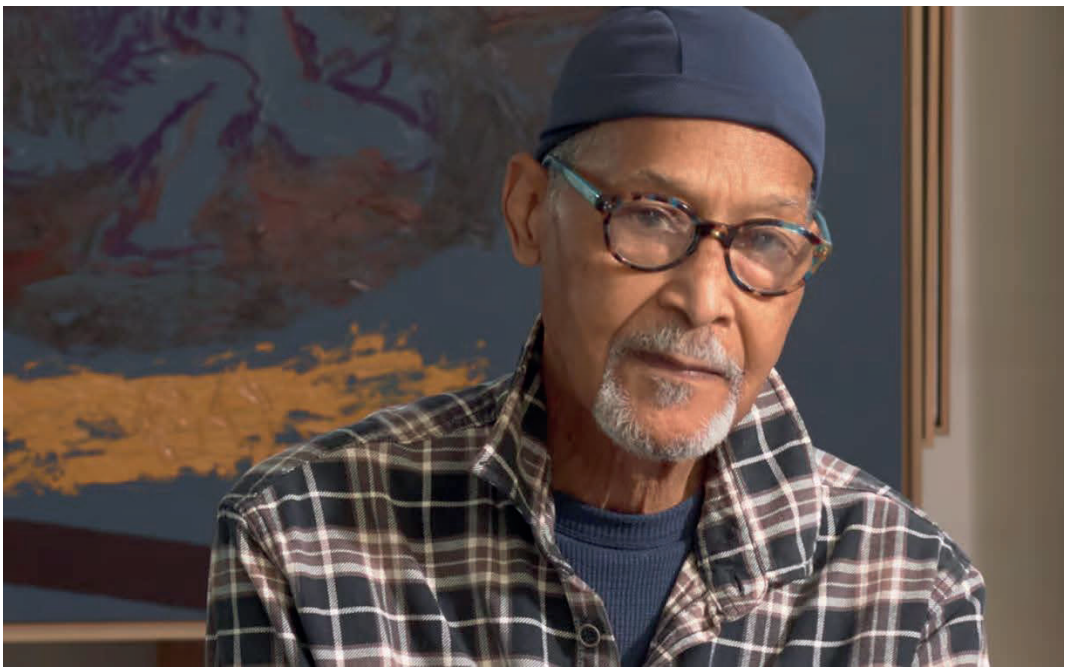
Jackson has only recently emerged on the blue-chip circuit, showing with Andrew Kreps, Blum, and Lisson within the past few years. There can be no doubt that New York centrism played a role in his continued exclusion in the upper echelons of the art market. He worked during the 1960s in St. Louis, where he was within the orbit of members of the Black Artists Group, and then, during the 1970s, he moved to California, where he has been based ever since. Better late than never, though. The Kreps show makes a good case continuing to keep a watch on him.

At 22 Cortlandt Alley, through April 12.

The Standard
8 April 2025

THE STANDARD

Artist Oliver Lee Jackson: 'Right now humans are in a desperate spiritual place'



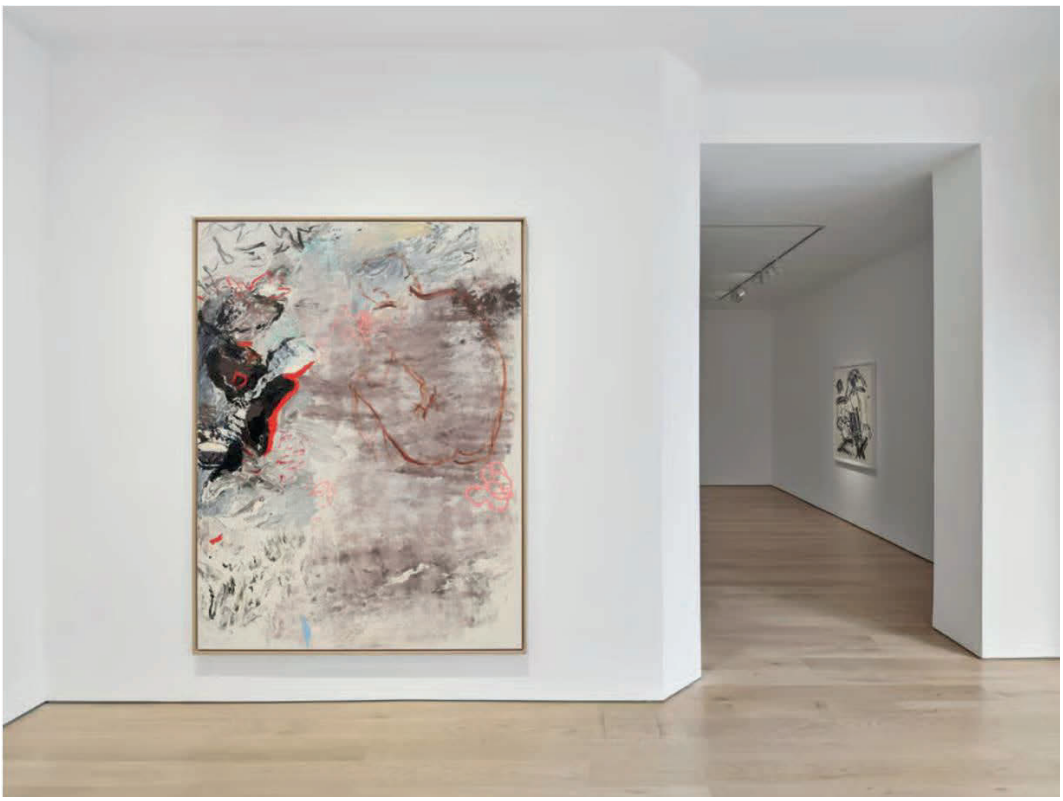
OLIVER LEE JACKSON

M. LEE FATHERREE

Oliver Lee Jackson has always been wary of politics. That is not to say that the artist, who was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1935, at a time when very few African-American working-class men made their way to art school, has not been involved in political movements virtually his entire career.

In the late 1960s he advised the St. Louis collective of musicians, poets, dancers and artists known as the Black Artists Group, while in 1971 he developed the curriculum for the Pan African department at the California State University in Sacramento, where he taught until 2002. Both bodies were born out of the struggles of racial segregation.

In his art, however, Jackson has largely avoided reference to specific historical or political events, except for a series of paintings he created in the 1970s based on photographs of Anti-Apartheid demonstrators escaping the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 in Johannesburg.



OLIVER LEE JACKSON: INTIMACIES

LISSON GALLERY

Instead, his paintings—which are on show in London for the first time at Lisson Gallery—resist definition: they are spaces for contemplation and multiple interpretation, free from the constraints of language (he never titles his works, preferring to number and mark them in pencil with a copyright symbol) and the false oppositions that seek to divide people.

"When you take sides, whether it's black or white, you got a position. You're missing it," the artist says. "These struggles degrade, and even if you win, it takes a while to come back from that. The battle itself degrades you. You can become so degraded by the action of relieving yourself of oppression that you yourself become what the United States is a perfect example of: the bully."

UNTITLED PAINTING (10.23.24), 2024

COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

In one canvas from 1990, *Painting (8.6.90)*, five hunched figures emerge as if carved from lumps of dark brown stone. More recently, Jackson has treated the figure with a lightness and economy of line, drawing in chalk to create bodies that expand and fragment towards the edges of the picture.

Since the 1970s, he has worked on canvases placed flat on trestles or on the studio floor, allowing him to move around the surface in 360 degrees without being bound by his own bodily limits.

His figures transcend racial stereotypes, even if indications of African-American features are present in some figures. This has sometimes prompted questions from viewers. “I had one person ask me why I have black people in my paintings. But that’s how racism works—you wouldn’t ask a white person why they paint white people,” Jackson says.

It is perhaps also a musical experience he strives for the viewer to have with his art: to receive it unmediated and all at once like an LSD trip, as he puts it. “That’s why it’s powerful, it happens simultaneously. It’s the kind of communication that moves you deeply. And it’s spiritual only because it’s interior, you get it all. Whether you can handle it all is another question.”

LISSON GALLERY

The Highline
June 2024

HIGH LINE

Photo by Timothy Schenck. Oliver Lee Jackson, *Untitled II*, 2024.

Oliver Lee Jackson

A Journey
Untitled I; Untitled II; Untitled III;
Untitled IV; Untitled V

June 2024 – October 2024

LOCATION
On the High Line at the Western Rail Yards

Over the span of five decades, Oliver Lee Jackson has developed a singular practice, creating complex and layered work in which figuration melds with abstract fields of vivid color. Jackson's works are tightly composed but feel improvisational in approach.

While Jackson is better known for his expressive, figurative paintings, the artist also has a robust sculptural practice that he has honed over his long career. The works on view on the High Line were produced by the artist for this exhibition. Since 2020 Jackson has constructed several monumental slotted steel sculptures, largely based on smaller works of his from the late 1990s. The artist honors his utilitarian material, and yet the painted, cut, and pockmarked surfaces animate the sculptures beyond their material properties.

The sharp angles and abstract shapes Jackson cuts from the steel coalesce into elegant, perceptible figures. In *Untitled II*, a male figure with truncated legs is rendered in purple and black with a red heart covered in gold leaf attached to his steel chest. A tray of pencils and a bowl of coins indicate the figure's humble circumstances while the massive form exudes physical power—an ambiguity of references that underlies much of Jackson's work.

A number of the works on view also continue Jackson's exploration of a minimal "stick figure" approach to figuration. *Untitled III* has distilled the human form into a simple collection of narrow planes of steel that evoke a kneeling woman with a bouquet of flowers positioned between her knees. *Untitled IV* resembles a figure striding forward, assembled from a combination of steel planes with black and white paint that add to its sense of determined motion.

Two distinct head motifs are repeated in Jackson's presentation; topped with a simple red/orange hat, *Untitled I* features two faces painted with rudimentary, but distinct, expressions on each side. *Untitled V* is an abstract sculptural interpretation formed from three interlocking steel plates painted in white with blue trim, and eyes, birds, flowers, and other imagery rendered in black on the outward-facing side to further animate the form.

On view at the Western Rail Yards, Oliver Lee Jackson's energetic work complements the section's simple gravel pathway and original self-seeded, wild landscape.

Oliver Lee Jackson, Untitled I, 2024, on the High Line, June 2024. Photo by Timothy Schenck, Courtesy of the High Line.

Artist bio

Oliver Lee Jackson (b. 1935, St. Louis, Missouri) lives and works in Oakland, California. Jackson has held solo exhibitions in numerous institutions including: St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri (2021); di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art, Napa, California (2021); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2019); San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose, California (2017); Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri (2012); Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (2002); Fresno Art Museum, Fresno California (2000); Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California (1993); Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California (1993); University of California, Berkeley Art Museum (1983); Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington (1982); among many others, as well as numerous group exhibitions.

Sculptures by Jackson are in the permanent collections of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit, Michigan; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, California; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, California; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. His artworks are also represented in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, Louisiana; Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon; Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington, and many more. Jackson was the recipient of the 2023–24 Lee Krasner Award for lifetime achievement from the Pollock Krasner Foundation.

Frieze
16 April 2024

FRIEZE

Oliver Lee Jackson's Indeterminate Abstraction

The artist's exhibition at Blum, Los Angeles, traces four decades of gestural painting that's neither purely abstract nor figurative

Oliver Lee Jackson would probably tell you that there is no need for reviews of his exhibitions. No need, in fact, for words at all. He might well argue that his paintings, which live primarily in a zone of non-objective abstraction, but which often approach – and sometimes even entirely breach – its borders, exist outside of language.

As Jackson said in a 2018 video interview with the National Gallery of Art in Washington: 'There is no storyline to follow.' Maybe he underestimates the persistence of narrative as a route into meaning-making. Jackson's story begins in 1935 in St. Louis. In the 1960s, he became involved with community cultural projects as well as with the Black Artists Group, a cross-disciplinary collective of musicians, actors, dancers, poets and artists. He later moved to Oakland, but his painting style – which draws from abstract expressionism as well as various classical and West African motifs – has sat uneasily with dominant trends in the Bay Area since the 1980s.

'Machines for the Spirit', Jackson's first solo exhibition at Blum, Los Angeles, constitutes a powerful body of paintings, made between 1983 and 2023, that track the artist's sometimes-fraught negotiation in his work of identification, of feeling and, indeed, of narrative significance. Take, for example, *Painting (12.12.00)* (2000), an economically titled drawing in paint. Calligraphic oil-stick gestures on gesso mingle with scuffed and scumbled areas of colour. The picture's more open lower portion ascends into a black cloud of heavy, overlaid forms, including shapes that resemble hunched human figures. A clue to the work's arduous gestation lies in its bottom corner: the painting is prominently signed and dated twice, once in 1985 and again in 2000.

Oliver Lee Jackson, *Untitled (12.4.23)*, 2023, artist oil paints, oil enamel, applied paper, graphite on plywood panel

246.4 × 188 × 5.1 cm. Courtesy: the artist and BLUM Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York; photograph: Hannah Mjølsnes

That earlier signature is appended by a copyright symbol, just as Jean-Michel Basquiat used to do around the same time. Basquiat's paintings are full of legible notations – he started out as a graffiti writer, after all – and invite us to read them. How to read Jackson's paintings, though? They are not transparently legible (are those really figures? maybe not) but they are also not abstract or open enough to welcome any and all interpretative projections. Figuration, which Jackson has consistently used as a jumping-off point for his improvisational, largely abstract compositions, muddies the waters.

Oliver Lee Jackson, *Painting (1.6.23),* 2023, oil-based paints on panel, 114.3 × 88.9 × 5.1 cm. Courtesy: the artist and BLUM Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York; photograph: Hannah Mjølsnes

What gets in the way, for me, is not so much the presence of figuration but the sense that one should look for it. Confronted with *Painting (1.6.23)* (2023), an elegantly spare arrangement of textural scrapes of colour on a perfectly smooth grey ground, I am distracted deciphering skittering orange lines that have hints of muscular bodies about them. In a major recent work, *Painting (12.4.23)* (2023), violent black and red dashes have hidden amongst them two figures attacking each other with swords. In the lower foreground, weirdly, Jackson has pasted on a rather sentimental pencil sketch, on paper, of four babies' booties. Above that are gestural forms that might be babies' arms and legs. Piles of them. What the hell is going on here? And how can Jackson claim there is no story?

Jackson has said that his art is 'for anybody's eyes. Any eyes will do.' I salute the sentiment – its generosity, its sincerity, its democracy. (It is worth noting that none of Jackson's figures are racially specific, Black or otherwise.) He has compared his art to music – specifically, to jazz – but music is abstract by default, and is not deciphered by a listener the way that a painting is read by a viewer. Painting has to work hard to resist all verbal identification; Jackson's paintings work hard, for sure, but I am not always certain what they are working hard at.

Oliver Lee Jackson, 'Machines for the Spirit', is on view at Blum, Los Angeles, until 4 May

Main Image: Oliver Lee Jackson, Painting No. 5 (10.23.13), *2013, artist oil paints, acrylic gesso on wood panel, 171.5 × 98.1 × 5.1 cm. Courtesy: the artist and BLUM Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York; photograph: Hannah Mjølsnes*

ArtReview
25 July 2023

ArtReview
Oliver Lee Jackson wins the 2022-2023 Lee Krasner Award

Oliver Lee Jackson. Photo: M. Lee Fatherree

The Pollock Krasner Foundation has named Oliver Lee Jackson the 2022-2023 recipient of the Lee Krasner Award for lifetime achievement. Born in St. Louis in 1935, the American painter is known for works that blur the lines between figuration and abstraction, as well as his support of African American artists via his involvement in Black Artists Group. Jackson has widely taught on art, philosophy and Pan-African Humanities at various institutions including St. Louis Community College, Washington University in St. Louis and Oberlin College in Ohio, among others. Recent solo exhibitions were held at the Saint Louis Art Museum and the di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art.

The Pollock-Krasner Foundation's other special award, the Pollock Prize for Creativity, was awarded to Pakistani-American artist Shahzia Sikander earlier this year. This year, the foundation has given out grants totalling $2.7 million to 93 artists and nonprofit organisations around the world.

Hyperallergic
17 February 2022

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

The Figural Ghosts of Oliver Lee Jackson's Expressive Abstraction

Jackson's two-dimensional surfaces lead us into a maze of shapes and visual gestures, yet tease us into recognizing the figures hidden within.

Oliver Lee Jackson (American, born 1935) *No. 1, 2020 (6.14.20)* (2020), oil-based paints, chalk, fixative on gessoed panel, 96 x 96 inches (courtesy the artist 2021.92; © Oliver Lee Jackson, photo by M. Lee Fatherree)

Two silver birds above a thick pink sunset, a quiet smile from a lone cloud, a woman's eyelids, a glimpse of a sleeping boy's foot, two hands interlocked on a walk through a vertiginous meadow, a saffron skyline exploding on the wall.

To experience the work of artist Oliver Lee Jackson, born in 1935, is to pull at the seams of perception so as to see ourselves for the very first time. His two-dimensional surfaces lead us into a maze of shapes and visual gestures, yet tease us into recognizing the figures hidden within. Is that an azure ellipse or a man's shoulder blade? An egg cracked into a void or a veil lifted by aged fingers? A beating heart or a crowded womb? Within each work emerge unbidden characters, the abstract haunted by the figural.

Curated by Simon Kelly and Hannah Klemm, and on view at the Saint Louis Art Museum through February 20, *Oliver Lee Jackson* presents over a half century of the artist's oeuvre on luminous display — as tender as it is imposing, as unabashedly splashy as it is often subdued. In these 12 paintings, drawings, and prints from 1966 to 2020, Jackson's early career is juxtaposed with his output from the past 15 years, evidencing his evolving experiments with color, shape, and the tension between figuration and abstraction. Organized thematically and stylistically rather than chronologically, the exhibition honors this living Black American artist as a groundbreaking contributor to the story of abstraction.

Oliver Lee Jackson (American, born 1935), "Untitled (Sharpeville Series)" (c. 1966), graphite on paper, approx. 30 x 40 inches. Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.85 (© Oliver Lee Jackson)

Upon entering the first gallery, we are greeted on the right by a 96 by 96 inch blazing yellow canvas painted with a combination of oil, chalk, and fixative on gessoed panel. The painting radiates with the intensity of its pigments: peony juts from a bottom corner, crimson squiggles swirl and collide, misty blue blotches float to the left. Titled "No. 1, 2020 (6.14.20)" after its date of completion, this most recent work on display erupts with the energy of early summer — in warm contrast to a bitter winter and ongoing pandemic. Two human figures on the left seem to move into the painting's unseen depths, the brow of the taller one leaning into the journey. Next to "No. 1," an even larger painting, mostly white, depicts a tornado-like rupture of vibrant color; greens, blacks, and reds cluster, while two poofs of bright yellow appear toward the center.

On the wall to the south, the largest work in the room — "Painting (12.15.04)," a 108 inch by 12 foot 1/8 inch linen canvas — is over two inches thick, a mirthful cacophony of oil, enamel, and mixed media. Strips of torn linen are affixed to the surface with heavy splotches of paint, itself taking on the tactility of fabric. The oldest, and smallest, works in the first gallery — "Sharpeville Series I, 1970" and "Sharpeville Series VIII, 1973," both taking the form of a grid and rendered predominantly in a muted gray-green — reference the 1960 slaughter of peaceful protestors in Sharpeville, South Africa. "Sharpeville Series VIII" is framed with a flamingo pink festooned on either side with magenta tassels; in its center, the silhouettes of four running figures emerge from the blank background, with varying degrees of representational detail. In "Sharpeville Series I" the same shade of pink forms an L-shape in its bottom left corner; on the upper right of the grid, a tiny hand holds a white blanket that nuzzles, in the square below, the likeness of a child's face.

A similar grid appears in the second gallery in Jackson's drawing "Untitled (Sharpeville Series)," circa 1966, this time dominated by graphite figures of human victims lying prone, parts of their bodies erased by partially or fully empty squares. In all three of these works, the precision of the grid visually imposes a type of order on a catastrophically violent event. Across the room, an eerie watercolor, "Untitled (8-22-89 II)," speaks to Jackson's virtuosity across media; the amorphous outlines of seven human forms — pointing, crouching, and lying face down — hover on a beige plane. Pastel blue, green, and bright pink lend a sense of childhood innocence, one subtly disrupted by an upside-down skull grinning to the left.

Oliver Lee Jackson (American, born 1935), "Sharpeville Series VIII" (c. 1973), acrylic paint, applied fabric, mixed media on cotton canvas, approx. 84 x 84 inches. Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.84 (© Oliver Lee Jackson)

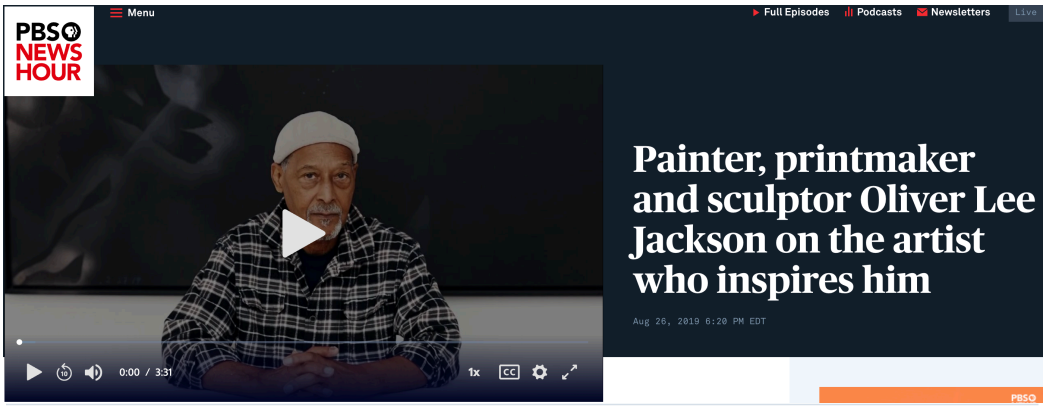
Abstract expressionism has long had the reputation of being all white, all male, and almighty, but Jackson is one of many Black artists to contribute to the history of American abstraction. Born in St. Louis and based in Oakland, California, he was associated with the artists, dancers, poets, and musicians comprising St. Louis's Black Artist Group (BAG) of the late 1960s and early '70s, a multidisciplinary cooperative that traveled throughout the nation, and around the globe, to promote what Jackson called an "African sensibility" alongside the European avant-garde. "To speak of one's art was not to describe what should be seen in it," argues Darby English in *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, on the spirit of two seminal American exhibitions of Black modernism. "It was to describe one's hope that the work would find itself, as it were, in a serious relationship, one in which the work could become more than what it — objectively — was by being seen for exactly what it was."

Oliver Lee Jackson (American, born 1935) "Sharpeville Series I" (1970), acrylic paints on cotton canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.83 (© Oliver Lee Jackson)

For Jackson — whose work did not appear in either of these shows, and whose artistic evolution over a half century is only now on display — what is visually at stake seems to morph as one approaches and retreats. We are rewarded for how deeply we inspect, then introspect, in response to these creations, which blur the line between abstraction and figuration, categories that Jackson himself has dismissed. What "exactly" we see is not what's most important. In each of his reveries of color and line, we are gifted a generous hint of what was, is, and may suddenly be.

Oliver Lee Jackson *continues at the Saint Louis Art Museum (One Fine Arts Drive, Forest Park, St. Louis, Missouri) through February 20. The exhibition was curated by Simon Kelly and Hannah Klemm, with Molly Moog.*

PBS Newshour
26 August 2019



American painter, printmaker and sculptor Oliver Lee Jackson has a complex and diverse portfolio that expertly incorporates influences from the Renaissance to modernism and African culture to American jazz. A current National Gallery show presents 18 paintings he created in the past 15 years -- many of which have never before been publicly exhibited. The NewsHour caught up with Jackson in D.C.

LISSON GALLERY

Openspace, SF MoMA
01 November 2018

Oliver Lee Jackson in New York

by Chris Cobb

Oliver Lee Jackson, *No. 4*, 2015

Some artists use their work to tell a story, some artists make work to show their process, but my favorite kind are the ones that make work to reveal things about the world. This is the sort of artist Oliver Lee Jackson is.

This California painter, it seems, is not thwarted by by blank canvases or empty pages, and has begun his dialogue of revelation anew, this time in New York City.

For his exhibition, Chelsea's Burning in Water gallery has done two remarkable things — the first was to bring the eighty-three year old artist to New York for the first time in twenty-five years, and the second was to present two exhibitions in a row without explaining it, framing it, or trying to tell us what to think about it all. Basically they've provided Jackson a venue with which to tell his own story.

His summer show was stuffed into their smaller Tenth Avenue space with paintings, wall hangings and prints which were mostly smaller works that benefited from a close read. Since then, the gallery has expanded into a 27th street location that really showcases Jackson's larger paintings, figurative sculptures, and tapestries. It's a lot of work just to look at everything and take it all in.

Unlike members of his better-known Bay Area peer group, Jackson avoids the attention-grabbing use of loud colors like William T. Wiley (eighty-one), the gritty & sociopolitical collage painting of Raymond Saunders (eighty-four), the intentionally iconic imagery of Wayne Thiebaud (ninety-seven), or the strongly narrative interdisciplinary work of artists like Mildred Howard (seventy-three) or Hung Liu (seventy).

In fact, despite his living and teaching in Northern California for so long, one would be hard-pressed to tie Jackson to any of the movements that have defined the region aesthetically — Funk art, Bay Area Conceptualism, and definitely not the more recent Mission School.

It might just be that his St. Louis roots, his studying marble sculpture in Italy as a younger artist, and his deep love of jazz (and his collaborations with musicians such as Julius Hemphill) have formed him into the sort of intellectual that is simply not confined to one region or time. For these and many other reasons, his subdued practice shows an intense interest not in being a "style" but rather in revealing philosophical and phenomenological moments.

My favorite works are the back of the small gallery in Burning in Water — three paintings (Paintings *No. 6*, *No. 7*, and *No. 12*). At first they appear to be monochromatic black from a distance, but they change as one approaches. Although the surfaces are indeed black, he has used both shiny and matte paint to make textures, figures, and animal forms. The effect is that they emerge only as you get close. He squeezes in a literal kaleidoscope of techniques within the blackness. He is showing us that he understands his materials so well that he can transform a non-binary into a binary and back again. It's quite a trick.

Oliver Lee Jackson, *Painting No. 6*, 2014

Oliver Lee Jackson, *Tapestry No. 1, 2011*, 2011

At the very front of the gallery is Jackson's scene-stealing — yet glibly titled — *Tapestry #1, 2011.* It is, strictly speaking, not a tapestry, but a sprawling eight-foot long conceptual gesture that seems to want to be a painting and a sculpture at the same time. It's made up of layers of raw linen, cotton canvas, and various fragments sewn, glued, and painted on it. Cut-out shapes feel like animated figures while other sections of fabric are folded and then riveted (literally) to the backing linen. The mark-making, the flow of fragments, figures — and gestural painting in sections — give the impression of a music score or a still frame from a film. It's not a static work at all — the surface has energy and depth. But if one were to ask what it all meant, well, there aren't many clues about its meaning in the title and so it poses only questions and gives no answers. My best guess is that it is like the other work in the show, and it is about looking.

The key work in the show is a large wall hanging/painting/collage that includes a large blue cut-out of bodies against a white background. He implies the figure with both elements of the positive and negative pieces of the studiously cut fabric. It has the effect of making a body that appears to be in the process of both being created and falling apart at the same time — depending on how you look at it.

In an art historical sense one might perceive the figures in his otherwise abstract paintings as an attempt to resolve or at least investigate the space between abstraction and figuration. That would be wrong. His figures are not trying to become something else, they exist in between states — being and becoming, living and dead, dreaming and awake. In this way Jackson walks away from a strictly Western approach to meaning (and the canon of contemporary art) and instead embraces a spectrum of cultural references that can vacillate from ancient and tribal art to a strict focus on materials and what they themselves mean. Jackson is not just in dialogue with his contemporaries, he is in dialogue with art history itself.

Several of his wooden figure sculptures in the show are decidedly anti-monumental and have as much in common with West African and Oceanic sculpture as they do with works by someone like Richard Tuttle, whose aesthetic is also notoriously hard to pin down. Like Tuttle, Jackson's work has an evasive grammar, possibly made up of verb-like gestures in the sense of hanging, leaning, resting, folding, staining, ripping, falling.

But there is more involved than just grammar. Jackson is fond of the conceptual gesture, which is clear in his *Wood Figure 1* and *Wood Figure 2*. Both appear to be, as their titles suggest, figures; abstract as they are. Yet one has to do a double-take because upon close inspection they are not just what their titles imply — wooden figures. Instead, they are paintings that have been ripped apart, with the frames broken into sections and frozen in place like the bones of a body. Like in his other work, it's not entirely clear whether we're witnessing an act of creation or an act of destruction. His motifs are present if you look — faces in profile, birds, flowers — but there are few clues. He leaves it to the viewer to figure out if the things are coming together or falling apart. Fair enough.

My guess is that, given his upcoming show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC next year, things are definitely coming together for Jackson.

Artforum
01 October 2018

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Oliver Lee Jackson

Burning in Water

By Donald Kuspit

Oliver Lee Jackson, *Composite*, 2012, intaglio print and mixed media on paper, 40 1/4 × 28 7/8".

An eclectic mix of paintings and sculptures by Oliver Lee Jackson was exhibited at Burning in Water. If you're unfamiliar with his work, know that the octogenarian artist has a rich past: Among other things, he founded in 1971 the African Continuum arts organization, a body dedicated to the support and advancement of black thinking and culture, and from 1968 to 1972 he collaborated with Saint Louis's cross-disciplinary Black Artists Group (or BAG), befriending and working with the avant-garde jazz musician Julius Hemphill. Jackson's show was a modest sampling from a lifetime of production by an imagination still going strong (a major retrospective of the artist's work is scheduled to open next March at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC). All the pieces on view were infused with a broad modernist spirit. One could locate subtle references to an assortment of forebears, such as Klee, Kandinsky, Pollock, and Picasso. Three freestanding, painted sculptures—two of steel (*Bust VI*, 1998, and *Striding Figure*, 2004), and one of wood (*Head No. 5*, 1988)—were rather cubist in feeling. Yet Jackson's vision is singular: A cunning handling of materials pushed the works well beyond formal quotation or clichéd distortion.

In three black paintings, *No. 12*, 2013, and *No. 6* and *No. 7*, both 2014, abstraction and representation ingeniously converged, suggesting their inseparability. At first glance, Jackson's canvases might come across as thoughtful extensions of Ad Reinhardt's "black paintings." But then, slowly yet surely, a figure appears, like a mirage—a phantom evoking Ralph Ellison's "invisible man." Of course, blackness has a different meaning for Jackson than it had for Reinhardt. Yes, *black is a color*, to borrow the title of Matisse's 1946 essay. Though in the United States, black has a profound social and political meaning—an aspect the French painter of bourgeois pleasure likely did not fathom. Jackson builds death into blackness, and his black figures appear to have risen from the grave to haunt us: They possess the inevitability and majesty of death; they are absence given uncanny presence. His beings surge from the souls of the paintings with nightmarish persistence, conveying the negation, devaluation, and deindividualization African Americans have suffered in this country. His figures, disappearing into oblivion even as they make an unforgettable appearance, are emblems of a violent black history, tragic memento mori.

Three intaglio prints in the exhibition were also powerful: *Composite*, 2012, and *Intaglio Print XLVI* and *Intaglio Print XLVII*, both 2013. To my eye they were the most intensely wrought and aesthetically convincing works in the exhibition—combinations of heavenly light and hellish shadow, depictions of bodies both damaged and adored, feats of draftsmanship complemented by a flair for expressionistic chaos. The artist creates a palpable tension by merging his particular stripe of formalism with his politics—it's what gives his works their inner grandeur, a revelatory beauty.

Sculpture
01 June 2018

sculpture

The Order of Making

OLIVER JACKSON

By Bruce Nixon

Chair People No. 10, 1985. Mixed media, 33.25 x 16.25 x 37.4 in.

As a sculptor, Oliver Jackson is almost free of what we typically call "style:·His work frustrates attempts to establish an overall order based on appearance alone. In many instances, his production begins from a specific mode of resistance, and as these change, so does the work. That, at least, is characteristic. He might, for example, undertake a series based on the formal concept of a head mounted atop a column. It is an art historical cliche, but the familiarity of the motif poses resistance because the concept will not sustain the work, thus forcing the artist toward extremes of imagination and invention as he builds. Jackson does not allow himself to repeat solutions. That, too, is characteristic. How many pieces will he make before his invention flattens out and the original idea no longer engages him? This particular series of untitled works, approximately 10 pieces constructed in 1990 and 1991, incorporated a tremendous array of materials and formal solutions.

But resistance might be found in a stack of marble sheets, some the length of a standing person, but none more than an inch thick-broken cast-offs at the quarry after large blocks have been trimmed to size. How many figural pieces can he build from this trim before he arrives at a point of repetition or, once again, the concept goes flat? Trips to Carrara in 1983 and 1985 led to a figural series in which Jackson shaped the sheets into roughly human forms, incised the surfaces, inked the incisions, and then applied simple, evocative materials: a rusty ring, twine, rusty wire, rope, and hanks of faded, colored cloth. For all the simplicity of the initial idea and the apparent roughness of form, these pieces exercised immense presence, yet they could still be elegant, even delicate at times, or vigorous in their associations. Jackson responds in immediate, concrete ways to the specificity of

materials, yet it would be misleading to suggest that he is oriented primarily toward them. He takes materials up as he finds them, as they suggest ideas, or as he needs them.

In order to illuminate Jackson's sculptural procedures, we might turn to an idea formulated by the French medievalist Etienne Gilson: art is not a kind of knowledge or a way of knowing; it belongs, instead, to an order other than that of knowledge, which is the order of making. What is not directly relevant to the making of a work is about art, but it is not art itself.*

Though such ideas are not current in art theory, they continue to provide spacious room for contemplation. For our purposes, they can be distilled to an essential conception of the artist as maker. Nothing else overcomes this fact, and it is absolutely crucial to any understanding of Jackson's work. Familiarity with his work leads to a point where we intuitively feel the sensibility of the maker come forth as the force that brought the materials to form, something more than "imagination" or "invention" alone. It is a quality of mind, manifested through the materials, whatever they happen to be. We learn the artist through his making.

Jackson, it goes without saying, is much concerned with problems of essence and being, the movement of form from the absence that precedes the idea into possibility and then to completion, problems that open themselves to a concrete, yet deeply personal investigation through the process of making: making, that is, as experience.

In this realm, no material possesses an intrinsic "art" meaning prior to the maker's use of it. All simply· make themselves available.

From Gilson once again: "There is art only when the operation, essentially and in its very substance, does not consist of knowing ... but of making. Although it requires knowledge and action, man's ability to make derives directly from his act of being. Man as capable of naking is first a making being, because his activity as a craftsman is like an outer manifestation of his act of existing:' What Gilson calls the "outer manifestation" is that form which makes the sculpture accessible. Access, then, is our ability to recognize the inner image of the work, which is the sensibility of the maker, received as sculptural form but inseparable from the making of it.

Oliver Jackson was born in 1935 in St. Louis. During the late 1960s, he became involved with the Black Artist Group (BAG) in St. Louis, an intriguing aspect of his early artistic maturity. He participated in a number of collective projects involving theater, dance, and music, and he worked with BAG musicians, including his close friend Julius Hemphill. To say that this experience invested his work with an "improvisational" or jazz-like component would be, once again, misleading. The quality of relationship is not that simplistic. Still, it is difficult to imagine that the experience o' collective, interdisciplinary production did not affect his thinking about the varieties of making and how different modes of art achieve form. BAG ensembles were characterized by the absence of a complete rhythm section, and one sees in

Untitled No. 3, 1983. Marble and mixed media, 76.5 x 31.5 x 12 in.

Jackson's work analogous ideas related to the innate qualities of available materials: selfimposed restrictions, an instinct for working against traditions that govern how things "should" be together, and the ability of artists to create and authenticate their own standards. In 1971, he took a teaching position in the San Francisco Bay Area, and in the intervening years, he has become associated with the scene in Oakland, where he is a familiar presence.

The problem, always, is how to make something that has not been made. It is in series that Jackson shows a vivid and expansive making consciousness. An early, fairly straightforward example is a set of some 10 assemblage pieces called the "Chair People," built between 1978 and 1986. A chair is a design product, and its function is always apparent. It is figural to the extent that it evokes a seated position, one of the basic human postures. Consequently, the sources of resistance are several. First. its formal scaffolding-continuous, readily apparent, referentially utilitarian. Then, its challenge as an externally imposed form, not one of the artist's devising. Sitting is a posture of rest or, in an urban context, of the waiting enforced by social bureaucracies on the needy. It is also a posture of authority, of kings on their thrones.

Jackson worked with the stripped-down metal frames, although he reinforced the figural element by placing a "head" on the upper back. The works are characterized, again, by an intense material specificity, each being radically different from the others, each establishing an internal or inner image based on the capacity of material to generate a unity harmonious with the frame. From this unity, we feel the work's effect. Choir People No. 1 (1978) is loosely fetishistic: a black, skull-like mask sprouts a dense cluster of objects, including a small skull. The frame is encrusted in black, and repeating orange dot motifs mark the "shoulders" or "arms" of the figure; it has a "spine" and nestles two other small skulls like infants.

The "fetish" motif is extended in Choir People No. 3 (1979) and Choir People No. 6 (1980). both wrapped in cloth,

the latter being thick and textured, almost musclebound, yet with the springy softness of cushions. No. 6 incorporates the yellow vinyl of the original back, whose tacking is echoed with an arch of emblems across the "chest"; a kind of crown rests on the head. Choir People No. 3 is tightly wrapped in brightly colored cloth, while the head is a flat, golden mask facing directly upward. A fetishism is sustained in Choir People No. 9 (1980), an all white female form. Its tiny head seems encased in a helmet; the chest and torso extrude clusters of jagged, spiky projections, like a hedgehog's quills. Choir People No. 10 (1986), in a much different mood, is austere. Part of the frame is missing, the chair drops backward, and the head, a rectangle of rusted metal, has an ambiguous "expression:· Otherwise there is only a tangle of rusted wire, a rusty can, an old bell, all of which infer a particular kind of poverty. The can hangs like a monk's begging bowl.

From the first, a term as loaded as "fetish" is corruptive, because it assumes the artist's intentionality preliminary to making, or a deliberate effort to determine reception. Yet how do we escape associalions? How do we remain "in" experience, allowing the work to work, and not evoke the easy, familiar associations of a reflexive, solely cultural nature? We must step back to reconsider everything.

In the "Chair People" series-and this also applies to the presentation heads and the sheet marble figures-the "fixed" armature is ultimately the source of variety. The pieces succeed both individually and as members of a series because Jackson's consistency as a maker leads toward both an individual and a collective formal harmony. At the same time. all the series are interconnected as humanesque but intensely static forms. Jackson works their kinesthetic potential from their stasis. The formal vehicle-the chair and the marble figures are excellent examples-has properties that enable the artist to leave significant elements of gesture incomplete because he knows the viewer's bodily response to the individual work will complete them.

The work says more than it speaks. Its effects may be so precise that the viewer has virtually no choice but to respond. As frames, the chairs (or the mounted heads, what might be called "presentation" heads, or the marble silhouettes) constitute a fixed, immobile pose. Though they are "alive" in their stasis, they remain contained. At times, they seem almost to tremble with tension. The viewer's physical engagement is, finally, a search for gateways into the inner image of the work, an image that will extend all the way to the internal harmony of the series itself.

If series demonstrate the range of Jackson's instincts-his sense that formal restriction leads to a limitless material freedom-individual works are more inclined to demonstrate the concentration of his imagination. These works, too, can be readily characterized by their wide range of forms and materials. An assemblage figure (Untitled, 1978-84) stands with its back hard against the wall, a bit larger than life, packed to high density with the materials and tools of an artist-spent paint tubes, ratty brushes, cans, rags, and

Untitled No. 4, 1983. Marble and mixed media, 44 x 18.75 x 22.5 in.

Untititled (8.85), 1985. Marble and mixed media, 88 x 44 x 24.5 inches

a wide, flat face like the pan of a shovel. The whole form is covered, or visually unified, by a blackish, viscous, tar-like paint. In its physical correspondences, it suggests that the artist's visceral substance is materials and tools: that the artist is what takes place in the studio. The dark surface quality generates other inferences.

One head, Untitled (1991), is assembled from pieces of cast aluminum and mounted on an antique music stand with an old-fashioned, three-footed base: a severe work, yet exuberant. The aluminum "feels" light. But how do you keep a pole from being a pole? One thinks of Picasso's bull, the combined bicycle seat and handlebars. Material transformation is always more vital than, say, a straightforward carving of the same thing. It enables us to know the sculpture in, or through, the specificity of its making. Wood from a tree limb is carved and polished to evoke the standing figure of Wood Figure No. 3 (1992). Periodic rings of transparent white imply parts of its anatomy, and at the same time, slow down the movement of the eye. It is a slender thing, graceful, with a wooden block for a head. The form leans. (A related piece was done with a bronze block head.) It exerts its harmony through the figure, as do the series: excitement lies in the transformation by which material simplicity leads to strong form and the possibility of powerful evocation.

Jackson is also interested in stacked works. In some instances, these can be relatively straightforward: Marble Sculpture (1998) is composed of a

steel pedestal, a stone base, and at the top (held upright by a wedge of lead), a rough block of gray marble with an elegant calla lily carved on one side, the stone rubbed in places with pigments. (Though his sculpture is oriented toward assemblage, Jackson is a skillful carver in stone and wood.)

Other sculptures are more complex. To take one freestanding work (Untitled, 2006), starting from the bottom: a small mount holds a heavy wood base several inches from the floor, creating both a shallow opening and a rim of shadow; the wood base itself, thick as a railroad tie, is white except for the ends, left raw to expose the rings in the wood. In the very center of the base is a circle of sheet lead hammered into the surface to make a bowl, which contains water and a block of broken red glass resembling a heart. Letters are punched into the lead. Then come two thick wooden shafts, one on each side of the bowl, which support a large, rectangular marble block in which lackson has carved a partial figure in one side, a lower body, clearly male, knees folded into the belly, as if under great duress; and on top of the marble, another large whitewashed block, raw at the ends. A circle is inscribed at top-center of this block, with blue pigment pressed into a long, vertical crack.

Untitled stands about waist high, yet it unequivocally exerts its verticality, emphasized formally by a pattern of shifting hue and tone at each level. And still the eye goes first to the figure. Here, Jackson has drawn on Michelangelo's concept of working from relationships of mass to mass rather than of mass to space, a formal situation

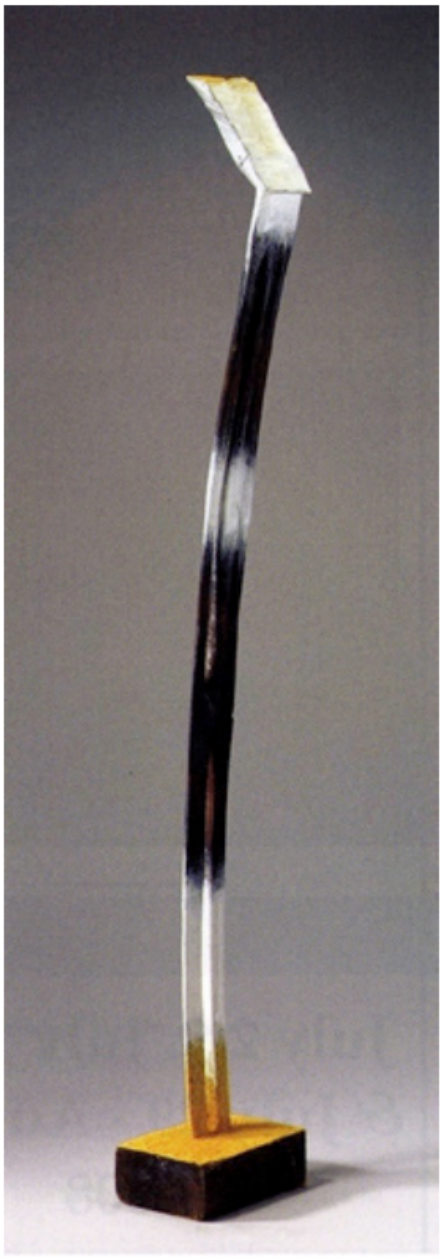
that leads to effects of tremendous tension and struggle, insofar as a sequence of horizontal components is seen as a vertical form impressing its verticality on surrounding space. The figure, too, presses upward toward verticality. But you have to get down on your knees to see the bowl and heart, the dark, cool water in this cavelike space, which feels as if it is under great weight: such dynamic relationships are crucial to the experience of the work.

Another, formally related piece, Untitled II (1985; reworked 2002), is a kind of bier. A heavy pedestal of rusty steel in the shape of a horizontally stretched U supports a long, horizontal block of white marble. A partial figure is carved into the top-a lower torso, loosely sketched thighs and

groin, the legs and feet twisted in an unmistakable posture of death. It is a naturalistic form surrounded first by patterns of cuts in the long "bowl" in which it lies and then by the natural surface of the stone. The head is a large obsidian block, its carved (weeping) faced turned away, on a square of red cloth. If the obsidian and cloth are removed, a face of hammered lead is revealed below, with tiny gilt tears by one eye; remove that, and a smaller, less detailed mask of hammered lead lies below on another cloth; remove them, and in this deep, hollow bowl in the marble, a highly realistic, carved skull rises from the stone. Each level suggests a state of being. Each functions sculpturally with equal satisfaction.

Though they resist summarization, these two stacked works, the latter especially, are concerned with passages and transformations. In the latter, the passage through the levels of the face/head becomes a ritualistic, mysterious, experientially memorable experiential act. Numbers are inscribed at each end of the block, corresponding to the dates of lackson's father's life. A code is inscribed at the head of the block: FARTHE L OVIEVE-which can be translated, or intuited, in several ways.

To know these things is, however, sculpturally unimportant. Perhaps their relation to the artist is best ignored. On the other hand, we can see that while they are not rationally connected, they operate effectively together. But this fact does not rationalize the work. It becomes evident, rather, that various intriguing elements of the sculpture are not dependent on the sculpture, and their



Wood Figure No. 3, 1991. Wood and mixed media, 19 X 91 X 14 In.

removal would not alter the work sculpturally. Yet they contribute a great deal to its effect, its atmosphere.

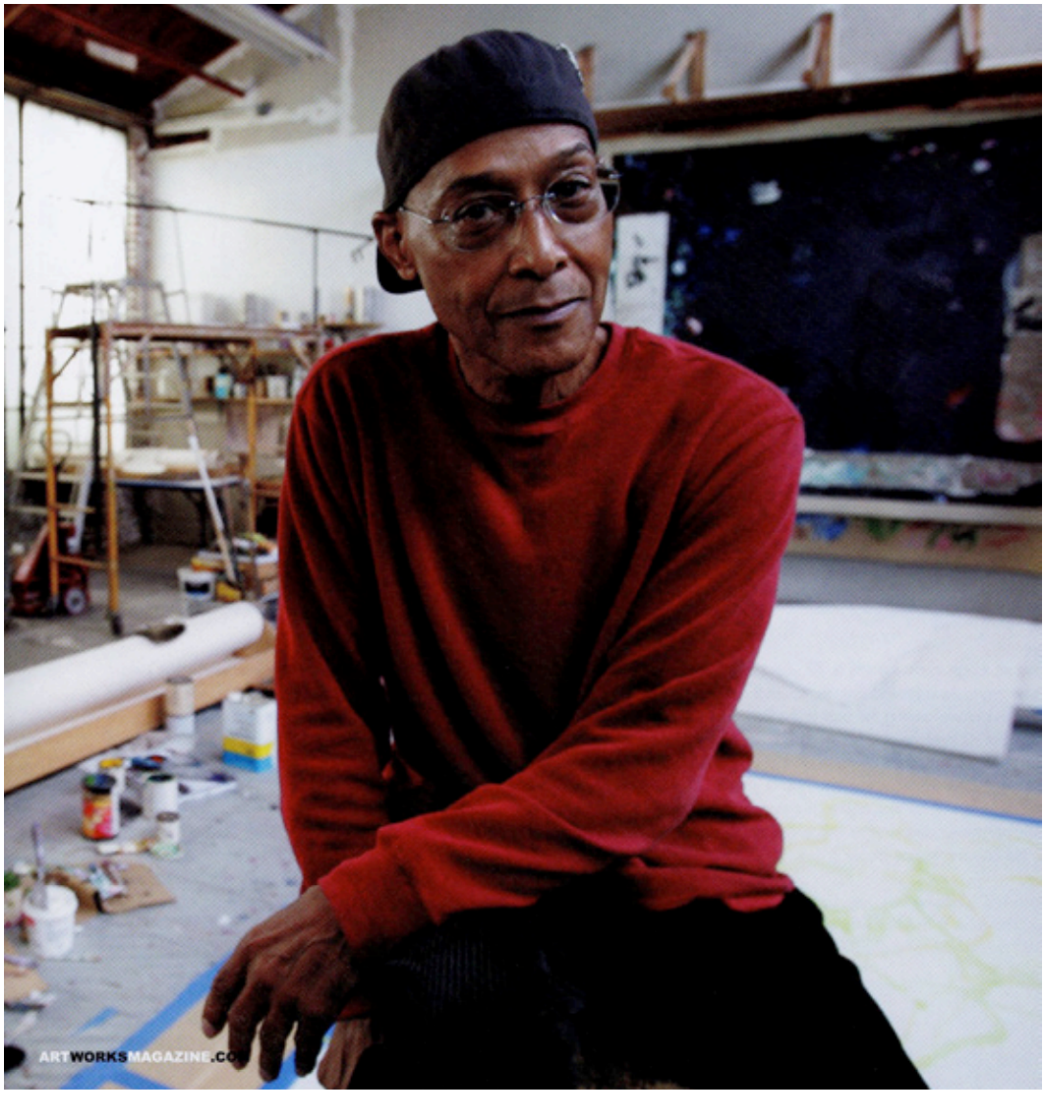
All this just begins to account for a large and complex body of work. Its sheer physicality tends to arouse description rather than interpretation. Description inaugurates one kind of engagement with the materials and their interactions, exciting the imagination to play and dream among them. While interpretation is another

kind of engagement, it tends to remain outside, or separate from, the work in itself. Jackson, an indefatigable student of art in all its periods and forms, has come to understand the ways in which effect challenges the mechanisms of otherwise reflexive cognitive procedures. While his sculpture is not solely an art of effect, whatever else we make of it will probably start there.

Jackson is not a metaphysical artist, nor does he proceed from any informing premise beyond that of making. Because the instincts in the work move so unerringly toward direct experience, habitual interpretive positions or heavily determined ideologies may soon become entangled outside the work, a condition that only the imagination can overcome.

Artworks
01 July 2018

ARTWORKS



Written by ERIN CLARK
Photographed by RANDY TUNNEL

Oliver Jackson blindsided me. Setting up our interview on the phone, he was polite and seemingly mild-mannered. Driving up to Oakland, I somehow avoided the infamous traffic on Interstate 880. I located Oliver's place - a cool live/work space in on industrial building on the city's busy north side - with no problem at all. I even found a parking space right out front. So you con forgive me for thinking that somehow the cosmic forces were lined up in my favor that day. Well, the universe, as always, got the last laugh.

IMAGE: Oliver Jackson in his studio, Oakland. CA

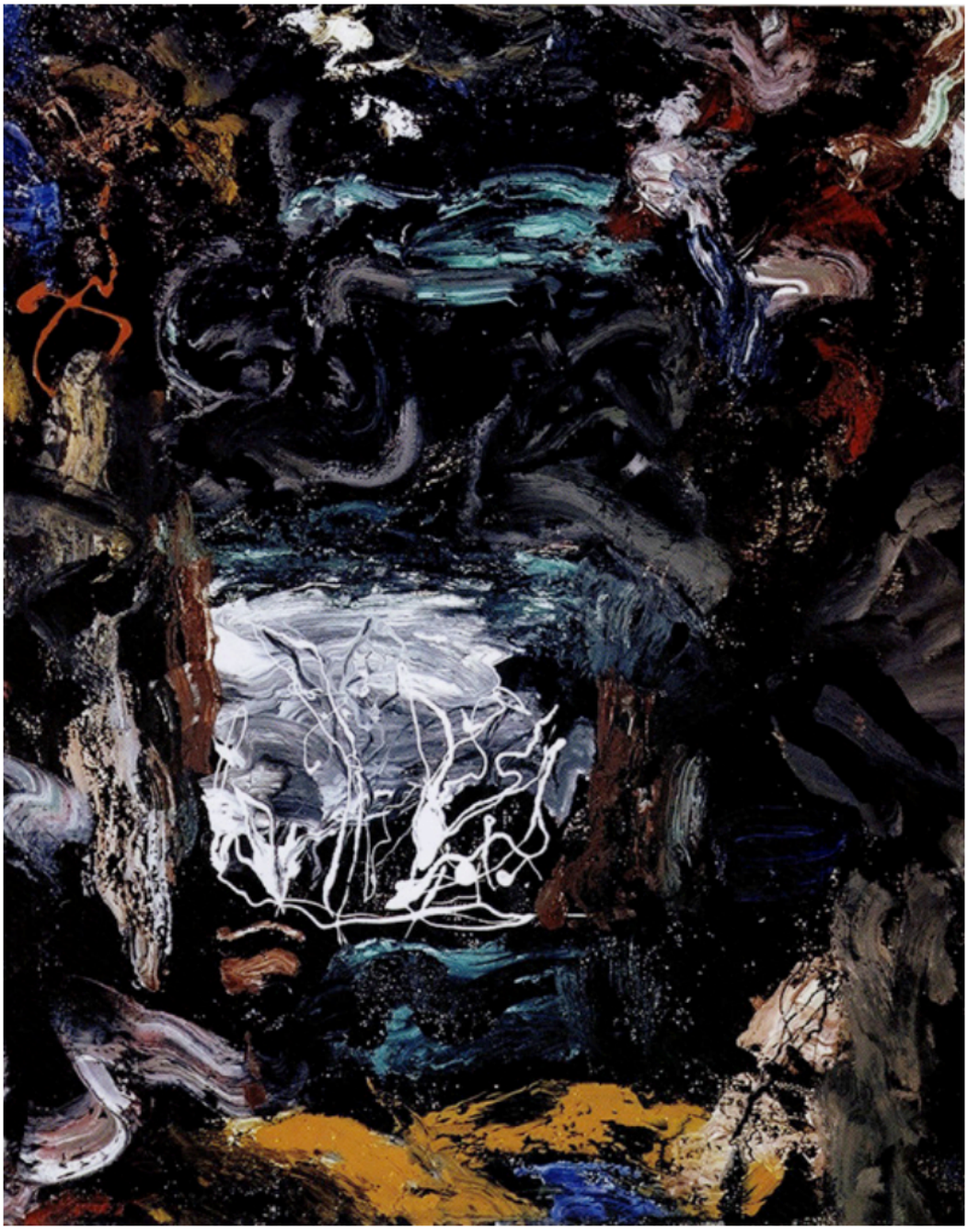
IMAGE: Untitled (12.15.04) 2004, Oil-based pigments, mixed media on linen 108 x 144 inches. At right, Until/eel (5.16.02) 2002, Oil-based pigments on linen, 34 1/4 x 34 1/4 inches. Private Collection. St. Louis, MO.

Jackson is one tough interview. He is 72 years old, but looks easily 25 years younger. As a prolific pointer, sculptor and printmaker, he has secured his place among the best in the Bay Area over the last half-century. But his intellectual intensity can be scorching, especially if you aren't ready for it. With piercing dark eyes, he quickly makes his assessment of me. It's not personal, but it's clear he is not especially fond of writers - or magazines, for that matter. He acknowledges that interviews and articles are a necessary part of the art business, but he's not happy about it.

"The public has it backwards," he says. "The cult of personality is one thing. The work is another. Many people love the idea of magazines and being photographed because it's about them. That's cool. But if it's about the work, I don't wont to interfere. I don't wont to get in the way. I understand the cult of personality in the market-place. It's ironic that you have to do that {put yourself out there} to have them take the work seriously." For Oliver, it is all about the work.

It's telling that of Jackson's 5,700 square feet of living and workspace, about 5,000 ore dedicated to the studio. He calls it his factory and in it, he is a different man. The mega-watt smile comes more easily, the shoulders relax just a bit and you can almost see him exhale. The sharp edges soften a bit. The studio is divided into different sections for pointing, sculpture, printmaking and storage. Jackson works all the time so there are projects scattered throughout, in various stages of development, and the storage rooms are jammed with canvases and sculpture. Every inch of the studio is used either for making art or being inspired to make art.

A human skull catches my attention and I ask Ol-



"But if it's about the work, I don't want to interfere. I don't want to get in the way. I understand the cult of personality in the marketplace. It's ironic that you have to do that {put yourself out there} to have them take the work seriously."

IMAGE: *Intaglio Drypoint I*, 1985, Printer's ink on paper 36 x 48 inches.

iver about it. "It really is beautiful in its own way," he says almost distractedly. "Great form." Something next to the skull catches his eye. He picks up what looks like a puzzle of metal pieces woven together. It's a model for what he hopes will be a large sculpture some day, but he's not sure if it will ever get done. "Fuckin' makes people nervous," he says as he moves on to the next port of our tour. I look closer and sure enough the metal pieces do gracefully form the outline of a man and woman intertwined. It is lovely, though - nothing vulgar about it.

Jackson was born in St. Louis in 1935. He got his formal art education close by, doing his undergrad work at Illinois Wesleyan Universily and then earning his Masters of Fine Art at the Universily of Iowa. In the l 960's, he got involved with the Black Artists Group in St. Louis. BAG was an arts cooperative that brought together and nurtured African American artists of all types: actors, painters, dancers, poets, filmmakers and jazz musicians. He developed a friendship with
legendary saxophonist Julius Hemphill - a relationship he would honor years later with an exhibition at Harvard's Sert Art Gallery.

The Harvard exhibit combined the efforts of Jackson, who created six monumental canvases, and musician Marty Ehrlich, who composed and recorded on hour-long piece to be featured with the paintings. The two artists collaborated on the work while in-residence as visiting artists.

The artistic crossover was inspired by Hemphill, a musician known for his own avant-garde approach to jazz. While the years working with BAG were obviously inspirational for Jackson, he has grown weary of talking about the "black experience" in reference to his art. "The whole thing about being block, reasons for this and reasons for that ... That whole American conversation is a pain in the ass,' he says. "Write about artists and suddenly it's a black artist. No one ever says 'he's a white artist.' Ever wonder why? They are making a distinction for white people to not take it in the some way they look at the work of white artists. The labels obscure. If we pretend that we can tell race or gender, then we

should be able to put up shows without names and everybody would be able to sort it out. 'Course you can't, so the culture sorts it out for you and you buy it. That's my point. You need to experience it {the art} for yourself. You need to trust your eyes and your own reaction."

The main part of Jackson's studio is dominated by a large platform where a piece of canvas is laid out on the floor. Paint cans, brushes and tools to push and pull point are scattered around the perimeter. On the far wall, two large finished pieces hung side by side. The space around the painting stage is cluttered with all the things a painter might need. It looks a bit like a creative carnival, but Oliver bristles at the thought. "People come in here and they think I'm playing. I'm not playing, " he says. "This is work."

And the work defies categories or easy explanations. Harry Cooper, a curator at the Notional Gallery of Art, discovered Jackson's work 20 years ago when he saw the cover of a Julius Hemphill album. Cooper says Jackson's art is all about space - both the paintings and sculpture. "He is a virtuoso sculptor, equally at home carving marble (which he approaches with on almost neo-classical technique) or, in a more contemporary vein, making dynamic constructions out of mixed materials," says Cooper. "Other media include drawing, printmaking, and large-scale watercolors. But painting remains his primary means of expression. Many of the canvases are very large, requiring him to paint them on the floor. This brings a physical dimension to his work reminiscent of Jackson Pollock but applied to an art that retains essential ties to the human figure, however abstracted."

That's what the expert says, but here's my conundrum: I have spent a good amount of time looking at, even studying many of Oliver's canvases and sculptures. I know what I think, and what I feel about the work, but to try to explain it or write about it would be to ignore one of the basic tenets of Oliver's philosophy. My experience with his work is mine alone. To translate for the reader would be to interfere with their experience, and he just plain hates that. "I get tired of people asking me what I think about my work," he soys. 'What am I supposed to say? I think it's great shit - I made it, why wouldn't I say that? But what weight does that have to you? Not very much. You have to experience the work and I don't won't to get in the way by telling you what I think.' So, I'm going to respect that and let you draw your own conclusions.

The sculpture area of Jackson's studio is shrouded in plastic, mostly for practical reasons. Working with marble, Jackson has to contain the dust or risk ruining a canvas or print in another section of his cavernous space, but the synthetic curtain also isolates the work inside giving the space its own feel - very different from the rest of the studio. The monochromatic palate inside the bubble is cool and quiet. A fine layer of dust covers everything, including the floor, the plastic, the tools and the large chucks of marble that dominate the space.

Figures and forms emerge from the hard stone with a gracefulness that is extraordinory. For his sculpture, Jackson does not work exclusively with marble. He sometimes mixes his materials, and has been known to use just about anything to create a sculpture, but in recent years, marble has been his material of choice. In the l 980's, Jackson spent extended periods working on marble sculptures in Corraro, Italy, at the studio of the celebrated Bay Area sculptor Monuel Neri. And in 1986, Jackson was commissioned to create a large marble sculpture for the Federal Courthouse in Oakland, which was installed in 1993.

A teaching job at CSU Sacramento brought Jackson to California in 1971. He stayed at the college for 31 years before retiring in 2002. Continuing education - his and others' - has always been a port of Jocksons' life. He has served as a Visiting Artist in Residence at numerous institutions, including: Chicago Art Institute, Wake Forest University, North Carolina School of Arts,

University of Washington, University of Iowa, Aix-en-Provence in Fronce and the California College of Arts and Crofts Summer Institute in Paris. He also teaches workshops across the country, but is clearly happiest in his own studio, making stuff every day. Although healthy, he is feeling the pressure of time. There is so much in his head that he wants to translate into art. He doesn't like wasting time.

Oliver is also a very private man. Through the course of our converson,on he reveals enough for me to figure out that there hove been great loves in his life, found and perhaps lost, but he's not going into any detail. Those stories will stay close to his heart. His studio is clearly a one-person place. The art - the making of the art - is a good outlet for his passion. He lives the "aha!" moment and thinks we all should, too. Jackson says such moments require no explanatioin; you just know it when they happen.

"The 'aha' moment is completely pure," he says. "You encounter this thing and this thing resonates with you in a way you've never experienced before. It's being completely alive. You can try to categorize it or dominate it by putting it in some kind of order, ut that is a losing proposition. If something like a painting can move you like that, why would you want off the hook?"

"Paintings require a set of eyes," he says. "They don't require a group. They are contemplative because they don't require you to do shit. They don't require you to applaud, they don't require you to agree or disagree. They only require that you look at them. It's not a communal experience and that appears to be uncomfortable for many people. We, as a culture, don't encourage people tomull things over and we should."

Jackson says the creative process is like having a child. You bring it into the world, do the best you can and then let it go. Sure, he says, an artist puts everything into a piece, but in the end the work stands alone.

My four-hour conversation with Oliver has been simultaneously exuasting and exhilarating. Very

OLIVER JACKSON

IMAGE: *Untitled Marble Sculpture* (8.85) (recto and verso) 1985, Marble, crayon, stainless steel 88 x 44 x 24 1/2 inches. Collection of the San Jose Museum of Art. Below, *Garden Series IV*, 2000, Oil-based pigments on linen, 108 x 120 inches. At right, various shots from Jackson's Oakland studio.

much like his work, his philosophy pulls you into a world that is not clearly defined or understood, and sometimes out of our comfort zone. But it's also a pretty provocative place. It makes you think. We have come to a point of mutual respect. I understand his reluctance to --as he puts it -- "get in the way" of the art. In return, Jackson trusts me to get it right. We've come a long way in a short tie.

Maybe the cosmic forces were lined up in my favor that day after all.

IMAGE: Untitted(10.14.06), 2006, Oil-based pigments on linen, 96 x 108 Inches.

"If we pretend that we can tell race or gender, then we should be able to put up show without names and everybody would be able to sort it out"

Artforum
1 July 1979

ARTFORUM

OLIVER LEE JACKSON: FORMS THAT FEELING TAKES

By Regina Hackett

OLIVER LEE JACKSON BUILDS multilayered fields of radiant oil color on canvases whose monumental size—6 feet 9 inches high by 15 feet long—matches monumental intentions.

With its aggressive scale, color and touch, and its sense of revelatory content as well, Jackson's work stands squarely in the modern expressionist tradition. Unlike many expressionists, however, Jackson does not "distort" form or intensify texture and tonality simply to heighten emotional impact. Indeed his forms and figures are not distorted at all. They are accurate images that require their peculiar anatomy and the particular layers of texture and tonality in which they find themselves floating in order to exist at all.

Clearly, Jackson is more interested in an overall harmony than in merely heightened emotional expression, but his is a free and rhythmically complex harmony that is the visual equivalent of the improvisations and extemporaneous embellishments found in jazz. Jackson says: "I've learned from musicians. They are incredible technicians, but they're not involved in technique; they're involved in getting the vision out. Most critics who write about musicians constantly talk about technique, that's what they respect. Musicians respect each other for what each is spiritually able to convey."

A sense of object and ground interpenetrating and shaping the form taken by each is strikingly evoked in Jackson's work, and here African art is also an important source for Jackson. Of course, he is far from the first Western artist to find this African holism inspiring. Once Picasso and the Cubists drew upon it and reworked it, it was a part of the diffusion of Cubism and the development of abstract art, in America as well as in Europe.

While most of the Abstract Expressionists began as figurative painters, virtually all dropped the figure to concentrate on the field. Philip Guston, who has returned to figurative imagery in the last decade, has, in doing so, withdrawn attention from the ground. Guston's blunt but finely painted figures seem to have swallowed the field almost entirely. Even de Kooning, who, like Jackson, moves in and out of figurative imagery, lets his figures take over energy from the field and dominate the ground instead.

In *Untitled No. 3*, 1978, for instance, male and female figures cavort in front of, or within, unfolding interiors of paint, while light rises on glowing streams of color. Both figure and field play out a variety of complementary contrasts, of which the most obvious is probably the bluntly painted black border surrounding atmospheric, softly billowing volumes of white. The border makes the ground inside look even more luminous and transparent than it would have had it simply flowed uninterrupted to the edges of the canvas.

A series of barely visible studs is set arbitrarily at 12-inch intervals. They give the canvas underlying support and are evident on the surface only in the sense that a skeleton is apparent beneath living flesh. Some of the figures are nearly as buried as these studs. A pair of mostly hidden, partially scraped-out blue male and red female figures floats in the painting's center, seemingly trying to rise to the surface. Neither quite makes it through the cloudlike white ground; they remain almost subliminal, a presence more felt than seen.

In *Untitled Nos. 2* and *4* the color is sun-soaked, and light emanates from the ground rather than streaming in color ribbons and rainbows. The field flows unbounded to the edges of the canvas. The figures, arranged in a ring, are all of a piece: simple, wrapped people who sit in a circle that floats in space. In mood, the figures resemble Edward Curtis' photograph of four Hopi women seen on a roof, from behind, with their bodies wrapped in blankets and their hair tied up in large dark whorls above each ear. These are direct, seamless paintings, with long, thickly painted brushstrokes constituting a continuous field.

Jackson sets up a partial directional pattern for north, south, east, and west by means of small blue marking squares in *Untitled No. 2*. In *Untitled No. 4*, a track of blue paint runs through the center of the circle and trails back into the field, drawing attention back into the field without anchoring the circle or even slowing its seeming drift off the canvas. The inflecting marks in this painting are larger than the little orienting squares on the sides and bottom of *Untitled No. 2*, and they have a greater role to play. Floating free and not interfering in the field, they nevertheless lock into it, slipping through without disturbance much as fish do when they swim through water. The completely abstract paintings *Untitled Nos. 5*, *6*, and *7*, Jackson calls his "Spring" paintings. Here the colors seem living in vast expanses of clear, high-keyed tonality rolled on in heavy layers. Jackson animates the surfaces of these paintings by burying, and then pulling out, strips of tape or strings to reveal solid layers of color underneath. He also embeds into or just below the surface pieces of oil, gold leaf, reflector lights and chips of old paint. In the red *No. 5* and green *No. 6* canvases, the layers of color behind the surface splay out around the edges of the central field in bright, messy borders. Like the pulled out strips within the field, the colors in the borders offer the viewer a key to the paintings' interiors.

Jackson's work is aggressively committed to the act of painting. He sees his work as an attempt to express the world in terms of powerful forces that contend with each other in an ultimately unifying harmony. And, for him, "To express modes and forces in painting is to create images of power that are potent enough to involve the viewer in the contemplation of them."

—Regina Hackett