

**Oliver Lee Jackson @ Rena Bransten**

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Diptych, 2018-19 (12.9.18) & (1.11.19), 2018-2019, oil, chalk, fixative on gessoed panel, 96 x 72 in. (each panel)

*Force Field*, Oakland-based painter Oliver Lee Jackson's current exhibition, presents an aesthetically rich and complex body of abstract paintings spanning multiple decades. Elegantly organized and installed, it possesses a serenity that invites sustained aesthetic contemplation.

Born in 1935, Jackson has been exhibiting since the 1960s, but his paintings feel very much of the moment. An African-American artist, Jackson's paintings exude a sense of urgency, while simultaneously managing to elide the expectations placed upon artists of color, primarily that they must aestheticize the signifiers of blackness. The consequence of this expectation usually takes the form of figurative works concerned with inequity or social struggle. This puts black artists in the awkward position of having to satisfy political and racial expectations while also negotiating the demands of an artworld that has historically held a narrow vision of what black art is and can be. As a result, African-American art has always endured a kind of benign neglect that has often relegated it to the periphery. From the Harlem Renaissance (1920s) to the Black

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No. 2, 2015 (3.6.15), 2015, linen, felt, chalk, alkyd on wood panel, 95 x 72 in.

Arts Movement of the 1960s-70s, black artists have fought for recognition and for their rightful place in the historical narrative of American art.

This struggle is especially relevant to any discussion of Jackson. In recent years, overlooked artists—many of whom are now in their 70s, 80s and 90s—have enjoyed a resurgence, due in large measure to the efforts of African-American curators and art historians like Richard J. Powell, David Driskell, Lowery Stokes Sims, Kellie Jones and many others whose recuperative efforts have indelibly transformed American art discourse. The result is that African-American abstractionists such as Alma Thomas, Howardena Pindell, Jack Whitten, Stanley Whitney and Edward Clark have, enjoyed experienced greater visibility in all the ways that matter: major gallery and museum exhibitions and sales. Jackson, who this year had a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, is among those who are benefitting from this swell of interest in African-American abstraction: a genre that has not always been appreciated even within the black arts community, as it was often perceived as not adequately conveying a sense of political resistance, or openly displaying its racial commitments.

Jackson's commitment to non-objective expression is, in many respects, a radical act—one that belies the historical positioning of abstraction as the most elevated of art forms and an antidote to

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identity politics. The historical construction of American abstraction as an ethnically white art form is bound up in its mythologizing as a gateway to transcendence and the universal, and a means to express an interiority and complexity that can only be articulated via the intangible. Black art, on the other hand, has all too often been confined by a limiting set of scripts that reduce its expressive potential to an aesthetics of racial didacticism. What makes Jackson's production so significant is its uncanny ability to play with the critical and historical tension between content and form: between racial legibility and the emancipatory pleasures of



Composite (2.15.98), 1998, mixed media on paper, 50 x 38"

formalism. The delicate balance of these elements is most readily apparent in the artist's skillful melding of figurative and non-objective features.

Among the exhibition's standouts is *Composite (2.15.98)*, 1998, a striking mixed-media work on paper that combines elements of figuration and action painting. In the artist's use of color, gestural mark-making and splashes of pigment, we can detect shades of Henri Matisse and Joan Miro that feel almost calligraphic. There are also collaged elements that are beautifully and sensitively layered. At times, Jackson imbues the work with illustrative passages of incredibly precise linework, only to disrupt them with splashes of orange and blue.

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Another impressive painting is *No. 2, 2015 (3.6.15)*, 2015, a large collage-based picture that also combines figuration and abstraction. With voluminous almost geometric blocks of color, it strays into abstract expressionist terrain. Its pastel-like palette and odd compositional balance are reminiscent of Monique Prieto and Ingrid Calame's neo-color field paintings of the mid-1990s. However, it also utilizes unexpected materials, like linen, felt, chalk and alkyd. As with many works in Jackson's oeuvre, the figure comes into view gradually; and in this painting it does so with head-like forms rendered in bright green and brown. The presence of figures, notwithstanding, the painting still reads as abstract, but it resists the often-mythologized romanticism surrounding abstraction's oft-claimed liberation from the messiness of identity. In this regard, many allusions come to mind when exploring the work's material intricacies, one of them being its nods to Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence. While Jackson's painting is more overtly abstract, formally and compositionally it reads like an intense close-up of the elder artists' social realist masterpieces.



Triptych, 2019

The most significant painting in the exhibition is ***Triptych (2019)***. These three canvases display urgency and ferocity and controlled chaos, expressed through intense gestural movement, dynamic brushwork, and the subtle use of color: black and white, predominately, with hints of yellow-ochre. While the painting is mostly abstract, you can see, on close inspection, figures dancing and gesticulating. Most enthralling are the elements that are distinctly linguistic, readable in circular applications of paint, which, when combined with crosshatched linework, recall musical notation.

Of all the works included in the show, Jackson's *Triptych* is most expressive of jazz: an art form that served as a potent influence on the rise of post-war American abstraction during the 1950s. This reference is not without significance if we are to fully consider the racial homogenizing of abstraction which, like its musical corollary, emerged as a response to intense ethnic and racial animus. Abstract Expressionism, and artistic formalism in general, have critically and historically been positioned as politically benign and beyond the politics of identity, despite having been defined by Jewish-American artists and art critics (Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg and Leo Steinberg) who were battling the persistence of anti-Semitism in the West. Jackson's awareness of this history bristles from his compositions; they rage against the stain of historical untruths and erasure, without compromising the sensuousness and freedom of his mark-making.

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There is always the tendency to read racial signification in the work of black artists—to find the story, so to speak. While Jackson may not indulge the cliché of using his artistry to romanticize the political, he instead instructs us to look first and to let the work grace us with the unexpected.

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*Oliver Lee Jackson: "Force Field" @ [Rena Bransten Gallery](#) through October 26, 2016.*

**About the author:**

[Derek Conrad Murray](#) is an interdisciplinary theorist specializing in the history, theory, and criticism of contemporary art and visual culture. Murray works in contemporary aesthetic and cultural theory with a particular attention to technocultural engagements with identity and representation. He is currently Professor of History of Art and Visual Culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is the author of *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity After Civil Rights* (2016) and the forthcoming book *Mapplethorpe and the Flower: Radical Sexuality and the Limits of Control* (2019).

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