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FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS

Oliver Lee Jackson: Paint People

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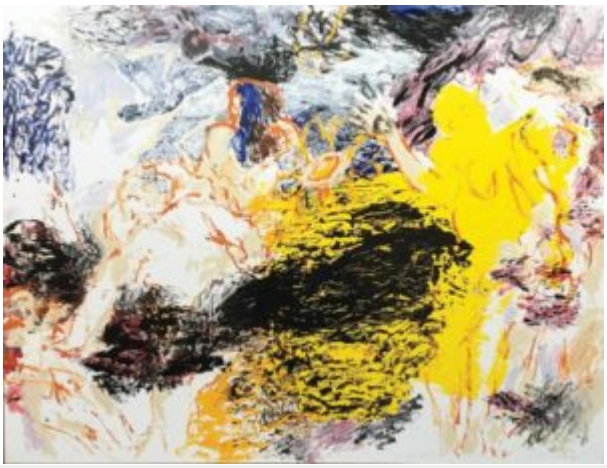
In the work of Oliver Lee Jackson, enigmatic figures enter and explore a colorful abstract realm.



Oliver Lee Jackson, No. 5, 2018 (3.24.18), 2018 oil-based paints on panel, overall: 72 x 96 in., framed: 74 x 97 x 2 in.

Featured Images:



Oliver Lee Jackson's potent, explorative gestural abstraction often shares the canvas with humanoid figures. Punctuating or delineating—or even serving as vessels for—passages of abstraction, the figures are removed from a figurative world, as if out of time. They instead seem to occupy a tumultuous space of mass, motion and energy that reverberates outside of narrative.
Jackson has said that these humanoid figures are not people. "He has often corrected me when I've been in the studio and said, 'I like this figure or that one,'" says Harry Cooper, senior curator and head of modern art at the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington, D.C. "He has often said, 'These are not figures, we are figures.'" Cooper, who is the curator of a new exhibition at the NGA that explores Jackson's recent work on canvas, notes that in the past Jackson has used the term "paint people" to describe the figures, as a way to point to their material construction. "These are figural presences," says the curator. "They're often recognizable and they're addressing us in some way, but it's important that viewers not forget that they are paint and other materials—this is important to Jackson, because materials are so important to him."

Jackson's figures' non-human status is notable. If they are purely material—typically, but not always, paint—then they are no different than the rest of his mark-making on canvas. They then dispense with an anthropocentrist view, which privileges the human as "subject" and nonhuman matter as "object," or in the case of Jackson's work, the representation of figures over non-figurative passages. In object-oriented ontology (or OOO as it sometimes called), a radical sense of realism is created wherein the human is not more important or real than any other phenomenal object. As a rejection of correalationism, an aspect of post-Kantian philosophy that posits that there is no reality beyond human cognition and thus all objects are subject only to the effect they have on us, OOO allows a more egalitarian way of seeing. In Jackson's work, this way of seeing would treat a canvas as a totalizing experience, not one led by its humanoid figures or under the jurisdiction of the figures' imagined experience or cognition; material and form could commingle on a non-hierarchical basis.

When figuration—particularly in the form of humanoid figures—butts into a conversation spoken in the language of abstraction, it can be seductive to view it as a sort of Virgil leading the viewer toward understanding. Repeated figures—a figure playing a horn, a figure wearing a hat, a figure pulling a cart—occur throughout Jackson's body of work, making it all the more seductive to imagine them as characters in a narrative. With their repeated representation, these figures can seem to form their own sort of hieroglyphic language, possibly guiding the viewer to a message. Though a narrative might not be what they are hinting at, it doesn't mean they aren't communicating with the viewer—they are equipped with messaging capability. "These figures are very meaningful—I know they are," says Cooper. "If there's something that keeps coming up, it's coming from a pretty deep place, but it's open to us to figure out."

What is perhaps so exciting about Jackson's work is that it need not be viewed through the lens of a philosophical position like OOO or pure narrative; it conforms to neither pole. His figures, woven deeply into his purely abstract passages, emerge and recede—sometimes seeming to embody a pivotal role that addresses the viewer directly, other times seeming only like a sweep of paint among others, but always exactly as they should be. "Everything is deployed to give a kind of single effect for each painting," says Cooper.

"Oliver Lee Jackson: Recent Paintings," which is at the NGA through September 2, puts 25 paintings by the artist on view. A rousing glimpse into his work, the show is also an ode to how indefatigable Jackson is. It features only canvases from the last 15 years, but the St. Louis-born, Oakland-based artist, who is now in his 80s, has been making art for more than half a century. His oeuvre encompasses painting, printmaking, and sculpture. However, these distinctions are often blurred, as many of his works, even those on canvas, incorporate a large variety of materials.

"Oliver is still doing a lot of sculpture and printmaking," says Cooper. "I agonized about including sculptures in the show, but in the end I narrowed in on a focus of the paintings." Through this slice of recent canvases, spread over three galleries, Cooper was able to create an intense portrait of Jackson's practice. Says the curator, "Instead of doing a sampler—a little of this and a little of that—I thought it would be more powerful and interesting to use the amount of space to go into depth on a body of work." This body of work exhibits quite a range of materials, says Cooper: pieces of collage material, oil paint, oil stick, watercolor, chalk, and charcoal, among others.

Cooper and Jackson worked together a little over 15 years ago, on an exhibition at the Harvard University Art Museums that was an experimental examination of the intersection of contemporary art and music. But Cooper had been aware of Jackson for decades. “I had first encountered his work on the cover of a record by a St. Louis musician, Julius Hemphill—I was probably in high school at the time,” says Cooper. Jackson and Hemphill, the late jazz composer and saxophone player, had both been part of the Black Artists Group (BAG), a multidisciplinary artists collective that emerged out of St. Louis in the 1960s and worked across theater, music, dance, poetry, and the visual arts. There, Jackson developed a close connection to music and jazz musicians. At Harvard, Jackson created six paintings, while Marty Ehrlich, one of Hemphill’s disciples, recorded music.

Jackson made some of the earliest paintings in the NGA’s show shortly after the Harvard exhibition. A series of square works from 2003, feature a flowing, almost calligraphic approach to watercolor. Painting (7.25.03) depicts what appears to be three huddled bodies, loosely articulated by sweeping, elegant brushstrokes. Above the figures float three orange forms that almost become squares but seem stuck floating in an amorphous flux. In Painting (8.10.03), Jackson’s inky marks have become more cacophonous. Stretches of thinned, very wet-looking paint cloud a rabble of curving, pulsating lines. Through this crowd, one seems to catch a glimpse of a man in a hat emerging from the surging throng. “These give just a beautiful sense of what Oliver can do with materials,” says Cooper, “and what he can do with gesture.”

The show is not organized chronologically, and Cooper notes that 12.15.04, “an extraordinary knockout large horizontal painting,” will be one of the first viewers see. The canvas, which took much of the 2004 to make, is an excellent example of how Jackson intricately intermingles abstraction and figuration. In this work, the figures are nearly imperceptible at first, but slowly they can be seen rising from the center, pushing into what feels like 3-dimentional space. The viewer watches them from above, as they appear to be squatting or kneeling or drumming amidst a world of pulsating abstract forms. “It may not be in your first reading, but once you start to catch on you see a lot of figural presences,” says Cooper. “There’s a great balance between the abstract and the figurative reading.”

In Painting 12.3.10, working again in a square format, Jackson returns to his inky, wet strokes of a few years prior. Thicker and more tumultuous, they seem to swim and swerve along the surface. In Painting (11.4.10), color takes center stage, as a gradient of pink rises to its top, dotted by wisps and clouds of abstract passages. No. 7, 2017 (7.27.17), a highlight of the show, also brings color to the

forefront. “It’s dominated by this mass of orange paint,” says Cooper. “It’s almost hard to deal with—it’s not a color you see too much in the history of art.” Mired in the shocking, Tang-colored orange is a mass of figures, some vibrating forward into space, others seeming to collapse downward.

Several of the works in the show are as recent as last year. One work from 2018, Triptych (applied fabric, mixed media on panel), is a standout of the exhibition. In the piece, shapes of bright color gyrate against black figures and each other, creating a sense of abstract rhythm and suggesting a rhythm of moving bodies. “This one is really beautiful,” says Cooper, “and a little more legible—one can think of the figures dancing or running across the panels, or can think of more violent associations, but Jackson wants the work to speak for itself, draw people in, and have its effect on the viewer.” Cooper also notes that though Jackson calls Triptych a painting, the work is composed primarily of felt, a material Jackson has also used in the past. “To me, this is part of Oliver’s genius, that he can respond to so many different materials.”

In No. 5, 2018 (3.24.18) (oil based paints on panel), another work from last year, hits the viewer immediately with the intensity of its line and color—its bold yellows, oranges, pops of blues, pinks, and grays, and inky blacks. But the work is one of slow revelations. Confronted by its embedded figures and rigorous examination of space, the eye becomes utterly lost within the field as if mystified; an unfamiliar, yet sturdy logic emerges, but nothing can be grasped for long.

Cooper says that Jackson sees his newer work as part of a continuing evolution. “I think for me personally,” says the curator, “I see a kind of daring that was always there but is sort of naked now: there’s more directness than ever, more improvisation on canvas, more soliciting of what might be seen as ugly, and an intensity of colors and textures.”

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By Sarah E. Fensom