



Oliver Lee Jackson Exhibit on Display at National Gallery of Art

Eve M. Ferguson . May 15, 2019



Oliver Lee Jackson (Courtesy photo)

The beauty of the paintings by St. Louis-born artist Oliver Lee Jackson is that they really don't need much explaining, or even titles. They are entities unto themselves and boldly present themselves in the current exhibit, "Oliver Lee Jackson: Recent Paintings," currently on view at the National Gallery of Art's East Building.

"I intend the work to have power, and I want the power to be specific in terms of its effects," Jackson said in a recent interview. "When you stand before a work — that goes for me after I

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finish one — you don't really know it until it resonates you, makes it significant for you. But how it resonates me has to do with me. It's like every vessel gets resonated uniquely. How it would affect me would be different than for you, because we are two different vessels."

The painter, printer, sculptor and multimedia artist, born in 1935, has drawn inspiration from a number of sources. First and foremost, Jackson draws on jazz and the musicality of colors and forms gleaned from his interaction with composer and saxophonist Julius Hemphill, saxophonist Oliver Lake and other members of the interdisciplinary collective, Black Artists Group.

Jackson also served as assistant director of the People's Art Center and director of Program Uhuru in St. Louis before relocating to California in 1971. Since 1982 he has been a fixture in Oakland, California, but never lost touch with his St. Louis roots.

"Because of my relationships with music and musicians, I began to understand how I could approach making something, starting with the first mark, the very first mark — that choice," he said about his process. "The musicians I was listening to might begin very, very softly, touching silence tenderly, or harshly. In doing either, they never seemed to violate the silence."

Jackson's paintings, mostly large-scale, also don't violate the silence, although the colors reach out and grab the viewer. Many of the 20 works on view, previously unseen publicly, are created by a variety of media, including liberal use of folded felt.

Although it seems an unusual material to work with, Jackson found something unique in its use.

"Oh, it's the absolute saturation of color, it's all the way through the cloth, there's no place it isn't dyed," he said. "So it gives back the color — it's just powerful. But in the most gently way — felt kicks the light back gently."

Jackson's color palette can only be described as delicious — sometimes taking on the shine of a bowl of orange sherbet, and in another work, plumbing the deep blues of the ocean. Sometimes

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one can make out what seems to be a figure, but on closer examination, the form dissolves into movement and rich hues.

“There are no human beings in painting — only ‘paint people,’” he explained as he acknowledged the figurative foundation of many of his works.

“Figurative is about the best I can do,” he added. “However, ‘figurative’ does not make a lot of sense to me because it is a category that depends on representation for its meaning. And that’s not what painting is for me — representation. I use figures as a foundation to make a painting, as a starting point.”

Harry Cooper, senior curator of Modern Art at the gallery, concurred.

“Unlike many artist who emerged in the wake of abstract expressionism, Jackson never wavered from his figurative stance,” Cooper said. “While his work is not political, it may refer to modes of violence and violation, and may imply suffering as well as hope, joy and perseverance. The result is an engaging, demanding body of work that challenges viewers to spend time with it and to open themselves to its effects.”

And therein lies the beauty of Jackson’s grand scale, gestural works. No one has to impose or dictate the response the viewer has to the work. It is unscripted and primal in its stance.

“The object’s strength is that it’s ‘somehow’ capable of provoking experiences in us,” Jackson said. “Whether we wish to interpret or not is just a predilection on our part. The art doesn’t care whose eyes see it.”

“Oliver Lee Jackson: Recent Paintings” is on view at the National Gallery of Art through Sept. 15 and will feature a talk by the artist on the final day. On May 19, poet, critic and Oliver Lee Jackson’s longtime collaborator Quincy Troupe and playwright/theorist Paul Carter Harrison will engage in a complementary program “Two Writers on Art, Music and Modality” at 2 p.m. Go to nga.gov for more information.