

Oliver Lee Jackson @ Rena Bransten

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Triptych 2015, 2015, Applied fabric, mixed media on panel 95 x 72 in. (ea)

by Maria Porges

Art is a faith-based system: a fact we are reminded of in multiple ways by Oliver Lee Jackson's panoramic exhibition at Rena Bransten Gallery. More like a show of three talented painters in their thirties than one who is 83, it includes works on canvas and paper that spread out over the walls of the entire gallery (a space that often hosts two or even three shows at once). Many are from the past 18 months; Jackson is prolific, making sculpture as well as pretty much anything two dimensional, including prints, a variety of works on paper, and even wall hangings. Using a range of techniques and materials with energy and fearlessness, he continues to explore what it means to make art that is spiritual in the 21st century—images that take the viewer to another realm, through the portal of paint. It's an uplifting journey, though not one that is always easy or straightforward.

But Jackson isn't really interested in making eye candy. He wants his viewers to go beyond that first once-over, past the expectation of narrative or a snap interpretation. He asks us, like Hansel and Gretel, to follow the breadcrumbs of image and idea through rich layers of thought and improvisation. Like a jazz master, Jackson can riff on a theme with either delicacy or boldness and sometimes both at the same time. Decades-long friendships with musicians such as the saxophonist Julian Hemphill, who dedicated a composition, [*The Painter*](#) (1972), to the artist, have given Jackson a perspective on the ways in which painting, like jazz, can take the form of exploration that leads to

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No. 11, 2017 (10.1.17), 2017, oil on panel, 95 x 72 inches

the creation of a sense of place: an exalted realm in which “the familiar outline of a melody peek(s) briefly through the improvisatory swirl, the song’s chord changes building their reassuring foundation as the soloist floats and swoops.” That was how one writer described the results of a collaboration between Jackson and the jazz composer Marty Ehrlich at Harvard during a 10-week residency in 2000.

Of Jackson Ehrlich said this: “I don’t know anyone more into music than Oliver. He lives with music, he paints with music, he sings along while he paints. The act of listening is very important to him. He’s old enough to have seen Charlie Parker as a young man, when Parker played with Jimmy Forrest in St. Louis – it’s still one of his seminal experiences.”

Jackson’s practice is equally grounded in knowledge of and deep affection for the body, readily visible in works that feature his prodigious gifts as a draftsman. These include the modestly scaled *No. 13, 2015 (10.18.15)*, in which sensitively drawn nudes interact with sprayed and brushed paint and collaged paper, as well as the show-stopping *Triptych 2015*. In this monumental, immersive piece, fragmented black felt figures—most truncated into sharply-pointed shapes—gyrate across an explosive field of orange, green, rose, white and gray. They could be dancing, but their movements have a different kind of urgency. Though Jackson’s titles give no hints of anything more

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No. 13, 2015 (10.18.15), 2015, mixed media on masonite, 25 1/2 x 14 12 inches

than the date of a work's completion, this triptych is a meditation on South Africa's Sharpeville massacre in 1960. Dozens—possibly hundreds—of protestors against apartheid died, many shot in the back by soldiers as they fled. Jackson has been active in the African American community for many decades and consulted widely on the creation of Pan-African studies programs during his career as a college professor.

Still, the impression given by many of these works is one of an unpoliticized abstraction, out of which figurative elements gradually emerge. At times, the latter can be difficult to identify in the swirls and stains of vigorously deployed paint. Some silhouetted forms clearly stand out—the crouching man in *No. 11, 2017 (10.1.17)*, for instance. There are also many stylized floral motifs, and sometimes penises (both appear in *Painting (1.1.11)*, as well as an elephant, supposedly), along with birds, faces and exuberant plant life. In *No. 1, 2018 (1.2.18)*, the four-foot-square field of the painting is covered with sprayed silhouettes of flowers and leaves in shades of gray, black and white, some dark against light, others light against dark, interspersed with small islands of vivid paint.

What's really going on? We have to guess for ourselves. Jackson's figurative elements seem to function as what one writer refers to as “an emotionally resonant pictorial puzzle.” The field of marks into which they are interwoven becomes a kind of figure itself: an embodied space in an imagined world.

Oliver Lee Jackson: “Someplace Else” @ [Rena Bransten Gallery](#) through April 28, 2018

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Painting (1.1.11), 2011, watercolor, enamel on canvas 65 3/4 x 64 1/4 inches

About the Author:

Maria Porges is an artist and writer who lives and works in Oakland. For over two decades, her critical writing has appeared in many publications, including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Sculpture*, *American Craft*, *Glass*, the *New York Times Book Review* and many other publications. The author of more than 100 exhibition catalog essays, she presently serves as an associate professor at California College of the Arts.