

# RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY

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## Mark Van Proyen on Oliver Lee Jackson

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No. 2, 2019 (12.9.19), 2019, oil-based paint and mixed media on panel, 96 x 96 inches

Walter Pater may have once said that all art aspires to the condition of music, but judging from a selection of six large Oliver Lee Jackson paintings dating from 2015 to 2021, his work aspires more to the condition of dance. And not just any kind of dance, but an exceedingly ecstatic one from which contrived and brittle constitutives seem to have been banished. This characteristic might make the works seem visually incoherent to some viewers. But, in our endless post-Warholian moment of overpackaged art, Jackson's approach to painting looks disarmingly fresh, daring even. These six untitled works playfully taunt the possibility of a fall into an abyss of visual chaos, only back away from it,



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reminding us that the deep taproot of the word ecstasy is *ex-stasis* — literally "out of the frozen moment," or more poetically, "outside of space and time."



No. 4, 2020, (12.10.20), 2020, oil paint, mixed media on panel, 96 x 72"

Throughout a six-decade career, Jackson has articulated the figure in various stylistic guises, but always in ways that sharply departed from the conventions of Bay Area Figurative painting. In works he exhibited during the 1980s, figures of ambiguous gender were formed out of bold, freewheeling gestures, floating in swirling, vertiginous spaces, unmoored to earthly circumstance. The newer paintings extend that involvement, but their figurative content now seems to be in a state of dissolution (or perhaps, pre-constitution), visible only as ghostly

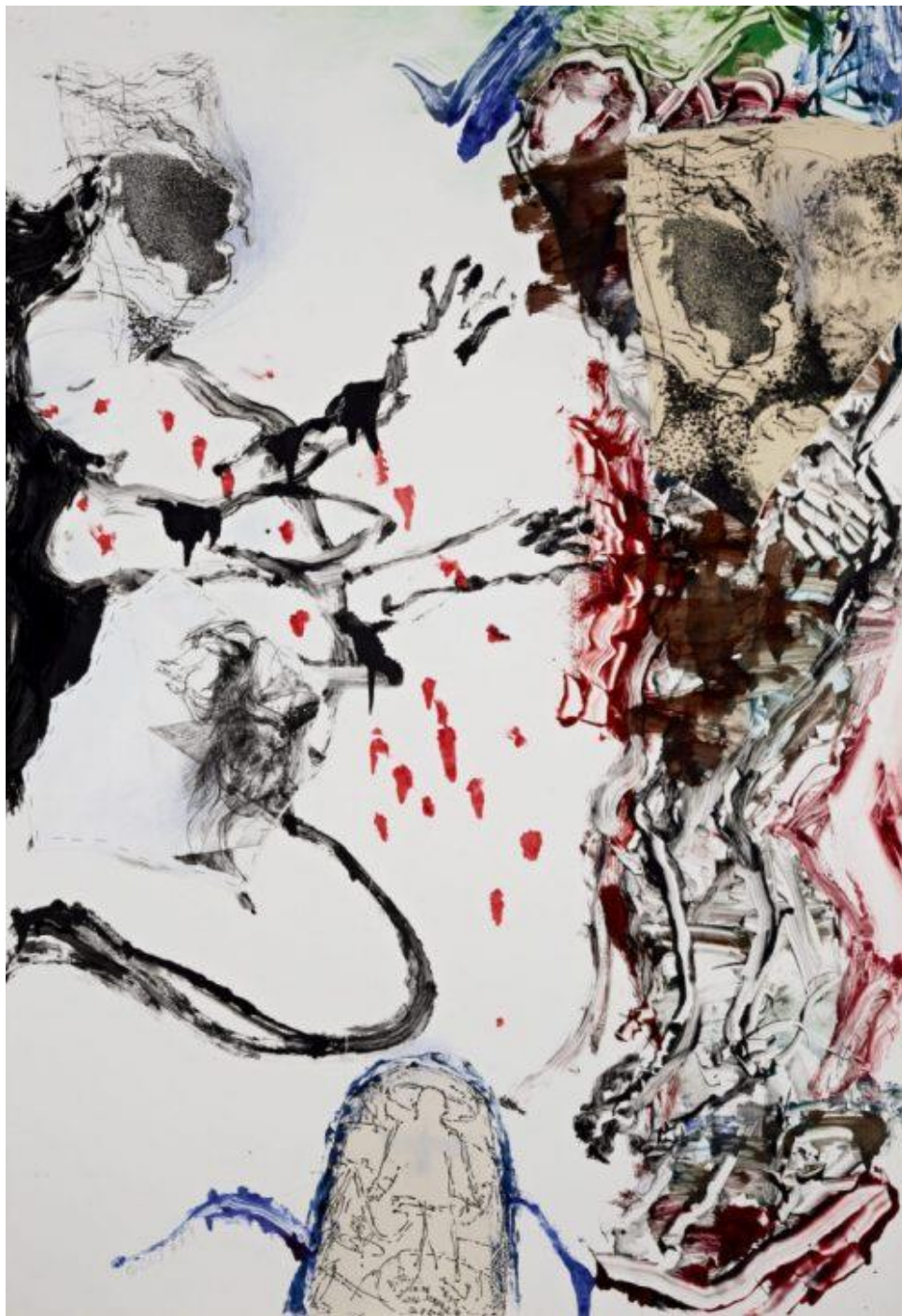
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apparitions that haunt the otherwise ambiguous picture spaces. For example, in *No. 4* (2020), we see what appear to be two distinct layers of painterly activity: a wet-into-wet application of a rainbow of bright oil-based colors and an articulation of darker shapes that coalesce into quasi-figurative forms evoking an ambiguous ritual significance. In *No. 2* (2021), a similar painterly strategy is in evidence. However, the standing figure is more explicit, appearing as the silhouette of a sentinel surveying a magical landscape, possibly an apocalyptic one.

*No.2* (2019) and *No. 11* (2015) suggest landscape through aerial views of energized topographies bereft of spatial orientation. Conversely, these works could also be read as fantastical cloudscape because they mimic the undulate respiration of whirlpool-like spirals moving in opposite directions. However, the landscape association, seemingly shaped by unseen geological forces and animated by luscious color and uninhibited brushwork, feels stronger. Throughout the exhibition, there are references to animated motion graphics. For example, in a small painting titled *No.11* (2018), we see a standard limning of a portrait head, which morphs into three very different faces depending on your viewing angle and the available light.



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Monotype Composite (7.8.09), 2009, 60 x 41 inches

In addition to the six large paintings given pride of place in the main gallery, the exhibition also contains a stunning trio of large untitled monoprints, each about 60 by 41 inches, dated, 2006, 2006 and 2009. These works take full advantage of the improvisatory possibilities of the monotype medium and are every bit as spontaneous and freewheeling as most of the paintings mentioned above. The lush colorations of the printer's ink, directly saturated into paper, partially

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account for this fact, but not nearly as much as the way the monoprint medium fuses painterly and collage aspects into what the British art critic Adrian Stokes has called “potential space, “the imaginary and fungible threshold between graphic surfaces and spatial illusionism.”

Ten additional works fill out the remainder of the exhibition. A few date from the late 1980s, but as a group they function as a synoptic reminder of the artist's evolution – one that should help viewers achieve a better understanding of the (relatively) recent paintings. One of these is a blue-ink-on-newsprint drawing from 1986 that reveals figure fragments floating in what might be an aquatic haze. Three untitled drypoint prints (1985, 1986 and 1987) complement this work and foreshadow the ways that Jackson has re-scripted and re-animated the relationships between ghostly figures and tumultuous grounds. There is also an untitled sculpture from 2021 that harks to other, larger three-dimensional works Jackson exhibited in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is about five feet tall and looks, by virtue of an accretion of brass, copper and sheet metal, to be a ritual object designed to accept sacrificial offerings. What it has to do with the newer paintings is unclear; then again, there is no reason why such a relationship should exist. Like everything else on view, it stands on its own, perfectly capable of defending itself.

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*Oliver Lee Jackson: “Vibrato” @ [Rena Bransten Gallery](#) through November 27, 2021.*

## **About the author:**

Mark Van Proyen's visual work and written commentaries emphasize the tragic consequences of blind faith in economies of narcissistic reward. Since 2003, he has been a corresponding editor for *Art in America*. His recent publications include: *Facing Innocence: The Art of Gottfried Helnwein* (2011) and *Cirian Logic and the Painting of Preconstruction* (2010). To learn more about Mark Van Proyen, read Alex Mak's interview on Broke-Ass Stuart's website.