

Oliver Lee Jackson at the St. Louis Art Museum

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Oliver Lee Jackson, "*Sharpeville Series VIII*", 1973, Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.84;
© Oliver Lee Jackson.

he Painter" moves expansively but in fits across the second side of *Dogon A.D.*, a

“T pendulous free jazz masterpiece self-released by Julius Hemphill in 1972. Probably the best single artifact of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) to have been born in St. Louis, Missouri, Hemphill’s album was exemplary of BAM’s refractory new aesthetic. “The Painter,” its enormous final cut, offers up a characteristically absorptive vision of listening as creation. Hemphill’s quartet careens around the track for fifteen minutes. Cyclically, the band accrues and sloughs off and regathers odd bits of rhythm or melody that seem suggestively like structure, but never quite congeal. The form of “The Painter” is tantalizing and thoroughly arbitrary. It becomes the listener’s task to find, actively and unguided, their own meaning through it.

It’s entirely possible that the track’s title refers to Oliver Lee Jackson, and not just because Hemphill’s sonics analogize so thoroughly Jackson’s own method of making visual art. By the time “The Painter” was recorded, Jackson and Hemphill had been close for several years. Both were major players in the scene of young Black artists which bloomed in St. Louis in the late sixties and early seventies, a loose regional variant of BAM. Jackson would occasionally contribute cover designs to his friend’s albums, and in the early seventies he made Hemphill the subject of an enigmatic portrait in wisping silver (now at the National Gallery of Art). Even if “The Painter” wasn’t Hemphill’s stab at returning this favor, it’s clear that Jackson shares a similar expectation of his audience. His painting fosters and seemingly manages its participation. This reciprocity nurtured between artwork and viewer is the primary source of a scant, stunning survey of the painter’s work at the Saint Louis Art Museum (SLAM).



Oliver Lee Jackson, “*Painting (12.15.04)*”, 2004; Courtesy of the artist; © Oliver Lee Jackson, Photo courtesy of The National Gallery of Art.

Jackson began to cultivate this audience-mutuality at the very beginning of this career, in the 1960s, when the prevailing mood concerning art’s ambitions and limitations was undergoing a significant change. By the late 1960s, the faith which the artists of the preceding decades had placed in its freeing potential was ceding to a generalized distrust. As the narrative goes, the tenuous play between painting as image and painting as object-on-which-the-modern-artists-had-

staked-their-whole-style gave way. By the later 1960s, we were onto a more basic, more destructive querying into the-true-nature-of-art. Conceptualism, as what came after modernist painting, sought the next step in style by stepping around it, displacing the traditional experience of art by questioning its own governing assumptions. One of this shift's most noticeable effects was a preoccupation with the viewer of art: increasingly, artists began incorporating into their works some element of their audience's presence, expectations, participation, or environment. Many did so with the intention of demystifying art itself, which had been a rarefied, hermetic thing for the Modernist painters against whom these "conceptualists" were reacting. By formulating a pictorial language of arbitrariness that thematized his viewers' active role in the meaning-making process, Jackson participated in the conceptual vogue, "activating" his viewers. But by putting these activations distinctly in service of the enigmatic realities that his works create, he cut against his moment's anti-aesthetic tendencies, articulating a method of conceptually rigorous creation which refused to debase or explain away the import of experience.

Oliver Lee Jackson, "*Intaglio Print XXXVII (Hilo I-1.15.12) (TP-II)*",
2012; Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.87; © Oliver Lee Jackson, Photo: M. Lee
Fatherree.

The paintings and works on paper at SLAM show that Jackson's method has yielded, almost unfailingly, great work. In each of the exhibition's dozen pieces (pebbling the span of Jackson's half-century career), rough human figures vie with an abstracting mire of paint or ink in hopes of taking solid shape. These "paint people," as Jackson has called them, are buried deep within their compositions—they're furtive bodies nested in or unfurling from heady complexes of pigment. Unavoidably, looking at any of Jackson's pictures becomes looking *for* these figures, shepherding them from their own contingency towards the definition that looking requires. These enigmatic figures help Jackson thematize what it is to be a viewer at its most rewarding. Their arbitrariness transforms looking into creating; it links the reflective capacity of a viewer to the expressive capacity of the picture.

An etching from 2012 puts Jackson's method to work arrestingly. Bearing the unwieldy title *Intaglio Print XXXVII (Hilo I-1.15.12) (TP-II)*, it is formally insane, almost indescribable. The piece contains an overwhelming array of marks and techniques, all set into an unresolving and (apparently) abstract relation. Lone lines abut shapely shadowed masses; painterly strokes float towards terse metal abrasions. At first glance, the etching's irregular fullness dissuades closer inspection. Eventually, however, the chiaroscuro hams of a recumbent figure appear in the lower left, as do this figure's raised right arm, crooking knees, and curving flank. Once this nude is perceived, the whole piece explodes into representation: above the figure could be a patch of scraggly beach plants, before it a bare suggestion of shore. But like a mirage, these forms dissolve back from representation, reverting to a mad array of blots and lines. It becomes a constant push and pull between coherent picture and the free play of forms.

Amiri Baraka, BAM's poetic lodestar, wrote in 1964 that the "point of life is that it is arbitrary, except in its basest forms. Arbitrariness, or self imposed meaning [...] is the only thing that permits us to live." Jackson's art recognizes what is unavoidably arbitrary about artistic meaning and makes those things the atomic elements of its style. Of all the "basest forms" from which the arbitrary might spring, Jackson chose the contours and movements of the human figure: there's an immemorial quality to his "paint people," as if they'd teach us something crucial, if only we could make them out. In 2004's *Painting (12.15.04)*, a buoyancy of pinks and summer greens collapses at its center into the bold contours of a few fetal figures, who all look like Atlas brooding under an envelopment of paint—both their burden and their entire being.

Oliver Lee Jackson, "*Painting (5.12.11)*", 2011; Courtesy of the artist; © Oliver Lee Jackson, Photo: M. Lee Fatherree.

Alchemy, a large gray paroxysm of paint from 1975, is the best piece in the SLAM exhibition. It spreads its many aspects out, broadly, over a plain ashen ground: drips and splatters of orange and red; white misted clouds; well-worked dark blue wallows. The painting at first feels encyclopedic in the way the ashes at Alexandria must have. But at its center are three shaky masses of white and wounding blue, which rhyme each other in their backwards tilt. At the crest of each gathering is a navy blue oblong with two circles in red at its midriff. Unlike the other thin marks of red above and below them, these peer out like eyes—it quickly becomes apparent that they *are* eyes, and each splotch of blue a head. The expanding white masses, too, are torsos with limbs. The figures, once they're recognized, all bend and break like dancers. As they do, the flecks of color around them start to look like flying sweat and the abstract columns of paint like rhythmic bars from some unknown form of musical notation. If ever there was a painting that was *made* by "The Painter," this would be it.

That Jackson's work absorbs its viewers aesthetically through the creation of painterly set-pieces about absorption is perhaps unsurprising given its historical context. His style was formulated at the precise moment when the "conceptual" disposition of art displaced its experience. Coming as it did at the end of abstraction, Jackson's work would have been set with the very same quandaries as conceptually-oriented work—namely, how does a viewer's presence constitute what an artwork is and does? What is contingent, and what, if anything, is essential? Is there something categorically special about art, as distinct from life? To this latter question, the resounding answer of Jackson's contemporaries which lingers thickly in our ideas about art today was: probably not.

Oliver Lee Jackson, “*Sharpeville Series I*”, 1970 ; Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.83; © Oliver Lee Jackson.

The prevailing tendency among many artists since the 1970s has been to adopt a deconstructive reaction to modernism as the horizon of artistic creation. Jackson’s perversely reverent approach to figurative abstraction, however, represents a stunning *other* way that art might have taken—and might still take itself—out of the stylistic bind that modern painting had put itself in come the 1960s. Jackson used art’s incapacitating knowledge of its own contingency, its foundational arbitrariness, against itself.

When I saw Jackson’s show at SLAM, all seven paintings were hung together—a bit crowded, but magisterial—in one room. Through the portal into the next space over, I could make out some wall text and glean that that gallery was hung thematically from the permanent collection; it was full of works which all had something to do with “the contemporary resurgence of figuration in painting.” But crafting his “paint people” as both form and content—conceptual fulcra as well as stylistic principles—was Jackson’s singular and dynamic way of integrating ideas about art into his work’s activation. It’s clear that each painting in the room adjacent (Kehinde Wiley, Kerry James Marshall) was guided throughout its making by a powerful set of principles pertaining to its central figures. But each in its own way failed to recognize the weight of the problematic which Jackson parried a half-century ago. The human figure in art—especially when presented indefectibly, almost uncritically—can tend today to feel like a riddle to be solved towards some definite end. Jackson reminds us of the immense human potential latent in what’s arbitrary.

Oliver Lee Jackson is on view at the St. Louis Art Museum thru February 20, 2022.