The National Gallery of Art's Harry Cooper Answers Our Questions on Oliver Lee Jackson

By Michael M. Clements | July 3, 2019 | Culture

The figurative works of Oliver Lee Jackson defy categorization, so we asked Harry Cooper, the head of modern art at the National Gallery of Art, for guidance.

What can we expect from the exhibition?
HARRY COOPER: The paintings presented here may be the fruit of Jackson's long experience, but they have a youthful energy that recalls Ezra Pound's battle cry of modernism, 'Make it new.'

Why is it a must-see?
HC: It's for anyone who loves color, energy, improvisation, rhythm, tension and the human figure and its gestures. Also, it's for anyone who wants to 'discover' an artist who has been working at the top of his discipline for some 50 years.

How long did it take to curate the exhibition?
HC: About two years, but I've known and worked with Oliver for two decades.

How has the exhibition been received so far?
HC: People are attracted, engaged and often moved by the works on view.

How is Jackson influencing modernism?

HC: I don't love the concept of influence when it comes to art, since it implies an active-passive dualism. I am not exactly sure what modernism means, or any '-ism' for that matter. I would say that Jackson is an essential part of the story of art, both in our times and as it extends back to the caves. He is dealing with age-old questions about how to express and convey human experience, which is at once physical-spatial and social-emotional, with the inert materials of art—and how to bring those materials to life. His ways of doing this are new, vital and very traditional.

Oliver Lee Jackson: Recent Paintings, through Sept. 15, National Gallery of Art, nga.gov