

Oliver Lee Jackson

Adam Shatz



AT A RECENT EVENT at the National Gallery in Washington, the painter Oliver Lee Jackson recalled hearing Charlie Parker and Max Roach play at nightclubs in the 1950s. Jackson, who was born in 1935, grew up during the Bebop revolution, and the kinetic language of his canvases echoes the freedom and spontaneity of jazz performance. But what most impressed him about the musicians he loved were the moments just before a set got going, when the lights were dimmed and the musicians began ‘very, very softly – touching silence tenderly or harshly’, or when Roach hit his snare drum, ‘lording it in the theatre’. Musicians, Jackson realised, ‘take the house’, establishing not only a mood but a claim on the audience’s attention. He wanted to do the same thing ‘through sight’.

Take the House is the title of Jackson’s new exhibition at the Malin Gallery in New York (until 7 March), which brings together 19 paintings and two small sculptures. The phrase denotes musicians’ joyous conquest in a club, while also suggesting, perhaps, another kind of conquest: an African American painter’s entrance into the gallery’s white cube space – a ‘house’ which, over the last decade or so, has been undergoing a belated desegregation.



‘Painting (11.30.92)’

Jackson’s large-scale ‘white space’ paintings achieve something like the same effect as the silences in a piece by Thelonious Monk or Miles Davis. (His use of white stands in striking contrast to the exploration of black in the work of many African American painters, including Kerry James Marshall and Glenn Ligon.) The centre of *Painting (11.30.92)*, an enormous mixed media work on

linen, is almost entirely white, except for a thick smear of coral. Around the edges of the canvas, brushstrokes in black, red and blue suggest forms, perhaps limbs; there's a faint handprint at the lower left of the canvas, and in the upper right the outline of an arm and hand. Jackson makes his paintings on the floor, and they ripple with activity and movement. But they don't suggest an Abstract Expressionist impulsiveness. Jackson says he wants to create a feeling of 'psychological time'. I think he means that the viewer should be conscious not only of the amount of time and thought that went into each work, but also of their own act of looking. Jackson's paintings are big and dramatic, but they're also complicated, giving up their secrets gradually, as a reward for patience.

Jackson has been based in Oakland since the early 1980s, but he spent his formative years in St Louis, where he took part in the creation of the Black Artists Group (known as BAG), a collective of black musicians, poets, dancers and artists established in 1968. BAG grew out of a multimedia staging of Jean Genet's *The Blacks*; Jackson helped to design the sets. He and his collaborators – the saxophonists Julius Hemphill, Oliver Lake and Hamiet Bluiett, the theatre artist Malinké Elliott, the trumpeter Baikida Carroll, and others – formed the group in order to provide arts education and training for young people in St Louis. 'Everything was being wrecked and downgraded in the schools,' he said at the National Gallery. 'We all had the same feeling – we had to do something in this barren landscape, in this desert for African Americans.' BAG wasn't a revolutionary political organisation, but it arose from the same collective awakening as the Black Power movement, and the FBI kept files on its activities. 'Whenever African American people train each other, the suspicion is we're in this revolutionary mode.'

Jackson's closest friend at the time was the BAG chairman, Julius Hemphill, an alto saxophonist and composer from Fort Worth and a cousin of Ornette Coleman's. Jackson and Hemphill worked in different media but shared an aesthetic, combining lyrical abstraction and a love of expansive open forms. They also shared a fascination with African culture. Hemphill called his 1972 album *Dogon A.D.*, an allusion to the 'adapted dances' that the Dogon people of Mali performed for Western visitors, drawing on elements of European choreography; he paid tribute to Jackson on one of the tracks, a piece for flute, trumpet, drums and cello called 'The Painter'. Jackson had spent 1965-66 travelling through Senegal, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Ghana, experiencing 'reality without looking over your shoulders, under threat'. He also discovered a black-majority culture that 'whites hadn't interfered with', with its own impressive 'love of making' in which 'all kinds of materials are mixed'. He returned home thinking: 'Why can't you put rags, or why can't you put metal, on the surface with paint?' Rags, ribbons and metal scraps adorn his 'Sharpeville' paintings of the early 1970s, which commemorate the 1960 massacre in South Africa.

The gestural quality of Jackson's work, and his use of negative space, might put one in mind of Cy Twombly and Brice Marden. But his marks don't resemble ideograms or calligraphy: they're not delicate but visceral – jabs, thrusts and incisions whose execution has been painstakingly weighed. The physicality of his style is probably why he still calls himself a figurative painter, but you won't find any figures in his work, aside from the occasional foot or hand, or what he calls 'paint people' – floating bodies that emerge only after you've stared at the work for a while (some resemble rather menacing monsters or robots). In No. 5, 2018, two such bodies, bathed (and bathing) in thickly applied paint, slowly yield to the viewer, one in a light outline, turning away; the other, in yellow, facing us, one arm raised.

Because Jackson is African American, these 'paint people' and the colours in which he paints them inevitably raise the question of colour itself, and particularly whether a political gesture is being made through these raceless beings. (A similar question was asked of his contemporary, the figurative painter Bob Thompson, whose subjects have exuberant, psychedelic skin-tones.)

Jackson came of age during the Civil Rights movement and situates himself on what he has called an 'African continuum' in the arts. But it would, I think, be a mistake to 'racialise' Jackson's colours, to see them as challenging or 'interrogating' racial perception. The struggle against racism is neither the subject nor the underlying theme of his work, any more than it is in the paintings of Alma Thomas, Norman Lewis, Jack Whitten, Ed Clark or Frank Bowling.

Jackson belongs in the company of these black modernists, who are only now being recognised by museums that have long ignored them. White institutions weren't the only ones standing in the way. As Darby English argued in *1971: A Year in the Life of Colour* (Chicago, 2016), black abstract painters came up against the resistance of black cultural institutions for which 'Negro Art offered safe refuge in the guise of freedom'. In their eyes, black abstractionists shirked the responsibility to 'represent the race' and praise black beauty. The belief that authentically black art is necessarily representational art – a corrective to white denigration of the black body – crumbled a long time ago. Even so, the discussion of black abstract painters often devolves into a fanciful hunt for political subtexts, as if, in English's words, their works 'somehow harbour, as a kind of buried treasure, a general narrative of race and racism'; the result, he says, has been 'a denial of the art in black art'.

The political quality of abstraction in the hands of an artist like Jackson has precisely to do with the flight from representation, and the creation of a personal language of colour and form. This could be seen as a kind of freedom, but Jackson prefers the word 'intention'. It's a concept important to many jazz musicians, who distrust the celebration of intuition and impulse (Anthony Braxton referred to the notion of spontaneous black creativity as the 'myth of the sweating brow'). For Jackson, intention means drive, direction, purpose – qualities you might find in a masterful solo. 'Because of my relationships with music and musicians, I began to understand how I could approach making something – starting with the first mark, that very first mark.' Jackson's paintings do not, and could not, 'sound' like jazz; painting jazz, he insists, was never his ambition. But they're the work of someone who has music in his bones, and a deep understanding of what Ornette Coleman called 'the art of the improviser'. To see them is, almost, to hear them.

Letters

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Adam Shatz, in his piece about Oliver Lee Jackson, claims that 'the struggle against racism is neither the subject nor the underlying theme of his work, any more than it is in the paintings of Alma Thomas, Norman Lewis, Jack Whitten, Ed Clark or Frank Bowling' (LRB, 5 March). Maybe, but not so fast. There is a pretty clear line of development connecting the Alma Thomas painting *March on Washington* (1964), with its wide swathe of semi-abstracted protest signs across the top half of the canvas, something between sails and shifting planes, to the colour-field paintings she became known for, dominated by irregularly shaped shards. The struggle may not be an underlying theme in her work exactly, but it is a coded one.

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