

Oliver Lee Jackson



SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

Oliver Lee Jackson

July 16, 2021 – February 20, 2022



Painting (5.12.11), 2011; oil-based pigment, acrylic, and silver and gold spray enamel on gessoed linen; 108 x 108 inches; Courtesy of the Oliver Lee Jackson Trust 2021.93; © Oliver Lee Jackson, Photo: M. Lee Fatherree

St. Louis-born, California-based artist Oliver Lee Jackson (b. 1935) has been creating complex, visually stunning art for over 50 years. Jackson works across multiple media, including large-scale painting, drawing, printmaking, and sculpture. Grounded in figuration, Jackson's work is also defined by materiality and medium. His multifaceted practice defies art historical categorizations of abstraction and figuration and is informed by a deep understanding of global art history—from early modern European painting to African art. Though figuration is often his starting point, his figures are not necessarily representations or narrative elements; instead, they are gestures that provoke the artist in the development of the painting. Over the years, Jackson has created a gestural vocabulary—of crouching, bending, reaching, sitting, and reclining poses—and motifs such as hats or birds that appear frequently in his work. These elements are developed through his distinctive use of color as a structural and formal device to create volume, space, and light.

This exhibition presents a retrospective selection of paintings, drawings, and prints in two galleries, uniting works made across Jackson's storied career from the 1960s to the present. The 12 works demonstrate how he has built upon his earlier practice and expanded his artistic techniques, which encourage viewers to slow down and take the time to engage with the artwork. The artist considers all these works figurative. He has described his figures using the term "paint people," which draws attention to their material origin and formal qualities. These painted, figurative elements are crucial to the compositional construction of each work, or what he calls the "actual tangible effect" of the painting.¹ He sees the perceived art historical separation between abstraction and figuration as an arbitrary division. For Jackson, rendering three-dimensional objects in two dimensions is inherently a tremendous act of abstraction, involving the manipulation of forms and media to create a desired visual effect.

Jackson studied art as an undergraduate at Illinois Wesleyan University and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Iowa, graduating in 1963. Returning to St. Louis, Jackson became involved in developing arts programs for underserved communities. From 1963 to 1964, he was assistant director of the People's Art Center, one of the city's first interracial art centers, which offered free art classes to children and adults.

¹ Quoted in *Oliver Lee Jackson* brochure, National Gallery of Art (2019), <https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/press/exh/5139/oliver-lee-jackson-brochure.pdf>.

In 1965, he traveled through Senegal, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. This trip influenced his work and broadened his understanding of the possibilities of art making, in particular how different materials functioned. Inspired by the openness of the African artists he encountered to a wide range of materials, he began to attach ribbons, rags, metal scraps, and glitter to his works in order to create complex compositions that belied the two-dimensional surface. Back in St. Louis, Jackson founded Program Uhuru (1967–68) at the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project, which aimed to bring art training to its residents.

From 1968 to 1971, Jackson was affiliated with an important multi-disciplinary cooperative in St. Louis, the Black Artists Group (BAG). BAG brought together African American artists working in music, theater, fine arts, poetry, film, and dance. BAG artists pursued aesthetic innovation, exploring African art and thought—what Jackson describes as “African sensibility”—alongside contemporary European avant-garde practices. They also used art and arts education to address the lack of access of local African American communities and neighborhoods to the city’s arts institutions. Jackson developed a close friendship with the BAG chairperson, legendary jazz saxophonist Julius Hemphill. Arguably, there is a connection between the free form nature of jazz and the spontaneity and physicality of Jackson’s own art-making practice. The two artists even collaborated on multimedia projects in St. Louis before Jackson moved to California in 1971.

BAG encouraged collaboration across the arts through productions that incorporated poetry, music, visual arts, and theater. According to Jackson, “working with musicians taught me about the whole matter of time in a painting. The need to eliminate dead spots, the parts that don’t move.”² Like a composer or musician, Jackson approaches his paintings from a starting gesture, such as a drawn or etched line. He then builds upon that gesture as musicians build upon a note, adding layers—pushing and pulling at the relationship of figure to ground, the play of volume and space, and the interaction of abstraction and representation. He is interested in the way that music, like painting, transcends time; the first four notes of Ludwig van Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony still strike listeners to the core despite having been written in 1808. For Jackson, painting holds that same power and ambiguity.



Untitled (Sharpeville Series), c.1966; graphite on paper; 47 1/2 x 66 inches; Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.85; © Oliver Lee Jackson

² Quoted in Leah Ollman, “Oliver Jackson’s Fluid Realm,” *Los Angeles Times* (November 27, 1991). <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-11-27-ca-81-story.html>.

The earliest works in this exhibition are from the *Sharpeville Series* in which Jackson referenced the 1960 massacre of 69 peaceful protesters in the South African township of Sharpeville. Jackson grounded his work in archival photographic imagery, producing detailed stand-alone drawings, like *Untitled (Sharpeville Series)*, and several paintings. In *Sharpeville Series I, 1970*, fragmented forms at top right operate in “a field of tension” with a red L-shaped form at lower left.³ In *Sharpeville Series VIII, 1973*, figures are shown running and tumbling as if desperately fleeing some terror, kneeling and falling in the process in gestures that Jackson has referred to as a grave kind of “dance.”⁴ Jackson insists that these works transcend the depicted historical moment. They should evoke a visceral response, both personal and universal. *Sharpeville Series VIII, 1973* also highlights Jackson’s use of the ribbons and glitter that he began to add to his canvases following his visit to Africa.



Sharpeville Series I, 1970, 1969–70; acrylic on cotton canvas; 66 x 66 inches; Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.83; © Oliver Lee Jackson



Sharpeville Series VIII, 1973, c.1973; acrylic, applied fabric, and mixed media on cotton canvas; 103 x 101 3/8 inches; Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.84; © Oliver Lee Jackson

³ Simon Kelly and Hannah Klemm interview with the artist, March 15, 2021.

⁴ Conversation between the artist and Harry Cooper, National Gallery of Art, September 2019.



Starting in the early 1970s, Jackson began laying his canvases on the floor, a reorientation that required a different approach from the artist. He became interested in how this reorientation also shifted his ability to give full attention to the total area of the painting. In the 1975 work *Alchemy*, areas of drizzled, flicked, and brushed paint form a group of “paint people” that dance diagonally across the canvas, emerging from swirls of silver and blue. Three-dimensional objects Jackson attached to the canvas surface, including the lid of a can, which shines brightly when light hits it, emphasize the materiality of the painting. While Jackson does not assign meaning to his works with their titles, the term alchemy references an ancient branch of mystic philosophy that practiced the exoteric transformation of metals, with the esoteric goal of the spiritual transformation of the practitioner.

For the viewer, this title may indirectly allude to the metal can lid or even the silvery metallic paint that Jackson used. Jackson is known for seamlessly working across media. For decades, he has embraced watercolor for its translucence and fluidity and its unique effects of illumination. In *Untitled (8-22-89 II)*, multiple figures float in the lower half of the paper. Several appear to crouch, and their arched backs mimic other curvilinear forms repeated throughout the composition. The watercolor medium itself provides a mingling to the layered forms as colors bleed into each other, pulling the eye toward the corners.



Alchemy, 1975; oil and enamel on canvas; 113 1/2 x 111 inches; Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2008.80; © Oliver Lee Jackson

upper left: *Untitled (8-22-89 II)*, 1989; watercolor; 48 x 42 5/16 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Friends Fund 138:1990; © Oliver Lee Jackson



Intaglio Drypoint VIII (Dptych) (4/15), 1993; drypoint and etching on Arches cover white paper; 36 x 23 1/2 inches; Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.86; © Oliver Lee Jackson

Jackson imbues the printmaking process with the same active qualities he brings to his painting: spatial fields, figures, and tones in dynamic tension. He starts his projects the same way—with an idea, a form, a gesture, regardless of the medium, which determines how the composition will proceed. In etchings such as *Intaglio Drypoint VIII (Dptych) (4/15)*, figures are depicted with a degree of naturalism, as shading and tone create volumes that seem to emerge from the paper.



Intaglio Print XXXVII (Hilo I-1.15.12) (TP-II), 2012; hardground etching softened with turpentine and aquatint on paper; 41 x 30 inches; Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.87; © Oliver Lee Jackson, Photo: M. Lee Fatherree

The white of the paper holds the composition in place, allowing for a visual break from the deep tonality of the figural forms in the upper and lower corners. In contrast, softer, more linear marks dance fluidly on the surface in *Intaglio Print XXXVII (Hilo I-1.15.12) (TP-II)*. Figures are created from lines rather than shading; abstract marks meld with figurative elements that seem to skip across the paper.



Painting (12.15.04), 2004; oil, oil enamel, applied linen, and mixed media on gessoed linen; 108 inches x 12 feet 1/8 inches x 2 1/4 inches; Courtesy of the Oliver Lee Jackson Trust 2021.89; © Oliver Lee Jackson, Photo courtesy of The National Gallery of Art

In addition to works from Jackson's early career, this exhibition brings together paintings and works on paper from 2004 to 2020. These works show how Jackson has continued to employ different media, styles, and materials as well as expand his vocabulary of figural forms. In the paintings, color dominates. Jackson sees color as a structural element that allows contrast, depth, and volume to elicit a feeling in the viewer. In works such as *Painting (12.15.04)*, he pushes the material limit of the painting, creating an arabesque of elements that is both systematized and willfully chaotic. The dark palette of *Painting (1.9.09)* features an intense interplay of transparent and opaque blacks with teals and coral pinks finding their way through the darkness. To the left, a figure outlined in silver with a hat pulls a cart filled with flowers and birds. A seated central figure in white crouches and draws a circle. At the bottom right is an image of clogs, an indication of the act of entering into another reality distinct from that of the viewer. Jackson's most recent work in this exhibition, *No. 1, 2020 (6.14.2020)*, is a field of incandescent yellows and emotional tenderness as an adult figure clasps the hand of a smaller, child-like form, with both figures floating in space.



Painting (1.9.09), 2009; oil-based pigment on gessoed linen; 96 1/4 x 108 3/4 x 2 3/8 inches; Courtesy of the Oliver Lee Jackson Trust 2021.94; © Oliver Lee Jackson, Photo: M. Lee Fatherree



No. 1, 2020 (6.14.20), 2020; oil, chalk, and fixative on gessoed panel; 96 x 96 inches; Courtesy of the Oliver Lee Jackson Trust 2021.92;
© Oliver Lee Jackson, Photo: M. Lee Fatherree

The works in this exhibition come from the artist's studio as well as the collection of prominent local collector and longtime friend of Jackson, Donald M. Suggs. As a group, the artworks demonstrate for the first time in an exhibition the evolution of the artist's practice from his formative early paintings to his more expansive later work. Jackson's paintings do not elevate a single message, narrative, or meaning but rather enable an encounter with process, materials, and agency, creating a lasting aesthetic experience, which he hopes is significant to the viewer. He encourages viewers to stake emotional claim on his paintings and not wait for instructions on what to see. Across art history, certain paintings demand close, slow looking and repay this time spent. Jackson's paintings are among them. The more you look, the more things rise to the surface, and the more details are visible, the more you can see the music.

Oliver Lee Jackson is curated by Simon Kelly, curator of modern and contemporary art, and Hannah Klemm, associate curator of modern and contemporary art, with Molly Moog, research assistant.

Oliver Lee Jackson

born St. Louis, MO, 1935
MFA, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA
BFA, Illinois Wesleyan University,
Bloomington, IL

Works in the Exhibition

Unless otherwise noted, works are lent
Courtesy of the Oliver Lee Jackson Trust.

Gallery 249

Painting (5.12.11), 2011
oil-based pigment, acrylic, and silver
and gold spray enamel on gessoed linen,
108 x 108 inches

No. 1, 2020 (6.14.20), 2020
oil, chalk, and fixative on gessoed panel,
96 x 96 inches

Painting (1.9.09), 2009
oil-based pigment on gessoed linen,
96 1/4 x 108 3/4 x 2 3/8 inches

Painting (12.15.04), 2004
oil, oil enamel, applied linen, and mixed
media on gessoed linen, 108 inches x
12 feet 1/8 inches x 2 1/4 inches

Sharpeville Series I, 1970, 1969–70
acrylic on cotton canvas, 66 x 66 inches
Collection of Donald M. Suggs

Sharpeville Series VIII, 1973, c.1973
acrylic, applied fabric, and mixed media
on cotton canvas, 103 x 101 3/8 inches
Collection of Donald M. Suggs

Alchemy, 1975
oil and enamel on canvas,
113 1/2 x 111 inches
Collection of Donald M. Suggs

Gallery 257

Composite (12.3.12), 2012
intaglio print, ink, colored pencil,
magic marker, applied paper, and staples
on paper, 29 5/8 x 41 1/2 inches
Collection of Donald M. Suggs

Untitled (Sharpeville Series), c.1966
graphite on paper, 47 1/2 x 66 inches
Collection of Donald M. Suggs

Intaglio Print XXXVII (Hilo I-1.15.12)
(TP-II), 2012
hardground etching softened with
turpentine and aquatint on paper,
41 x 30 inches
Collection of Donald M. Suggs

Intaglio Drypoint VIII (Diptych)
(4/15), 1993
drypoint and etching on Arches cover
white paper, 36 x 23 1/2 inches
Collection of Donald M. Suggs

Untitled (8-22-89 II), 1989
watercolor, 48 x 42 5/16 inches
Saint Louis Art Museum,
Friends Fund 138:1990

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2019
Oliver Lee Jackson: Recent Paintings,
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

2017
Oliver Jackson: Composed, Works from
1984 to 2016, San Jose Institute of
Contemporary Art, CA

2012
Oliver L. Jackson,
Contemporary Art Museum,
St. Louis, MO

2002–03
Duo: Oliver Jackson/Marty Ehrlich,
Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts,
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

2000
Oliver Jackson: Recent Paintings,
Sculpture and Work on Paper,
Fresno Art Museum, CA

1993
New California Art: Oliver Jackson,
Newport Harbor Art Museum,
Newport Beach, CA

1990
Currents 43: Oliver Jackson,
Saint Louis Art Museum, MO

1985
Oliver Jackson, University Art Museum,
University of California, Santa Barbara

1983
Oliver Jackson, University of California
Art Museum, Berkeley

1982
Oliver Jackson, Seattle Art Museum, WA

1980
Oliver Lee Jackson, Southeastern Center
for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC

1973
Oliver L. Jackson: The Sharpeville Series,
The Gallery of the Loretto-Hilton Center,
Webster University, St. Louis, MO.

Selected Group Exhibitions

2021–22
Art Along the Rivers: A
Bicentennial Celebration,
Saint Louis Art Museum, MO

2020–21
Expanding Abstraction: Pushing the
Boundaries of Painting in the Americas
1958–1983, Blanton Museum of Art,
University of Texas, Austin

2011
Safety in Numbers? Images of African
American Identity and Community,
Portland Art Museum, OR

2004–06
Echoes of Africa, American Adventure
Pavilion, Epcot, Walt Disney World,
Orlando, FL

1994

The Exchange Show: Twelve Painters
from San Francisco and Rio de Janeiro,
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts,
San Francisco, CA; Museu de Arte
Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

1990
Toward the Future: Contemporary Art in
Context, Museum of Contemporary Art,
Chicago, IL

1989–90
The Appropriate Object, Albright-
Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; Detroit
Institute of Arts, MI; San Jose Museum of
Art, CA; J.B. Speed Memorial Museum,
Louisville, KY

1986
American Painting: Abstract
Expressionism and After, San Francisco
Museum of Modern Art, CA

1985
States of War: New European and
American Paintings,
Seattle Art Museum, WA

1984
An International Survey of
Recent Painting and Sculpture,
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

1983
1983 Biennial Exhibition,
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York, NY

Selected Awards and Fellowships

2003/2004
Award in Painting and Sculpture,
Flintridge Foundation, Pasadena, CA

1993
Eureka Fellowship, Fleishhacker
Foundation,
San Francisco, CA

1988
Art Matters Grant, Art Matters, Inc.,
New York

1984
Nettie Marie Jones Fellowship,
Lake Placid, NY

1980–81
National Endowment for the Arts
Fellowship



Composite (12.3.12), 2012; intaglio print, ink, colored pencil, magic marker, applied paper, and staples on paper; 29 5/8 x 41 1/2 inches; Collection of Donald M. Suggs 2021.88; © Oliver Lee Jackson, Photo: M. Lee Fatherree

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