

For Immediate Release



Oliver Lee Jackson: *Take the House*

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515 West 29th St., New York

Because of my relationships with music and musicians, I began to understand how I could approach making something — starting the with the first mark, that very first mark.

The musicians I was listening to might begin very, very softly - touching silence tenderly or harshly. In doing either, they never seemed to violate the silence. That's what I was trying to do in making — achieve directness. Directness is personal. To be direct is to be yourself. To be yourself is to know yourself.

*Musicians **take the house** with sound. I take it through sight.*

Beethoven's Fifth - how does he take the space? [Sings the opening motif]. He took it!

Well, you can do it with color - a splash of red. Bam!

See? I understood.

-Oliver Lee Jackson

Malin Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of paintings and sculpture by **Oliver Lee Jackson: *Take the House***. Based in Oakland, the 84-year-old artist has been pursuing his singular artistic vision for over five decades. *Take the House* is the gallery's third solo exhibition of work by Jackson and follows his acclaimed exhibition at the National Gallery, Washington: *Oliver Lee Jackson - Recent Paintings*.

Born in 1935, Oliver Lee Jackson initially emerged as an artist amidst the vibrant, cross-disciplinary arts scene of St. Louis, where he led a series of community arts programs and was closely affiliated with the Blacks Artists' Group (BAG) that fostered collaboration among musicians, dancers and theater performers in the St. Louis area from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Jackson was deeply enmeshed with the *avant-garde* jazz musicians at the heart of the BAG movement, including its leader Julius Hemphill, who became a life-long collaborator. As one of the two visual artists affiliated with BAG, Jackson created sets and costumes for the group's performances, and his artwork graced album covers for the musicians. In addition to its creative innovations, BAG was also pioneering in its adoption of community-oriented, participatory art programs and its commitment to activism. As historian Benjamin Looker notes in his history of BAG, *Point from which Creation Begins*, Jackson's role in BAG extended beyond primary visual artist. Looker describes Jackson as additionally serving as the key "theorist" within the group - constantly evaluating the group's activities within a broader socio-cultural context and frequently pushing for more direct action. Although the milieu around BAG was suffused with socio-political exigencies that he confronted directly, in his artwork Jackson strove to engage viewers on the most intimate, profound terms, asserting that, "The responsibility of the artist is to give back — not a reflection, but a sense of clarity about the spiritual state." He aimed for directness that could beguile and provoke viewers in a manner unmediated by historicity, theory or circumstance:

Can you see?

Can you bear witness — not interpret — can you bear witness?

People always ask..."Who is this for?"

It's for anybody that's got eyes.

"Well, is it for your people?"

Anybody that's got eyes...

By 1972, Jackson along with several of his BAG contemporaries, had departed St. Louis - chaffing against the inhospitability of the Midwestern civic milieu towards their social and artistic ambitions. Alternating academic stints with sojourns abroad studying sculpture in West Africa

and learning traditional marble sculpture techniques in Carrera, Jackson embarked on his own trajectory artistic experimentation. Having now entered a fifth decade of his artistic project, Jackson maintains his endeavor with a preternatural degree of vitality, ambition and radical openness. His formative experiences with BAG remain critical touchstones in his work with the aesthetics of *avant-garde* music and dance persisting as animating forces. Beyond the elements of his work that may be seen as visual correlates of the spirits of jazz music, dance or African rhythms lie deeper undercurrents that flow through Jackson's work through the years: a celebration of the transformative potential of art and a continual striving towards transcendence. Moreover, Jackson's compositions flourish in that most desired, sacrosanct realm of the jazz ethos: they *swing*.

In describing his approach to art, Jackson frequently invokes the terms *power* and *fierceness*. His avowed intention is for his art to serve as a conduit to archetypal, quasi-spiritual spaces that exist outside of the physical realm of material, form and line. Rather than pre-ordained pathway or closed forms, he sees his artworks as points of departure. Jackson states his intention to make work that can "get past the eyes" and facilitate discernment of a "vision beyond." Jackson's agenda predicated neither on formalism nor narration. Rather, he invites viewers to step into their own dreams.

Although allusions to human form are elements that recur throughout Jackson's body of work, he eschews characterization as a figurative painter. The bodily forms evident in his work, Jackson insists, are "paint people" who are defined by their materiality and whose "anatomy" exists only "in the paint." Though his visual elements may seem superficially familiar, the *power* and *fierceness* of Jackson's images derives from their ultimate ineffability:

Look, painting is not a verbal language - it bypasses understanding...it is pure modality — it is about states of being. And paintings have a certain force, and they cut into you in certain places within your spirituality.

Drawn from over a forty-year span of Jackson's career, the selection of works in *Take the House* demonstrate visual elements that have re-emerged in his work over time. Several of the artist's "white space" paintings from different periods are featured. Echoing Ornette Coleman's selection of his friend Jackson Pollock's painting *The White Light* (1954) as the cover art for the seminal 1961 album *Free Jazz*, Jackson's "white space" works suggest parallels between a bright visual expanse and seemingly limitless possibilities for creation. As art historian Robert Pincus has noted:

Jackson acknowledges that music has been an influence on his work, and, in particular, on his expansively open paintings that make generous use of white.

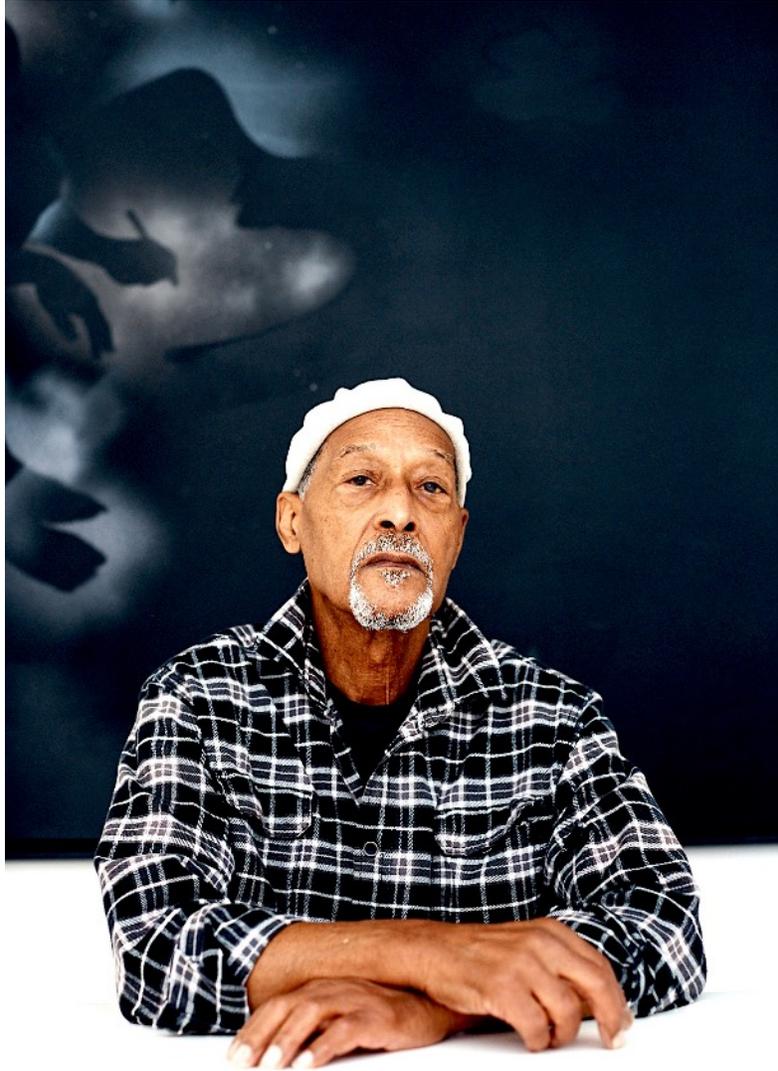
Silence and pauses are as integral to a great musical number as melody or arrangement...

In Jackson's paintings, open space becomes the world in which figures exist. The space has a mythic...quality; figures metamorphose into others. White space has [been the] vital element of Jackson's style through the decades. The gessoed surface, true to Jackson's ability to merge figure and surroundings, functions not as background but as an emblem of infinite space...

Oliver Lee Jackson (b. 1935, St. Louis, Missouri) is a painter, sculptor and printmaker based in Oakland, California. Jackson was awarded a BFA from Illinois Wesleyan University (1958) and an MFA from the University of Iowa, Iowa City (1963). During the 1960s, Jackson worked extensively with community-based arts groups in the St. Louis region during which time he was Assistant Director of the People's Art Center and later the Director of Program Uhuru. He was closely aligned with the landmark Black Artists Group (BAG), which included musicians, theater performers and dancers in addition to visual artists, and he was a close collaborator of renowned jazz musician Julius Hemphill. Jackson also co-founded the arts organization African Continuum.

Jackson was an artist-in-residence at Harvard University from 2000-2001. His artwork has been exhibited extensively at major institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY); the Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY); the Museo de Arte Moderno (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil); the Seattle Art Museum (Seattle, WA); the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA); the Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, Illinois); the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (Buffalo, NY); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (San Francisco, CA); the Portland Art Museum (Portland, OR); the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, CA); and the New Orleans Museum of Art (New Orleans, LA). Jackson's recent show at Burning in Water Gallery

(New York), *Untitled Original*, was recommended by *Artnet News* and *Time Out - New York* and selected as a "must-see" exhibition by *Artforum* magazine.



Malin Gallery (formerly Burning in Water) is a New York-based gallery featuring an innovative curatorial program that highlights the work of living artists with reference to broader issues confronting society. Founded in 2015 by Dr. Barry Thomas Malin, the gallery's program conjoins a series of exhibitions by artists represented by the gallery with historical exhibitions of work by American and African artists.



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