



**OLIVER LEE JACKSON**

*Recent Paintings*

National Gallery of Art  
April 14 – September 15, 2019



**Figure 1** Oliver Lee Jackson's cover illustration for Julius Hemphill's album *Blue Boye*, 1977

**W**orking across many media, from painting and drawing to printmaking and sculpture, Oliver Lee Jackson (b. 1935) pursues an abstract art always rooted in the human figure. His compositions make connections between gestural actions (pointing, bending, kneeling), recurrent motifs (figures with hats, instruments, or carts), and references to the act of making (drawing, brushing, measuring, scraping, cutting). Jackson's mastery of the craft of painting has allowed him to fuse Western visual traditions from the Renaissance to the present with principles based in an African sensibility.

Unlike many artists who emerged in the wake of abstract expressionism, Jackson never wavered from his figural stance. While his work is not political, it may refer to modes of violence and violation, and may imply suffering as well as hope, joy, and perseverance. The result is an engaging, demanding body of work that challenges viewers to spend time with it and to open themselves to its effects.

A native of Saint Louis, Jackson collaborated on community projects with composer and saxophonist Julius Hemphill and members of the interdisciplinary collective Black Artists Group. Jackson was assistant director of the People's Art Center (1963 – 1964) and director of Program Uhuru<sup>1</sup> (1967 – 1968), which he established at the Pruitt–Igoe public housing project to bring creative discipline to its teenage residents. He moved to California in 1971 and has lived and worked in Oakland since 1982.

This exhibition is the second chapter in my engagement with Jackson's work. In 2002, at the Harvard Art Museums, I organized *Duo*, a collaborative homage to Hemphill consisting of six new paintings by Jackson and a composition by Marty Ehrlich, a leading saxophonist and composer who had worked intimately with

<sup>1</sup> "Uhuru" is the Swahili word for "freedom."



Figure 2 *Painting (11.30.10)*

Hemphill as well as Jackson in Saint Louis. Since that 2002 exhibition, Jackson has been remarkably prolific, belying his years. The eighteen paintings in this exhibition may be the fruit of long experience, but they have a youthful energy that recalls Ezra Pound's battle cry of modernism: "Make it new!"

Among his friends and admirers, Jackson is known for his passionate and voluble speech. The following conversation is a compendium of various interviews and statements from the past four decades. Jackson considers such issues as the false dichotomy of figuration and abstraction, the demands of materials versus the will of the artist, the physicality of making, the roles of music and African sensibility in his work, and what he describes as a "resonated" beholder — a viewer who is deeply, irresistibly affected by the objects an artist makes. He rarely comments on specific paintings, respecting the autonomy of the viewer and refusing the idea that visual art can be decoded or have its meanings spelled out. As you read, or imagine listening, it will quickly become clear that these seemingly casual conversations represent a full-fledged philosophy of art, or as Jackson would say, a philosophy of making.

Harry Cooper  
Senior Curator of Modern Art



**Figure 3** *Painting* (7.25.03)

**When did you realize that you were compelled to be a maker?**

Very early. I was making things all the time prior to grade school. It was just the urge. When I was in my mid-twenties, I understood my necessity to make things, regardless of profit or meaning. And making was not necessarily joyful; it was a burden at times, because it doesn't yield to practicality outside of itself. . . . Making is not a priority in a community that needs health[care] and its streets to be cleaned.

**Which paintings fascinated you in the Saint Louis Art Museum?**

I remember particularly paintings with effects that were called Caravaggisti — after Caravaggio. The paintings were impressive in their ability to make you feel you were in their space. . . . I could

see how these artists were able to make a completely authentic world, whether the size was six by seven feet, or three by five inches. . . . It took me to places I had no words for. It still does.

**So, how would you describe your work now?**

Figurative is about the best I can do. However, “figurative” does not make a lot of sense to me because it is a category that depends on representation for its meaning. And that’s not what painting is for me — representation. I use figures as a foundation to make painting. . . . as a starting point.

What I learned really well is to keep a painting a painting, so all the marks in it are marks in a painting, and all the images, no matter how referential, no matter how



Figure 4 *Painting (10.14.06)*

much people respond to them like they are reality — they are not.

There are no human beings in painting — only “paint people”! And therefore their thrust is always different — even though they tend to engage us with familiarity (you will say, “That’s a head”). Sometimes the heads will have eyes in them — that is even more familiar... We make contact with them through their recognizable appendages... but at the same time the power with which these images are animated... is off the Richter scale for us... That power is what they are about.

You don’t need stories — but you do need significance. And how do you make an image significant? Well, there are some factors. One is, there’s got to be tension, like two people standing close together.

We get funny when people get up on us and we don’t know who they are. There’s a tension automatically like that, and that can be depended on in painting... If one can make a tension between two things — well what do you need a story for?

**When you are ready to make something, do you decide in advance whether it’s going to be a painting or a sculpture or a work on paper?**

I make a conscious decision, absolutely... When you are pursuing a particular goal, the materials are making demands, and if you acquiesce to the material demands, they will change the work. It’s an ongoing enlightenment and intimacy in the actual making process. You see things that you could not have seen conceptually or mentally — you change!



Figure 5 No. 7, 2017 (7.27.17)

### **You were telling me one of the attractions of felt for you —**

Oh, it's the absolute saturation of color, it's all the way through the cloth, there's no place it isn't dyed. So it gives back the color — it's just powerful. But in the most gentle way — felt kicks the light back gently. It has that sense of essential intimacy. . . . What it also allows is dimensionality in folding it. You'll notice that I'm overlapping and then the seam underneath creates dimension. And what it does is, it intensifies the physicality so that the flatness of the material does not dominate the effect of volume.

Wood is wood, and it has integrity, and it never stops being *what it is as it is*. Now will I yield? Well I'd better, why am I using it — to dominate it? What's that all about? So you have to try, if you are going to be a

devotee to something — that is, to serve it, while at the same time wanting things from it. That's oxymoronic, you know, you're a devotee but you want something. See? So you have to in some way deal with yourself to be, in my opinion, a good maker. You're not psychoanalyzing yourself to heal anything, but to *make well*.

### **How did growing up in Saint Louis shape your vision?**

The African American community informed me in its own "sweet" particular way about love, friendship, harmony, human beings, aesthetics, etcetera. I was able to feel and know things intimately — nothing between me and the feeling, and knowing, and getting. The landscape contributed very much to my sense of scale in nature, and the Midwest is known for its dramatic weather

changes — the power and visual strength as well as the physical strength associated with them. It is a watery place, not only because of the Mississippi, but the basin effect of the terrain and the humidity in the air: it is felt as humidity, and also seen as luminosity, that is, light is always passing through moisture. So a lot of these natural effects that you absorb become a part of your sensibility.

### **What might be some of the goals that you might want to achieve in a particular work?**

I intend the work to have power, and I want the power to be specific in terms of its effects. It's like being in a summer storm; it resonates you differently than a winter storm.

### **How do you know when you have achieved that goal?**

When you stand before a work — that goes for me after I finish one — you don't really *know* it until it resonates you, makes it significant for you. But *how* it resonates me has to do with me. It's like every vessel gets resonated uniquely. How it would affect me would be different than for you, because we're two different vessels.

We don't need to beat it to death. It cannot be explained. What's happening to you, strange and deep. It does not make a demand unless you are resonated, and then there is something weird going on between you and it. It pretends to be inanimate, but what the hell happened to you by engaging with it? Now that's a mystery. It happens to everybody all the time. Your favorite rock — what did the rock do?

### **I wanted to know about your relationship with music — how it informs your work.**

Because of my relationships with music and musicians, I began to understand how I could approach making something,

starting with the first mark, the very first mark — that choice. 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, to master, in making — directness. Directness is personal; to be direct is to be yourself; to be yourself is to know yourself. I was fortunate to be intimate with musicians like Julius Hemphill, Marty Ehrlich, and Oliver Lake, and other great musicians, and from them you get imbued with this love of beauty. You learn to yield to beauty.

Musicians take the space with sound, I take it through sight. Beethoven's Fifth, how does he take the space [sings opening notes] — bam! — he took it. Well, you can do it with color — a splash of red — bam — see I understood.

### **Correct me if I'm wrong, but the figure is not the end, the figure is the means to an end. So what's the end?**

The end is the field that must, if I can get it right, be the actual tangible effect of the interior effect that started it in the beginning. A painting is a reality apart from the images within it, and that's a difficult thing. It may be made up, like with Van Gogh, of marks and trees and the landscape. He could just come alive and make a painting, rather than simply a scene.

Painting far exceeds the things that were used to make it. When I understood that, I was freed from the figure and began to understand that the vocabulary determined the look of a particular figure in a particular mode — so I had real possibilities. I wasn't stuck in realism or so-called expressionism. I could do anything as long as the *effect* was figurative, and was the proper one for the field that had to come forth.



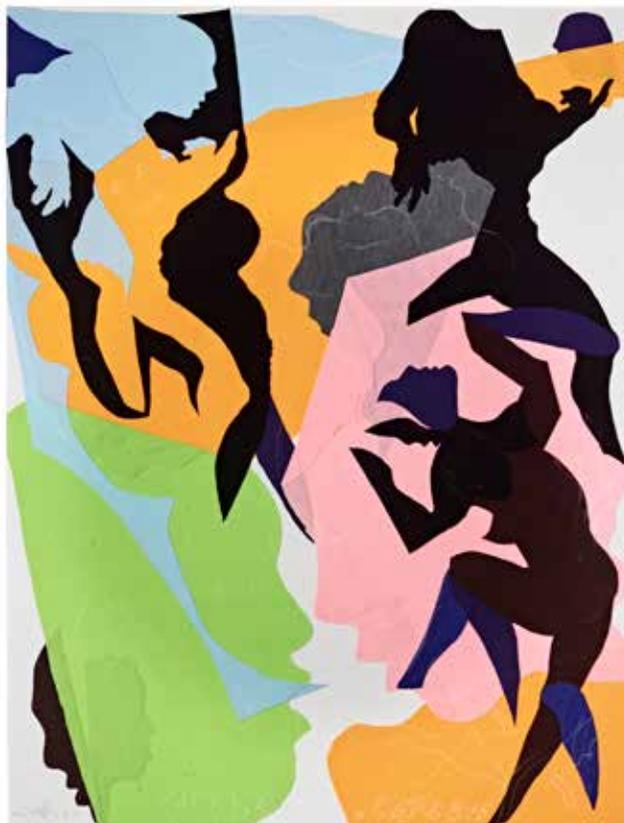
Figure 6 *Triptych* (3.20.15, 5.21.15, 6.8.15)

### How did going to Africa affect your work?

I understood that you could do anything if you could understand the materials well. I had started to fumble around before then with added materials. [But] in the process of making, adding something is not important. In Africa, there's no such word that I know of as "collage"; you're not adding anything, you're using the necessary materials to make something that needs to be made in that manner. And it seems to me that the maker just must stay with that, because that really makes you strict about the relationships that are being built, whether or not they're adequate. Then that freed me, interestingly enough, to become intimate with the materials, rather than just being aesthetically attracted to them — see what they can and what they can't do.

Africa helped a lot to see the integration taking place without the conceptual baggage, so that one paid attention to whether or not a cohesive *thing* was made. And then as a maker you could see that it was possible to use what the heart desired as tools or things to make something. You could say, "Well I always liked dirt. It's okay."

It seems to me that one of the central biases of the African sensibility, in whatever making mode, is transformation. The implication for an African artist is that making becomes essentially a spiritual concern; the coming into existence of a new "thing" from existing "things." It is clear to me that the work of African American artists follows the same path of transformation in making as traditional "African art" — that certain preferences are attended. Among those are *Significance*: the viewer must



sense that there is *urgency* in the stance or concept; *Uprightness*: the integrity of the piece standing forth as it is; and *Beauty*: this is a beauty that is powerful and forceful in its material and immaterial vitality.

### **How does the experience of painting become known to you in the process of making a painting?**

It tunes you for making, so that when you put another relationship down, and it doesn't work, you feel it. This feeling is not emotional like people think, but I can say that it, personally, will almost make you sick. It's like something distasteful in your mouth sometimes. It's very visceral for me. If you work a long time in any field, what looks like spontaneity to other people is just an absolute intimacy with the materials. And if it doesn't work, you take it out — spontaneously!

What I had to understand is that there is no dictionary in the visual — there is not. So, it's freedom, but it is also an extraordinary difficulty because you need a guide but there is none, so you end up making one. If you make it well, stand behind it. You don't like it, still stand behind it. Simultaneity is another thing that you have to get really comfortable with, that “something” and “something else” can act simultaneously. Take red again, as a color: in a painting it can be space, form, image, weight, all at once, because seeing is like that.

You've got to learn to see, not to interfere with what the eyes are bringing, because that's the difficulty — it's always a difficulty, interpretation — but you can see. Can you see, can you bear witness — not interpret, can you bear witness. People always ask you, “Who's this for?” Anybody that's got



**Figure 7** *No. 3, 2016 (1.29.16)*

eyes. “Well, is it for your people?” Anybody that’s got eyes. The point is, once the work is completed, it ain’t me. *I’m me.* “Well, you made it.” Of course I made it! There are people that make wagons, and chairs, shit, somebody gotta make it. There’s nobody that says, “Well, that chair is you.”

The object’s strength is that it’s “somehow” capable of provoking experiences in us. Whether we wish to interpret or not is just a predilection on our part.

The work doesn’t care whose eyes see it.

### **What do you want people to know about your work?**

That it just *is* what it is. That it exists and is there for them to experience. That’s not *knowing* about the work, that’s its being. So I don’t know if I want them to *know* anything.

This interview is a compilation adapted from the following:

Interview with Jan Butterfield, “Oliver Jackson,” in *Oliver Jackson* (Seattle Art Museum, 1982)

Conversation with Diane Roby, excerpts previously published in “Oliver Jackson: On Making,” *International Review of African American Art*, Fall 1996

Artist’s Statement, “The African Continuum,” 1997–1998

Conversation with Margaret Porter Troupe, December 10, 2005, published in *Black Renaissance Noire*, 2006

Conversation with Harry Cooper, San Jose Institute for Contemporary Art, April 9, 2017

Lecture at New York University, Institute of African American Affairs, September 22, 2017

Interview with Harry Cooper, Oakland, December 13, 2017

## Exhibition Checklist

Unless otherwise noted, works are courtesy of the artist.

*Painting (7.25.03)*, 2003  
water-based paint and silver leaf on canvas  
165.1 × 163.83 cm (65 × 64½ in.)

### Figure 3

*Painting (8.10.03)*, 2003  
water-based paint and silver leaf on canvas  
165.1 × 165.1 cm (65 × 65 in.)

*Painting (8.12.03)*, 2003  
water-based paint and silver leaf on canvas  
163.83 cm × 163.83 cm (64½ × 64½ in.)

*Painting (8.20.03)*, 2003  
water-based paint on canvas  
163.83 × 163.83 cm (64½ × 64½ in.)

*Painting (12.15.04)*, 2004  
oil-based paint, enamel paint, applied linen, and mixed media on linen  
274.32 × 366.08 cm (108 × 144⅛ in.)

*Painting (10.14.06)*, 2006  
oil-based paint on canvas  
241.62 × 274.64 cm (95⅞ × 108⅞ in.)

### Figure 4

*Painting (1.9.09)*, 2009  
oil-based paint on linen  
244.48 × 276.23 cm (96¼ × 108¾ in.)

*Painting (11.4.10)*, 2010  
water-based paint, metallic enamel paint, and applied canvas on canvas  
165.1 × 165.1 cm (65 × 65 in.)

*Painting (11.30.10)*, 2010  
water-based paint and metallic enamel paint on canvas  
163.2 × 163.2 cm (64¼ × 64¼ in.)

### Figure 2

*Painting (12.3.10)*, 2010  
water-based paint on canvas  
163.2 × 163.2 cm (64¼ × 64¼ in.)

*Painting (1.26.11)*, 2011  
water-based paint, acrylic paint, and silver and gold spray enamel paint on canvas  
163.2 × 163.2 cm (64¼ × 64¼ in.)

*Painting (5.27.11)*, 2011  
oil-based paint on canvas  
71.76 × 76.84 cm (28¼ × 30¼ in.)  
Courtesy Lucy Goldman

*Painting (6.15.11)*, 2011  
oil-based paint and oil paint stick on canvas  
71.76 × 76.84 cm (28¼ × 30¼ in.)

*Triptych (3.20.15, 5.21.15, 6.8.15)*, 2015  
applied felt, chalk, alkyd paint, and mixed media on wood panel  
each panel: 241.3 × 182.88 cm (95 × 72 in.)  
**Cover (detail) and Figure 6**

*No. 15, 2015 (12.23.15)*, 2015  
graphite, chalk, oil-based paint, and enamel paint on linen  
99.7 × 93.98 cm (39¼ × 37 in.)

*No. 3, 2016 (1.29.16)*, 2016  
oil-based paint, enamel paint, and spray enamel paint on wood panel  
241.3 × 182.88 cm (95 × 72 in.)

### Figure 7

*No. 7, 2017 (7.27.17)*, 2017  
oil-based paint on panel  
241.3 × 182.88 cm (95 × 72 in.)

### Figure 5

*No. 5, 2018 (3.24.18)*, 2018  
oil-based paint on panel  
182.88 × 241.3 cm (72 × 95 in.)

## Additional illustration

Cover illustration for Julius Hemphill's album  
*Blue Boyé*, 1977  
Mbari records  
graphic design Betsy Berne  
**Figure 1**

Brochure produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office, National Gallery of Art. © 2019 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

All works in exhibition © Oliver Lee Jackson

Cover, Figures 2–7: Photos by M. Lee Fatherree

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