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Oliver Lee Jackson's Powerful Paintings of the Last 15 Years Presented at the National Gallery of Art



Oliver Lee Jackson, *No. 7, 2017 (7.27.17)*, 2017, oil-based paints on panel. Courtesy of the artist.
Photo M. Lee Fatherree

Washington, DC—A distinguished painter, printmaker, and sculptor, Oliver Lee Jackson (b. 1935) has created a complex and original body of work that remains rooted in the human figure while drawing on all the resources of modernist abstraction and expression. Jackson's paintings, often large in scale, defy categorization. Figurative elements captivate the eye, while the dynamic compositions, vibrant colors, and vigorously worked surfaces in a variety of materials capture the viewer's attention. On view in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art from April 14 through September 15, 2019, ***Oliver Lee Jackson: Recent Paintings*** presents some 20 paintings created over the past 15 years, many of which are being shown publicly for the first time.

Jackson's mastery of painting is evident in the works, which reflect his personal sensibility and ease with his materials. His compositions offer connections between gestural actions (pointing, kneeling), recurrent motifs (figures with hats, instruments, or carts), and references to the act of making (drawing, brushing, measuring). The exhibition also includes a film created by the Gallery featuring an interview with the artist in his Oakland studio.

"Jackson's experience working with writers, musicians, dancers, and other visual artists directly inspires his colorful compositions. His work has captivated audiences worldwide and challenges viewers to see in new and different ways," said James P. Gorman, chairman and chief executive officer, Morgan Stanley. "At Morgan Stanley, we strive to challenge ourselves to discover new perspectives to share with our clients and communities, and we are pleased to be able to play a part in sharing Oliver Lee Jackson's work with you."

"Unlike many artists who came of age in the wake of abstract expressionism, Jackson never abandoned his figurative orientation," said Harry Cooper, senior curator and head of modern art, National Gallery of Art, Washington. "Having worked with Jackson for over two decades (including on a 2002 exhibition at the Harvard Art Museums), I am excited that we are presenting his recent work, which for all its discipline has an extraordinary freedom and daring. 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!'"

Exhibition Support

The exhibition is made possible through the generous support of the Robert and Mercedes Eichholz Foundation. Morgan Stanley is proud to sponsor *Oliver Lee Jackson: Recent Paintings*. Additional funding is provided by The Tower Project of the National Gallery of Art.

Exhibition Organization and Curator

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The exhibition is curated by Harry Cooper, senior curator and head, department of modern art, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Exhibition Highlights

One of the most striking works in the exhibition is the large *Triptych* (2015), consisting almost entirely of colored felt cut and applied to board. In each panel, dark forms suggesting figures or parts of figures seem to move, dance, or run in and through fields of light blue, orange, pink, green, and white. Figurative references—looming heads and recumbent bodies—are also contained within the fields of

color. The imagery, with its simultaneous suggestions of joy and intense energy, dance and flight, echoes thematic material that has permeated Jackson's career, from the dynamism of his works of the 1970s inspired by newspaper photographs of the 1960 massacre in Sharpeville, South Africa, to persistent themes of a grand dance evoking a sense of spectacle and ritual. While collage and cut-outs have a long history in 20th-century art, Jackson's embrace of felt, which he values for its saturated color and optical neutrality, is distinctive. He folds and overlaps the cloth to create sensations of depth that complicate (without ever contradicting) the inherent flatness of the materials.

Another highlight of the exhibition is a group of eight paintings from 2003 and 2010-2011, each just over five feet square, made with water-based pigments on canvas with touches of spray paint and gold and silver leaf. Once again, Jackson's unusual choice of materials at this scale (watercolors are usually confined to small works on paper) allows for striking and original effects. These works are notable in Jackson's oeuvre for their dramatic restraint and apparent simplicity. Some seem to be entirely abstract while others make clear references to birds, flowers, and figures. The paintings exhibit an improvisational daring that the medium of watercolor both allows and enforces.

Oliver Lee Jackson

Born in 1935 in Saint Louis, Missouri, Oliver Lee Jackson collaborated on community cultural projects with composers and saxophonists, including Julius Hemphill, Oliver Lake, and Marty Ehrlich, and members of the cross-disciplinary collective Black Artists Group. Jackson served as assistant director of the People's Art Center (1963–1964) and as director of Program Uhuru (1967–1968), which he established at the Pruitt & Igoe public housing project to bring creative discipline to its youthful residents. He moved to California in 1971 and has lived and worked in Oakland since 1982.

Jackson's paintings, prints, and sculptures have been the focus of solo exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Museum, Saint Louis; Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, Harvard University; and Seattle Art Museum, among others. Jackson's work has also been included in group exhibitions at museums including the Whitney Museum of American Art; Museum of Modern Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. His work is included public and private collections across the United States, including the National Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Modern Art; Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Art Gallery; Detroit Institute of the Arts; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Related Programs

Evenings at the Edge

Our Art, Our Time

April 11, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m.

Registration begins Friday, March 15, at nga.gov/evenings

Celebrate the art of our time and get a sneak peek of the exhibition *Oliver Lee Jackson: Recent Paintings* before it opens. Uncover artwork created in the last half-century and revel in showstopping performances by the Marty Ehrlich Ensemble and TRIO 3, featuring Oliver Lake, Reggie Workman, and Andrew Cyrille—collaborators of Oliver Lee Jackson and the influential Black Artists Group. The evening will also feature gallery talks and hands-on art-making activities. Light fare and drinks, including beer and wine, will be available for purchase at various locations throughout the East Building. Admission to Evenings at the Edge is free, but registration is required.

Lectures

Shared Exploration: Music and the Visual Arts

April 12, 1:00 p.m.

Oliver Lee Jackson, artist; Marty Ehrlich, composer, multi-instrumental performer, ensemble leader, and associate professor of jazz and contemporary music, Hampshire College; Oliver Lake, saxophonist, composer, painter, and poet; and Harry Cooper, senior curator and head of modern art, National Gallery of Art;. Moderated by A. B. Spellman, poet, music critic, and arts administrator.

Two Writers on Art, Music, and Modality

May 19, 2:00 p.m.

East Building Auditorium

Paul Carter Harrison, playwright and theorist, and Quincy Troupe, poet and biographer of Miles Davis, in conversation with Harry Cooper, senior curator and head of modern art, National Gallery of Art

Conversations with Artists: Oliver Lee Jackson

September 15, 2:00 p.m.

East Building Auditorium

Oliver Lee Jackson in conversation with Harry Cooper, senior curator and head of modern art, National Gallery of Art

John Wilmerding Community Celebration

April 14, 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

East Building

A program for all ages weaves the rich sounds, rhythms, and colors of jazz with visual art. Activities include in-gallery exploration, artmaking, and live performances. In conjunction with the community day, visitors are invited to view a specially installed photo mural at 7th Street and Madison Drive NW that celebrates the extraordinary diversity of Washington, D.C. No registration required.

Films

August/September

East Building Auditorium

A film program is planned to coincide with the exhibition. More details will be announced later in 2019.

Writing Salon

Poetry: Movement and Meaning

Taught by Tara Campbell

April 26, 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

April 27 and 28; May 4 and 5, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Registration begins at noon on Tuesday, April 16, at nga.gov/writingsalon

Explore the colorful, energetic work of contemporary artist Oliver Lee Jackson as inspiration for writing free verse and formal poetry.

Press Contact:

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt, Twitter at www.twitter.com/ngadc, and Instagram at <http://instagram.com/ngadc>.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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PRESS KIT ▼

Exhibition Press Release

[Checklist](#) (PDF 210 kb)

[Exhibition Brochure](#) (PDF 336 kb)

[Morgan Stanley Corporate Statement](#) (PDF 26 kb)

[Curator Biography: Harry Cooper](#)

ONLINE RESOURCES ▼

[Exhibition Page](#)

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The public may call (202) 737-4215 or visit www.nga.gov for more information about the [National Gallery of Art](#).

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