

Oliver Lee Jackson  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 66

University Art Museum  
late October–November 1983

Untitled (3.8.83), 1983



A resurgence of figurative painting has revitalized the international art scene over the past few years, after a generation during which other styles were paramount. During the 1950s and 60s, representation in painting was overshadowed by abstract expressionist and minimalist abstraction; during the following decade, conceptualist non-object forms dominated contemporary art. Throughout these three decades, however, there has been a continuing regional interest in expressive figuration. In Chicago, such artists as Leon Golub (MATRIX 59) and Peter Saul created viable figurative styles. In the Bay Area, artists Joan Brown (MATRIX 24) and William Wiley among many others carry on a figurative tradition established in the fifties by David Park, Richard Diebenkorn (MATRIX 40) and Elmer Bischoff (MATRIX 55). Bay Area figuration was characterized by a successful wedding of the figure to an abstract expressionist method of paint handling.

The sources of the Oakland-based painter Oliver Lee Jackson's particular style are various: African art, early twentieth century German expressionism, American jazz. His immediate roots, however, can be found in the New York School, particularly in works by Philip Guston and Willem de Kooning. In Jackson's paintings of a few years ago, the blocky figures made up of staccato strokes of variegated color recall the late works of Guston, whose startling shift to figuration over a decade ago contributed to the revival of interest in representational painting. The vibrantly colored female figure in Jackson's Untitled

(3.8.83) bears a resemblance to the powerful women de Kooning incorporated into his rich, colorful fields of gestural line and stroke. Although de Kooning was a leader of the predominantly nonfigurative abstract expressionist movement, he never abandoned the human form.

Jackson's painting in the newest works in the current MATRIX exhibition is more fluid than ever before. He has replaced his earlier choppy brush strokes with wide, multicolored swaths of paint. Whereas in previous paintings he left large areas of canvas unpainted, he now tends to cover the entire surface with heavily textured oil paint, as in Untitled (6.4.83) and Untitled (7.12.83). Like Jackson Pollock, Jackson works on unstretched canvas laid out on the floor and moves in and around it while he paints. The marks of his physical involvement (hand and footprints) are often still visible in the finished work. Jackson's explosive compositions are held in precarious balance by a tight surface tension and overall unity. At times he achieves this harmony through centrifugal or centripetal movement around a central core, as in Untitled (3.8.83), Untitled (7.7.83) and Untitled (6.4.83). In other works, such as Untitled (7.12.83) and Untitled (8.16.83), the forms are held together by a pattern of repeated curves.

The stick figures seen in Untitled (3.8.83); the frontal male figure that dominates Untitled (7.7.83) and the frenzied dancing figures of Untitled (8.16.83) that recall primitive dancers

of the early twentieth century German expressionist Emil Nolde are among the artist's inventory of figures he terms "paint people." Perhaps the most prevalent are the horn players, the "heralds" as Jackson has called them (Untitled 3.8.83, Untitled 7.2.83, Untitled 7.7.83). Other shadowy or lightly sketched in figures or fragments thereof coalesce from or disappear into the swirling surface activity that defies figure-ground distinctions. These mysterious beings suggest the ancestor ghosts of African religions or spirits of the Jungian collective unconscious. Jackson's paint people seem to be engaged in rites of a magical world in which they are not restricted by gravitational or other earthly restraints. The vitality of Jackson's paintings is a product of their imaginative content and the artist's obvious passion for the medium.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1935, Jackson received a B.F.A. in 1958 from Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington and an M.F.A. in 1963 from the University of Iowa. He has taught in several colleges and universities during the past 20 years, among them, Washington University, St. Louis; Oberlin College, Ohio; and, since 1971, California State College, Sacramento. He was the recipient of a 1980-81 National Endowment for the arts grant.

Constance Lewallen

#### Works in MATRIX:

Untitled (3.8.83), 1983, oil on canvas, 84" x 108".

Untitled (6.4.83), 1983, oil on canvas, 83-3/4" x 108".

Untitled (7.7.83), 1983, oil on canvas, 83-1/2" x 107".

Untitled (7.12.83), 1983, oil on canvas, 84" x 108".

Untitled (8.16.83), 1983, oil on canvas, 96" x 144".

All works are lent by Quay Gallery, San Francisco and Allan Stone Gallery, New York.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Downstairs Gallery, St. Louis, MO, '64; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA, '77; Washington University School of Fine Arts, St. Louis, MO, '79; Allan Stone Gallery, New York, '80; Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC, '80 (catalogue); C.N. Gorman Museum, University of California, Davis, '81; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA, '82 (catalogue); Quay Gallery, San Francisco, '82.

Selected group exhibitions:

People's Art Center, St. Louis, MO, '63; Art-in-the-Embassies Program, Washington, DC, '66-68; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Contemporary California Artists: Carlos Gutierrez-Solana & Oliver L. Jackson, '75 (traveled to Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City); San Francisco Art Institute, Other Sources, '76; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA, Aspects of Abstract, '79 (catalogue); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Fresh Paint: Fifteen California Artists, '82 (brochure); Oakland Museum, CA, From the Sunny Side, '82 (brochure); Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Biennial, '83 (catalogue).

Selected bibliography about Jackson (see also catalogues under exhibitions:

Albright, Thomas. "Abstract Expressions of Raw, Sweeping Energy," San Francisco Chronicle, June 11, '75.

Hackett, Regina. "Oliver Lee Jackson: Forms That Feeling Takes," Artforum, Summer, '79.

Albright, Thomas. "A Painter with a Vision of His Own," San Francisco Chronicle, Oct. 13, '82.

Glowen, Ron. "Power of Paint," Artweek, Oct. 16, '82.

Burstein, Joanne. "From the Sunny Side: Six East Bay Artists," Artweek, Oct. 23, '82.

Boettger, Suzaan. "Reviews: San Francisco," Artforum, Jan., '83.

Cameron, Daniel. "Biennial Cycle," Arts Magazine, June, '83.

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