



# Oliver Lee Jackson: Composed

Works from 1984 to 2016

By Cathy Kimball



PHOTOGRAPHS BY M. LEE FATHERREE

Oliver Lee Jackson regards an empty canvas, an untouched slab of marble, or a blank sheet of paper as an energy field with which he freely collaborates.

The works in *Composed* reveal the signature figural elements that Jackson has consistently insinuated into the work: figures that rise, float or fall; entwined lovers or reclining dreamers; figures that appear to dance or play; and figures that come together in circles or clusters. While these gestural forms have been a persistent means by which Jackson activates the canvas, the marble or the paper, their function has nothing to do with a narrative. Jackson's intent is not to tell us a story.



Painting, 2010 (11.11.10)  
Mixed media on canvas  
65 1/4" by 65 1/2"

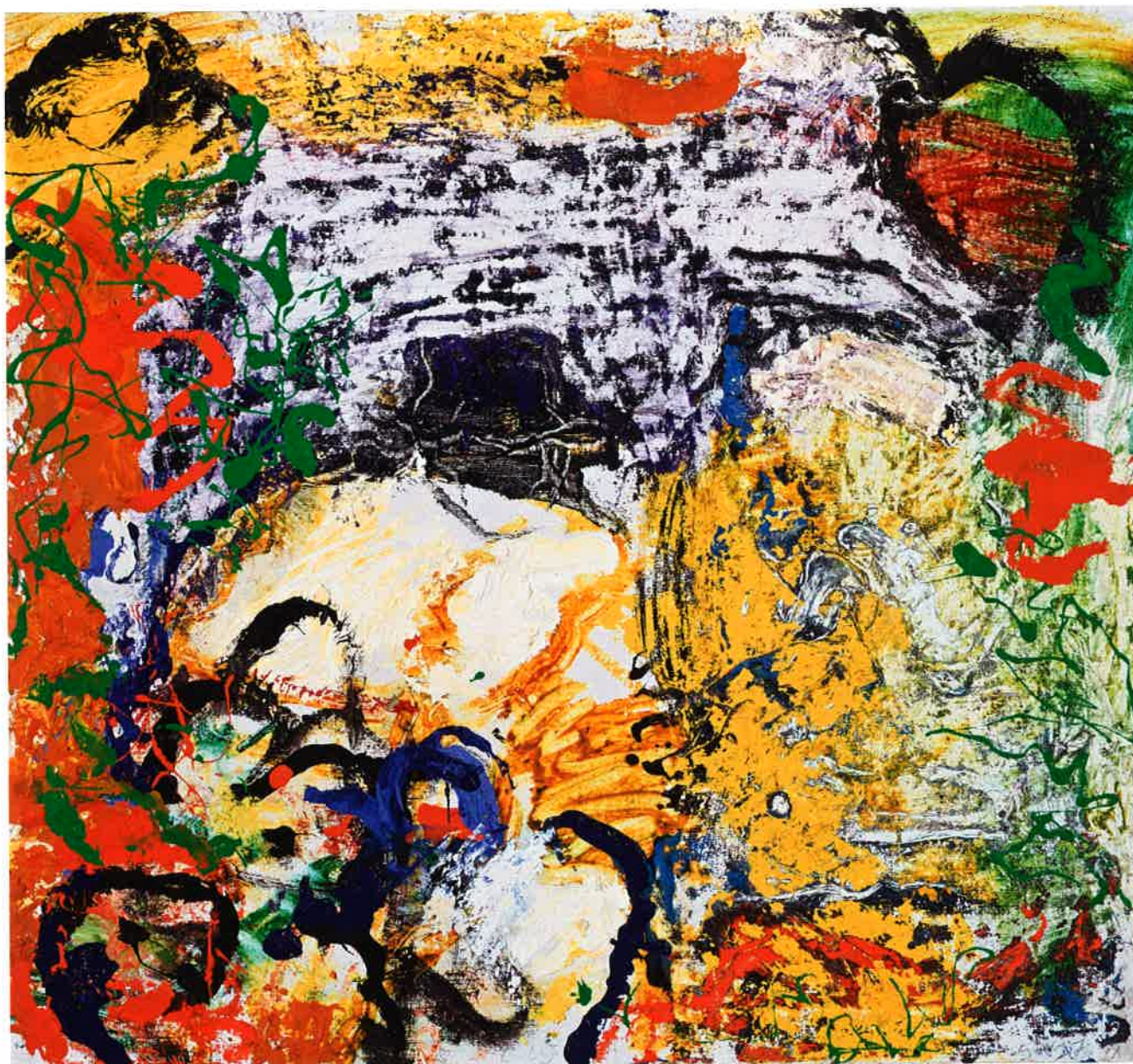


↑  
*Painting, 2011 (5-12, 11)*  
 Oil-based pigments on linen  
 108" by 108"

Along with the figural elements, he may include a cascade of flowers, a flurry of birds, hats or shoes. As you look at these works, you will find that the imagery does not stand still: what might at first be seen as space or illumination surrounding a form will suddenly reveal another figure. For Jackson, the positioning and gestures of the figures are meant to lead the viewer's eye, and define an ambiguous space that pulses in a constant state of flux, as figural

imagery and field merge into and arise out of each other. Whether at monumental or intimate scale, Jackson's works draw us in and provoke in us an experience that is meant to be personal — which may be one of recognition, comfort, ambivalence or even unease. Jackson aims to make works that invite us to become lost in an experience of looking.



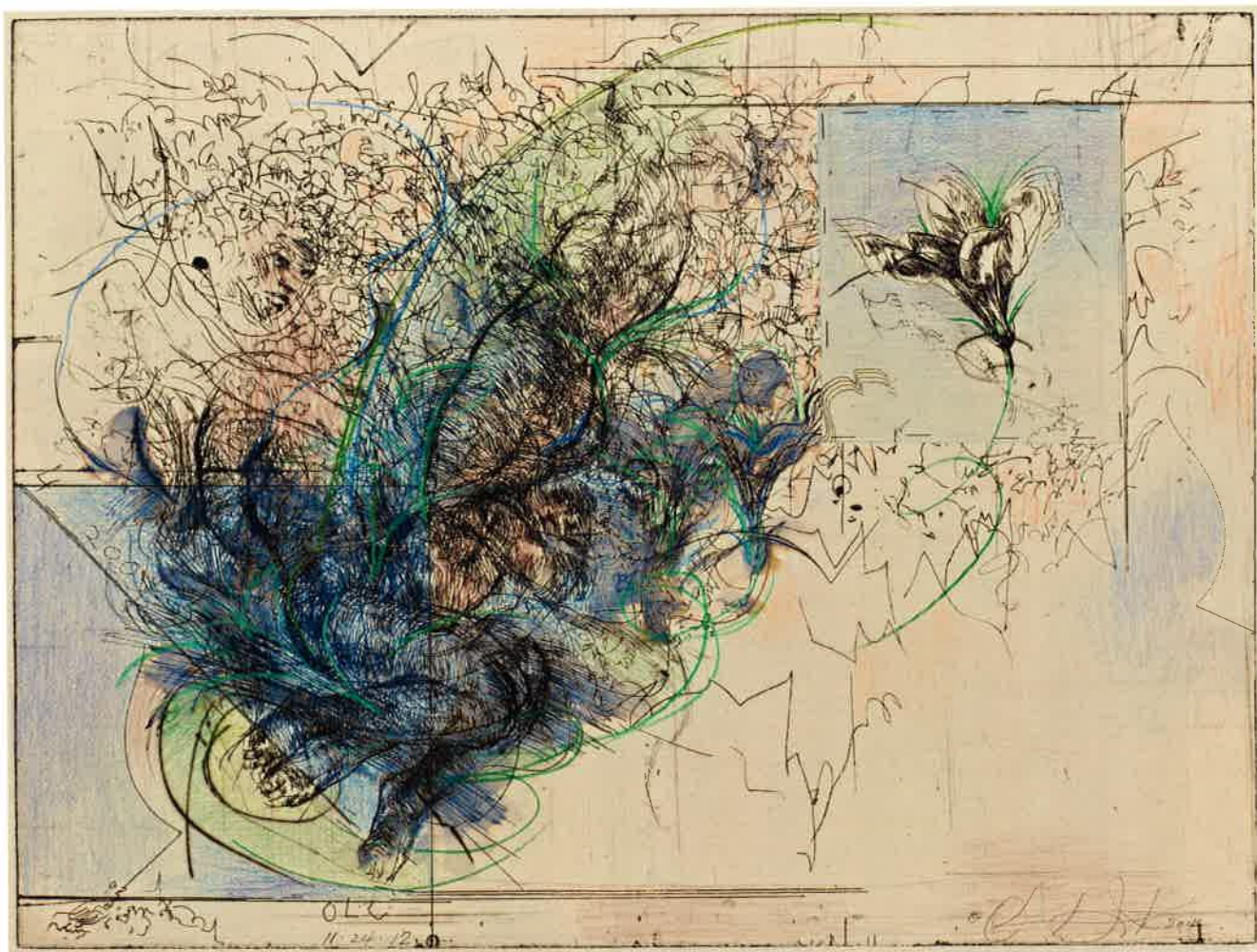


Jackson's career spans more than five decades and the paintings, sculptures, drawings, constructions and artist's books included in *Composed* represent more than 30 years of output, from the mid-1980s to recently completed works and highlight Jackson's mastery as a composer, a colorist, and a craftsman. Jackson has had solo exhibitions at the Seattle Art Museum, St. Louis Art Museum, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Crocker Art Museum, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, and others; and group exhibitions at the Whitney Museum

of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Museo do Arte Moderno, Rio de Janeiro; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and many others. He was Professor of Art at California State University, Sacramento from 1971 to 2002, and has served as an Artist-in-Residence or visiting artist at numerous institutions in the United States and Europe. Jackson lives and works in Oakland, California. ■

Reprinted from the catalogue of the Oliver Jackson exhibition at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose, California, March 19 – June 14, 2017





*Painting, 2011 (5.27.11)*  
Oil based pigments on canvas  
28 1/4" by 30 1/4"



*Composite, 2012 (11.24.12)*  
Intaglio print, mixed media on paper  
18 1/4" by 24 1/4"



*Composite, 2012* (12,3,12)  
Intaglio print, mixed media on paper  
29 1/2" by 41 1/8"



*Painting No. 4, 2014* (3,31,14)  
Oil-based pigments on panel  
76 3/8" by 96"







PHOTOGRAPHS BY M. LEE FATHERREE



*No. 1, 2015 (2.3.15)*  
Applied fabric, mixed media on panel  
95" by 72"



*No. 4, 2015 (4.2.15)*  
Applied fabric, mixed media on panel  
78 1/4" by 66"









No. 1, 2017 (3.13.17)  
Oil-based paints, mixed media on panel  
95" by 72"



No. 3, 2017 (5.7.17)  
Oil-based paints, mixed media on panel  
95" by 72"



## Cross-Cultural Components

By Allan M. Gordon

It would be helpful, if the viewer of Oliver Jackson's sculpture had a working knowledge of African art and aesthetics. This would enable the viewer to approach the work on levels other than the perception of it as essentially an "elegant," "tough," "expressionistic" solution to art-making problems.

The work is all these things, but unless the African component is taken into consideration, the entire issue of content is minimized or completely missed.

Nor is the viewer apt to appreciate another issue, which Jackson and other Western artists who make an ancestral claim to African art and culture: how can the artist selectively choose from an array of non-Christian motifs, forms, and ideas, and translate them into viable and convincing meaning that would make any kind of sense within a contemporary Western, Christian ethos? It ain't easy.

Coincidentally, it was a similar problem faced by Sandro Boticelli, Michelangelo Buonarroti and other Italian artists of the quattro- and cinquecentos. The Renaissance artists wanted to use the art from the ancient pagan past compatible with Christianity. The mystical Neoplatonism of Plotinus paralleled the mysticism of Christianity and eventually provided an aesthetic and philosophical connecting link for the artists.

Unfortunately (or fortunately), Jackson has no such readymade bridge to connect Western traditions to the multilayered African cultures. Leopold Senghor's concept of *Negritude*, perhaps, comes as close as anything but is an introduction that does not go far enough.

What Jackson does have is the tradition of modernism, its emphasis on formalistic devices, and his own gut instincts. But if his paintings are any indication, formalism alone is not enough. A fairly explicit content has always been a crucial aspect of the artist's work.

The figural imagery in his paintings might be seen as decorative and emblematic design elements, if they were not developed from personal references that are either autobiographical in nature or at least aspects of a cosmological/theological framework that Jackson thoroughly understands and also is accepted by the society in which he lives.

This is what makes, for example, the chair sculptures problematic. Even when he is unable to use the reference of the chair frame itself to "slip past" and become a metaphor for the figure, because the chair remains too insistent, the allusion and overt reference to African sculpture can not transcend the differences between belief systems existing between that which spawned the original and the new creations that can only hint at a continuum that does not necessarily exist on the level that Jackson suggests.

What remains are sculptural works that are almost self-consciously aware of their precedents in both African art and western modernism. For the concerned viewer, Jackson's work offers a mini-compendium of possibilities that exist in viewing African art as a source and inspiration. ■

*From a review originally published in Artweek, 1993.*



*Marble and Wood Sculpture, 2017*  
Marble, wood, mixed media  
46" by 48" by 24"

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