

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Oliver Lee Jackson: *Intimacies*

4 April – 17 May 2025
27 Bell Street, London

Opening: 3 April, 6 – 8pm

Artist talk, chaired by Ekow Eshun: 5 April, 11.30am, rsvp@lissongallery.com to reserve a place

For his inaugural exhibition with Lisson Gallery and his first ever solo show in London, Oliver Lee Jackson presents a selection of new and recent paintings. The American artist, based in Oakland, California, creates energetic fields of abstract marks that occasionally coalesce into floating forms approaching figuration. These ‘paint people’ can be glimpsed in groups or as individuals in various poses – crouched, huddled, seated, perhaps even flying – appearing in either very few brushstrokes or as indicators of spatial dynamics, sometimes accompanied by flowers, birds, hats or shoes.

While Jackson does indeed consider himself a figurative artist, his unique painted worlds only open up through an appreciation of the full plethora of marks he commits to each panel. Human forms mingle and merge in shimmering, skittering lines that hint both at the movement and the volume of these figures, while often comprising more or less than their prescribed number of arms or legs, with some forms shifting across planes and seemingly sliding away from view and beyond our focus. Between these groupings of figures are expanses of primed surface, punctuated by swathes of abstract gesture and bold colouration that pull these scenes beyond mere image, into zones of feeling, expression and intent. Utilizing the spatial parameters of the support he is working across, Jackson brings each composition into a state of balance and harmony, controlling each section of the work and moving the eye across his passages of oil, enamel and chalk.

This totality in his work is hard-won through six decades of rigorous practice, in which Jackson revolves around the painted arena, placed flat on trestles or directly on the studio floor. This 360-degree approach allows him to survey the entirety of the canvas or panel at any one time, in order to hold all the components together and distribute his desired effects equally. This compositional dance also reveals itself through the weightier moments of painterly line and colour, in contrast to the lighter moments provided by the chalk markings.

Objects, gestures and focal points may also arise through this process and have done repeatedly so over time. Squatting, dancing, embracing, conversing and reclining figures have been visible in various guises in Jackson’s work since the 1970s, here appearing dreamlike and only suggested in bodily fragments and feverishly repeating lines. As central as the figure remains within this body of work, Jackson himself never stands still, always keeping the field moving, keeping it flowing.

The themes of joy, abandon and serenity that might link these compositions to classical ideals or art historical precedents – of bathers or nymphs, for example – could just as likely morph into more unsettling notions of clustered, hovering or fleeing figures, depending on the perspective and mood of the beholder. It is this congregation between viewer and image that brings about the ‘intimacies’ alluded to in the title of the show. These can be tender moments of connection experienced through touch, sight or emotion or even with the physicality of the medium and material of the works themselves, or more prosaically it could refer to a closeness that comes from two parties communing in love or even while at war.

About the artist

Oliver Lee Jackson is a painter, sculptor and printmaker whose creations open up spaces for contemplation and interpretation, as well as encounters with seen and unseen worlds. He has long engaged in freeing form and matter from the strictures and false oppositions between figuration and abstraction, preferring hybridity, ambiguity and improvisation with his materials over fixed meanings and didacticism. Beginning with gridded compositions in the 1960s and then moving his large canvases to the floor in the 1970s, in order to approach his work from multiple orientations, Jackson's images remain based in reality and bound to human experience. "Every exchange we have, regardless of whether we call it spiritual or not," says the artist, "is through the world, by the senses, absorbing things in things, exploiting things by things, always relationships with things."

His chosen materials – stone, steel, wood, marble, fabric, paint – become the conduit for him to communicate emotions, moods and shared phenomena through the making of objects and images. The figure is a constant presence – sometimes overt, sometimes fragmentary and fugitive – in all of Jackson's work, acting as both starting point and anchor for the marks, glimpses, moments and motives behind each composition. Even in two dimensions, the relative weights and volumes of brushstrokes, handprints and colour expanses create fluctuating densities, depths and spatial possibilities. Demonstrative narratives or references to actual historic events are fleeting and nonlinear, excepting important series such as his 1970s paintings based on photographs of Anti-Apartheid demonstrators escaping the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 in Johannesburg, whose gestures profoundly reflected interior states of being – in this case confronting the terror of state-sponsored violence. Otherwise, Jackson cites influence from both African and European art traditions to feed his gestural representations that suggest a timeless, bodily flow of life force, memory and atmosphere.

Oliver Lee Jackson was born in 1935, St. Louis, Missouri and now lives and works in Oakland, California, USA. After attending the University of Iowa and advising the St. Louis collective of musicians, poets, dancers and artists known as the Black Artists Group (known as BAG) in the late 1960s, Jackson relocated to the West Coast to be a professor of art at the California State University, Sacramento, from 1971 until 2002, where he initially developed a curriculum for the Pan African Studies program. In addition to numerous collaborations with writers, musicians and dancers, Jackson has worked on large-scale commissions and held major solo presentations at the Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO (2021, 1990); di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art, Napa, CA (2021); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2019); Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, MO (2012); Harvard University, Cambridge MA (2002); Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA (1993, 1984, 1977); Seattle Art Museum (1982) among others.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 70 international artists across spaces in London, New York, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Beijing. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists and others of that generation, from Carmen Herrera and Olga de Amaral to Hélio Oiticica and Lee Ufan. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Liu Xiaodong, Otobong Nkanga, Pedro Reyes, Sean Scully, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Wael Shawky. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists including Dana Awartani, Cory Arcangel, Garrett Bradley, Ryan Gander, Josh Kline, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost and Cheyney Thompson.

For press enquiries, please contact

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