

Jonathan Griffin, *Vitamin P3: New Perspectives in Painting*, Phaidon Publication, 2016

There is a particular technique of applying paint that distinguishes Alex Olson's work. It appears in a great many of her paintings, including a number of works in her 'Proposal' series (2012): a squeegeed strip of colour, immaculately smooth except at its tail end where a curling crest of paint betrays where the artist lifted her tool from the canvas. The mark seems to tell us everything we could want to know about the texture of oil paint: its viscosity, its speed, its consistency – all this information is readily available on the surface. And yet there is something about Olson's paintings that is a little too perfect to be taken at face value. Certain things about them do not quite add up. Frequently listed in her media, along with oil paint and linen, is modelling paste – indicating that the paintings are more fastidiously fabricated than their gestural surfaces might sometimes imply.

Take *Proposal 9* (2012), for example, in which a rectangle of these squeegeed marks, ranked in a tight grid, effectively denotes a painting within a painting. The edges of these pale grey strips, especially their cresting tails, are tinted with black, as if revealing a dark underside to each one. How has the artist done that? Instead of being a uniform putty grey colour, some contain barely perceptible hints of pink. Is this accident or intention? Furthermore, the ground on which they sit, which consists of an even field of brushstrokes curving in all directions (another Olson trademark, perhaps lifted from domestic wall textures of the 1970s) is uncannily tidy. Each individual hair in each brushstroke seems to have been accentuated through black dry-brushing, or under-painting, or sanding-through, in contrast to the smooth and wet-looking strips on top. This is painting to the power of itself.

To say that Olson practices a form of painting in inverted commas would seem to imply a degree of contrivance and detachment to her position, but this is far from the case. Her work is beautiful, movingly so in many cases. It provides for both the mind and the eye – and indeed, in its deconstruction of the constituent elements of oil painting, it could almost be said to be *about* visual pleasure as much as it is about illusion, gesture, pictorial space, formal materiality and other such issues concerning the status of painting in the twenty-first century.

Certain works, such as *Gesture* (2015), are founded on a particular conceptual observation – in this case, the differentiation between the gestural pink and red ground and the illusionistically rendered green and blue threads which seem to dance across it, their profiles built up with modelling paste and *trompe l'oeil* shadows falling beneath. Is the more authentic gesture the movement of the threads, which resemble scribbled lines, or the casually brushed background? Or perhaps, in Olson's hyper-controlled and exhaustively considered work, they are one and the same.

– Jonathan Griffin

ALEX OLSON Born 1978, Boston, MA. Lives and works in Los Angeles. **Selected Solo Exhibitions:** 2015 – 'Scene of Elastic Sight', Laura Bartlett Gallery, London; 2013 – 'Interior Address: Paintings by Alex Olson (Notes by M. Malliaris)', Shane Cambell Gallery, Chicago; 2010 – 'As a Verb, As a Noun, In Peach and Silver', Lisa Cooley, New York. **Selected Group Exhibitions:** 2014 – 'Reductive Minimalism: Two Generations of Women Artists in Dialogue 1960–2014', University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor MI; 2013 – 'Painter Painter', Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; 2012 – 'Made in LA', Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. **Selected Bibliography:** 2015 – Jamie Sterns, 'Summer Colors: Alex Olson at Laura Bartlett Gallery', *ARTnews*, Oct; 2014 – Suzanne Hudson, 'Openings', *Artforum*, Oct; 2013 – Jonathan Thomas, 'Painter Painter', *Frieze*, Jun; 2010 – Roberta Smith, 'Varieties in Abstraction', *The New York Times*, Aug.

