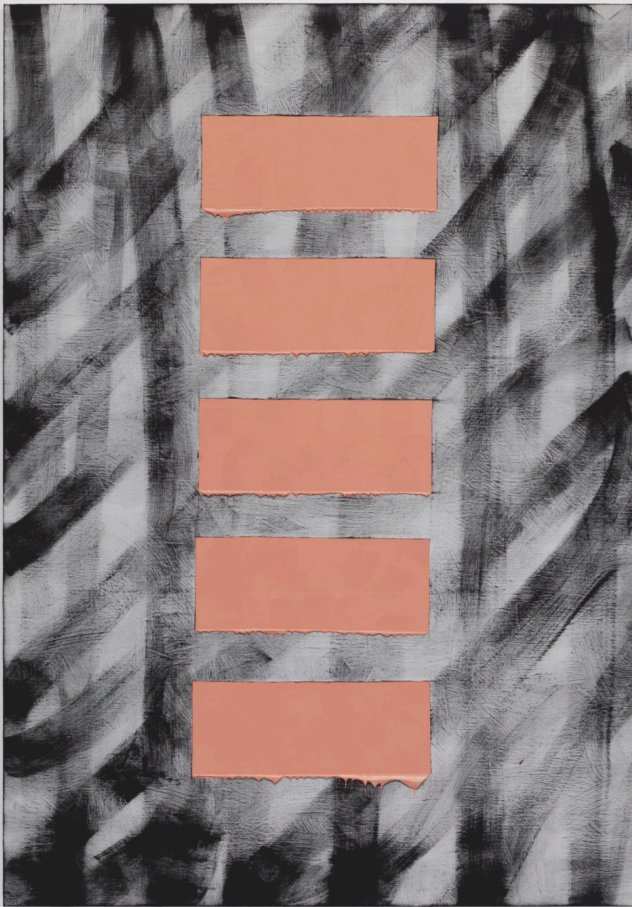


# WALKER

Crosby, Eric. "Remarks on Surface: An Interview with Alex Olson." *Walker Art Center Blog*. October 5, 2012

## Remarks on Surface: An Interview with Alex Olson

BY ERIC CROSBY



*Proposal 3* 2012  
oil on linen  
61 x 43 in.  
Photo: Brian Forrest



*In Studio Sessions, our ongoing web series, the 15 artists in the Walker-organized exhibition Painter Painter respond to an open-ended query about their practices. Here Los Angeles-based artist Alex Olson converses with exhibition co-curator Eric Crosby.*

### Eric Crosby

To begin, let's start with appearances. Whenever I encounter one of your paintings, I learn something new about paint —its materiality, its consistency, its presence as image and surface. What is paint to you, and how do you describe your use of it?

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October 5, 2012

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## Alex Olson

I'd say there are two main qualities of paint, specifically oil paint, that especially appeal to me. One is its enormous range as a material. Depending on how it's applied, it can read from graphic to visceral. Most of my paintings take full advantage of this quality, incorporating a variety of tools and marks to arrive at the finished piece. The second quality is its extensive history. It's impossible to make a mark at this point that doesn't come with a historical referent, but this is actually a huge benefit. You can pull from art history's enormous catalogue and build off of a past meaning, re-situating it in the present toward a different end. In doing so, it's important to understand how a specific mark or idea functioned in the past versus now, and to consider what using it now would mean, but this creates even richer possibilities to choose from.

## Crosby

And do you think of your paintings as abstract? Does that word have any currency in your practice?

## Olson

While I don't mind using "abstract painting" as a short-hand to describe what I do, I don't think in terms of "abstraction" or "abstracting." In fact, the way I approach painting is almost the opposite in that nothing is an abstraction of something else: it literally is what it is. A brushstroke will read as an image of a brushstroke and as a physical brushstroke. The overall look of one of my paintings is never precisely identifiable, but it isn't an abstraction of something else either. It's its own thing.



*Record* 2012  
oil on linen  
51 x 36 in.  
Photo: Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago

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## Crosby

When Bart [Ryan] and I visited your studio back in February, we talked at length about issues of surface and process, which stemmed from your interest in painting as a kind of language.

## Olson

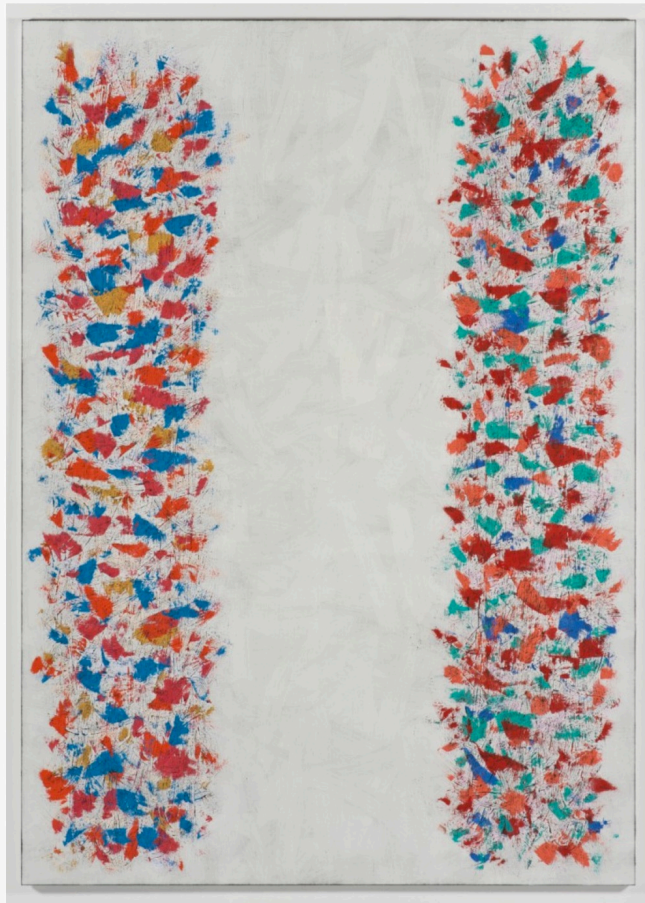
I do think that painting is a language, as all marks are referential, but that's just one element that comes into play for me when making a painting. My focus is on choreographing these marks in ways that prompt a desire to read, but without providing precise language to do so. It's about suspending the act of looking and judging for the viewer, and hopefully encouraging a constant reassessment of these judgments.

## Crosby

Yet each gesture, each discrete mark, feels entirely available. Your paintings don't seem to hide any aspect of their making. Is this an important part of your practice?

## Olson

Yes, you can excavate my paintings into the parts used to build them, although it might not always be easy to tell the order in which they were laid down. I want the paintings to be very self-evident in their construction, so that there is a transparency for the viewer in the architecture of the works, rather than something virtuosic with the paint. I tend to favor blunt, indexical, familiar marks. My goal isn't to transport the viewer; it's to offer up everything on the surface for the viewer to parse out, no additional text required.



Relay 2012  
oil on linen  
75 x 53 in.  
Photo: Brian Forrest



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*Relay* (detail)  
Photo: Brian Forrest

## **Crosby**

It's interesting that you position the work against the idea of virtuosity, which of course has a long tradition in the history and criticism of painting. The word conjures a very specific, even heroic image of the work of a master painter.

## **Olson**

The values that are associated with virtuosity in paint are ones that I'm just not interested in. For instance, I never want my work to read as heavily labored, so that the labor overrides the rest of the work. Instead, I'm trying to make clear, accessible paintings, built using deliberate marks. Generally, I choose marks that have the ability to behave as stock signage—meaning that they act as a sign but remain unattached to a singular definition—such as a dash or an “x.” They are very flexible, and can conjure up associations without delivering one precise read.

## **Crosby**

Can painting be a space of illusion for you, or is that something you actively deny in your practice?

## **Olson**

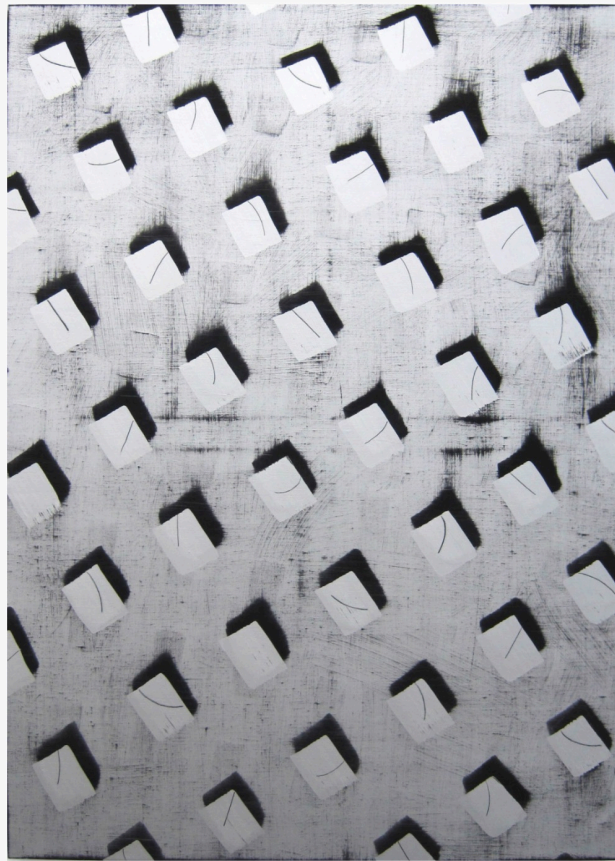
Illusion rarely comes into play in my work, and when it does, it's made in a flat-footed, obvious way. The paintings are very present and external, and all the marks are to the scale of the tools used to make them and to the hand. The scale of the paintings is also in relation to a viewer's body, ranging from portrait-size to person-size, so that they remain discrete viewing experiences rather than overwhelming or miniature.

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*Open Letter* 2009  
oil on linen  
41 x 29 in.  
Photo: Alex Olson

**Crosby**

Yet in surface and support, they can take on a close relationship to the wall.

**Olson**

Yes, I work on very thin stretchers, since it helps to bring attention to the surface of the work and the experience of engaging with it. Thicker stretcher bars encourage a read of painting-as-object, while painting directly on the wall causes a conversation of painting-as-architecture. Instead, I want the work to exist in this other zone, neither sculpture nor stand-in, but more like a proposal. It offers a contained visual experience that presents a set of signs on its surface for negotiation, which involves a greater amount of projection than would a more spatial experience.

**Crosby**

There's also a strong temporal aspect to your work. I'm curious about one painting in particular—*Mark* (November 2011–February 2012)—which you included in your last exhibition at Shane Campbell Gallery in Chicago.

**Olson**

The painting you're referring to looks a lot like my studio walls, which I am constantly wiping my fingers on, either from touching a wet painting before it's dry or from mixing paint, or just from general studio messiness. For this last show at Shane Campbell Gallery, I decided to record all of these swipes onto a single painting, thereby giving some indication of the choices that went into making the show. You can find evidence of ideas that stuck and those that were edited, and I think this helps to highlight the fact that the paintings are not predetermined but are built through a process of call and response. This particular painting, therefore, became like a diary or a calendar, and served as an introduction to the other works. I also liked how it so obviously demonstrated a touching of a surface, since most of the other works involved a grazing, scraping, stroking, or carving in order to point back to their own surfaces.

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*Mark (November 2011–February 2012)* 2011–2012

oil on linen

24 x 18 in.

Photo: Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago

## **Crosby**

It sounds like you've developed a complete mental catalogue of all possible marks!

## **Olson**

I don't think the catalogue is complete by any means! But I do experiment a lot with mark-making and testing new tools in order to see how different marks can read. One way I try out new marks is by making works on paper that aren't studies but instead are more like aids for thinking through the paintings. These works live on my studio floor and I treat them as utilitarian while they are active, grabbing one that might have a part on it that will assist me at a particular time, but then perhaps weeks later, using it again for a different idea. These then gather aspects of multiple paintings over the course of a body of work, becoming a record for the work's development as a whole.



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each: *Untitled* 2012  
oil on gessoed paper  
17 x 14 in.  
Photo: Brian Forrest

## Crosby

So your paintings develop in a very relational or dialogic fashion in the studio? I think this is a concern shared among many of the artists in our upcoming show *Painter Painter*.

## Olson

Yes, the paintings are created simultaneously or in response to one another. When I'm making a show, I consider how each painting will perform a different role, offering a range experiences: some are quieter than others, some more pronounced, some are tangents, and so forth. However, while each painting is distinct, they often overlap in the types of marks used to construct them. Two paintings might begin with the same infrastructure but take different paths to their conclusions. For instance, in *Proposal 1* and *Proposal 5*, both began with a ground of the same curving marks, but then each diverged into its own unique form, with the initial marks reading extremely differently by the end.

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*Proposal 1* 2012  
oil on linen  
61 x 43 in.  
Photo: Brian Forrest



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*Proposal 5* 2012  
oil on linen  
61 x 43 in.  
Photo: Brian Forreest

## **Crosby**

And when does the process of naming come into play? Your titles generally specify roles or job functions (e.g., *Editor, Archivist, Orator*) as well as aspects or instances of language (for example, *Shorthand, Turn of Phrase, Announcement, Score*). Why is that?

## **Olson**

Generally, I title paintings once the work is done. I pick titles that embody the function of the paintings rather than what they look like. I also favor titles that have more than one meaning, or serve as multiple parts of speech. The goal is to highlight how the painting is active or in constant flux, without being too illustrative.

## **Crosby**

It sounds like a balancing act, yet some of your paintings feel more outwardly referential than others. As images, they participate in a vast visual culture and inevitably come into contact with other contexts. What visual contexts outside of painting interest you?

## **Olson**

While I would never want a painting to appear as a depiction of something specifically, the work definitely pulls influences from painting's history as well as from sources outside of art altogether. I keep files each month of images that interest me, through scanning websites and blogs. Along with art references, these images usually include textiles, architectural surfaces and façades, graphic design for its ability to have marks embody ideas, and just general odd collisions of visuals wherever they might crop up. I am looking for things that are subtly elegant and simultaneously absurd, things that sneak up on you as baffling or as a contradiction and cause you to reconsider them.

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**Crosby**

And is this also true of what you find compelling in art history?

**Olson**

Yes, I tend to respond to work that goes beyond a one-liner or extreme craftsmanship. I have a rule for my own work, which is no solving-by-decorating, meaning don't just add things if they aren't performing a function. That being said, I'm drawn to simple solutions with expansive impacts. Some of my favorites artists who excel at this include Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin, and Lucio Fontana. I also look at work that embodies an idea in lieu of explicit content, such as the work of Jo Baer, Joan Mitchell, Philip Guston, Lee Lozano, and Mary Heilmann. I love an artwork that has an element of tangible creativity in it, so that I didn't see that particular solution coming. Richard Tuttle is a master at this, Jasper Johns and Moira Dryer, too.

**Crosby**

Sometimes I feel sorry for contemporary painting because everyone is so eager to historicize it (myself included). From your vantage point, what's at stake? What exchanges or dialogues are you having with the medium's past?

**Olson**

I don't necessarily feel part of a specific movement, but I do feel like there are kindred spirits out there among my peers. What's at stake is that each generation has the opportunity to reevaluate narratives of the past in a manner that makes sense in the present. Ideas tend to recirculate, but they might mean something completely different in today's context. It's important to restate them in new ways in order to better communicate them, and to engage with them not always in opposition but in response.

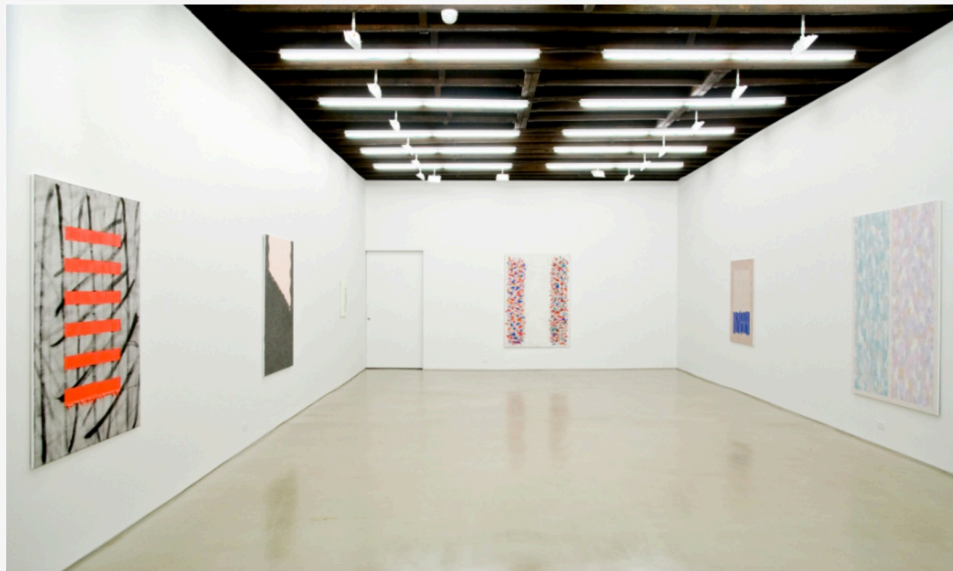
Specifically, I consider myself to be coming out of and responding to the Robert Ryman camp of how-to-paint over the what-to-paint. The BMT group [Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, Niele Toroni] was very significant to me in grad school, as well as Supports-Surfaces. From these artists, I took away an understanding of painting as an apparatus that could be dismantled and rebuilt toward new meanings. I was also influenced by many of the artists featured in the exhibition *High Times, Hard Times*. Artists such as Ree Morton and Howardena Pindell were a revelation for their insistence on experimenting with materials and injecting subjectivity into the work without turning out overtly historic, expressionistic artworks. I see myself as building from all these perspectives, not just one singular history.

**Crosby**

Tell us about your current show at Lisa Cooley in New York. What new concerns are emerging out of that work?

**Olson**

My concerns tend to remain consistent, as do the parameters that I work within, but how I approach making the paintings shifts between bodies of work. Usually new paintings are built in response to the last. For my show at Lisa Cooley's, each painting is loosely based on an idea of a pairing that either collaborates with or contradicts its counterpart. For instance, a graphic version of a brushstroke will conjure up one particular read, but then it will be competing for attention alongside a much more textured, bodily version of itself that points to a different story. I'm trying to propose surfaces whose signposts aren't always in agreement, and then see how the brain might privilege one indicator versus the other. The show is titled *Palmist and Editor*, as these are two professions that both derive information from surfaces, one in the form of texture and one in the form of text.



Installation view, *Palmist and Editor*, Lisa Cooley, New York, September 2012  
Photo: Cary Whittier



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## Crosby

*Palmist and Editor...* I can't wait to see it. What about painter? Do you identify with that title?

## Olson

Thanks! Yes, I do identify as a painter. The ideas I am interested in work best for me in the form of paint on canvas. I also think painting is in a very generous position right now, in that its greatest asset is that it has no function other than as an art object. It isn't fooling anyone: it's extremely clear about what it consists of and what it's offering. Viewers can then approach it as a site created for the sole purpose of delivering signs for visual engagement. This is an optimistic state, and one that I can't ever see exhausting in favor of another form.



*Harbor* 2012  
oil on linen  
61 x 43 in.  
Photo: Brian Forrest

*Alex Olson lives and works in Los Angeles. She received a BA from Harvard University in 2001, and an MFA from California Institute of the Arts in 2008. Recent exhibitions include Made in L.A., Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Laura Bartlett Gallery, London; Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Her exhibition Palmist and Editor at Lisa Cooley in New York will be on view through October 28, 2012.*