

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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X—TRA

Higgins, Dakota, “The Art of the Pun,” *X-TRA*, January 3, 2022

I see two types of artists: those who are working with puns and those who are not.

– Jimmy Raskin, *The Final Eternal Return*

Is it a coincidence that Marcel Duchamp, the true-if-over-cited midwife of the readymade, grandfather of the found object, was also an avid producer of puns? Might there be a relationship, in both form and function, between the loathed and lowly pun and the repurposing, repositioning, recontextualizing, and general rethinking of given forms—that strategy once reviled, now ever-present?



Guy Bennet, *D.S.A.G. (Aging Goddess)*, 2021, pencil on inkjet paper. Courtesy of the artist.

1. I spider 'cuz she's fly.

– Johnny 5, “101101010010100”

The brilliance of the above lyric by Johnny 5 lies in its accomplishment of three key things: it a) compellingly conveys what is otherwise a tragically tired cliché (“I noticed a pretty girl”) by not only b) resituating the terms “spider” and “fly,” playing on the multiple ways that these sounds can be interpreted, but by also c) creating and utilizing a context in which its elements are comprehensible: the words “spider” and “fly” only function because we understand that they are somehow related. Without the context of their relationship, it would be impossible to even *hear* the insect-words “spider” and “fly;” we would only catch “spied her” and “*fly*,” the adjective meaning cool and beautiful. Impressively, Johnny 5 does more than play, arbitrarily, with the varied meanings of the words he uses; his quip anticipates a recognition of these multiple meanings to be fully intelligible. What’s more, this recognition is not an end unto itself: one might, for example, go on to consider how the above statement implies a predatory relationship between the spectator and the spectacle.

Thus, we begin to discern a surprising set of parallels between the architecture of the pun and the logic of de-/re-contextualization inherent in the use of found forms in art. It could be said that puns emerge when words, phrases and sounds are treated as found objects to be recontextualized; while a pun’s constituent elements may be presented matter-of-factly or as minimally manipulated (as are the sounds “spider”/“spied her,” “fly”/“*fly*” above), the subtlety and particularity of their presentation leads the listener down unexpected paths, creating an opportunity to reconsider the meanings and uses of the featured terms.

Within this framework, might Duchamp’s readymades be viewed as puns of art objects themselves?

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Stock image approximating Marcel Duchamp's *Trebuchet (Trap)*, 1917, a coat rack nailed to floor. The title references a particular position in chess wherein any move a player makes will result in a loss.

2. Sometimes a phallus is just a penis.

– Andrew Mbaruk, “Gender Trouble”

What happens when art forms, histories, styles, and strategies *themselves* become found objects to rearrange? The astute reader might recognize this leading question’s invocation of postmodern pastiche, the oft-derided work that merely “remixes” recognizable tropes and imagery from other artistic modes, moments, and movements. In a work of pastiche, the remixed elements are treated as little more than culturally available signs, readily reduced to reference.

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Fortunately, the clever pun offers a subtle alternative, surpassing pastiche by virtue of the rules that govern its organization of parts: while relying on the mixed- and mis-matched presentation of signs, the pun is fundamentally concerned with *signification*, its very existence predicated upon the plausible intelligibility of the meanings, concepts, and histories to which it refers. As such, puns necessarily depend on what has already been said: to be played with, words require familiar rules. It is this weaving of past (by virtue of the contingent meanings and histories upon which we rely to communicate) and present (by virtue of the particularity of the wordplay *in the moment*) that allows puns to defy cliché. Rather than regurgitate past expressions in all-too-familiar ways, the pun parkours played out uses of terms by intentionally resituating them.

Take, for example, the lyric by Vancouver-based rapper Andrew Mbaruk that introduces this section. As opposed to the relatively self-contained nature of the pun analyzed at the top of this text, Mbaruk's play on words depends not on the sounds that comprise it, but on the syntax and metahistory of the phrase famously misattributed to Freud, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

While a remix as such is principally defined by the blending of historically unrelated or previously uncombined sounds, Mbaruk's paraphrase demonstrates how, in order for a remix to be a pun, it must not be mixed arbitrarily, or simply with respect to style or taste, but instead with an understanding of how the mix might manage to mean. A pun is a precise kind of remix; a form of context-aware, self-evident repetition that addresses and interrogates its status as a thing said before, as a play on the past. Considered thusly, we can begin to see how puns may be used to structure artworks dialectically, such that a work made in the present may "echo" the past, but in the self-aware and self-evident ways prescribed by the pun.

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Alex Olson, *Vessel (with Fish)*, 2017. Oil and modeling paste on canvas, 71 × 53 in. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco. Photo: Brian Forrest.

Analogous to the function of the word “spider” explored above, in Olson’s painting, the brushstroke performs several roles simultaneously: brushstrokes here are at once waves, fish, images of brushstrokes, and of course, *actual brushstrokes*.

3. Jack of all trades is dealin' niggas a handful.

– Earl Sweatshirt, “The Bends”

As the two examples of wordplay explored thus far reveal, a good pun requires, above all, a careful crafter. Conscious of how the elements of their quip relate to one another, to history, *and* to their audience, the punster paradoxically superposes self-evidence and context-dependence, sense and nonsense; their puns simultaneously negotiate the *textual* and the *textural* dimensions of language, the union of content and form.

In a revivalist-raving, pastiche-pasting, sequel-spewing aesthetic climate like our own, the pun may provide (and indeed *has provided*) a “way through,” allowing artists to revisit the ghosts of (art) histories passed while succumbing neither to empty cliché nor pointless gesticulation. For example, Alex Olson’s insistence on the brush stroke as both a material fact *and* a recognizable sign has resulted in several works that keenly pun histories of Abstract Expression. Similarly, Cammie Staros’s recent exhibition at Shalomit Nazarian, *What Will Have Being*, not only utilized word play titularly; the artworks themselves demonstrated how a thoughtful pun can generate a true *constellation* of things.

Several of the forms in the show are works of punning conflation. Formal ambiguity *defines* her wall-mounted ceramic pieces, for example, as they are simultaneously classical vessels and snail shells. Aptly, Staros refers to these works as “shell pots,” describing their form as a “cross-species analogy.” As already-existing forms (“shell” and “pot”) treated as found objects recontextualized by their ambiguous unification, how else is this analogy made but by the logic of the pun?

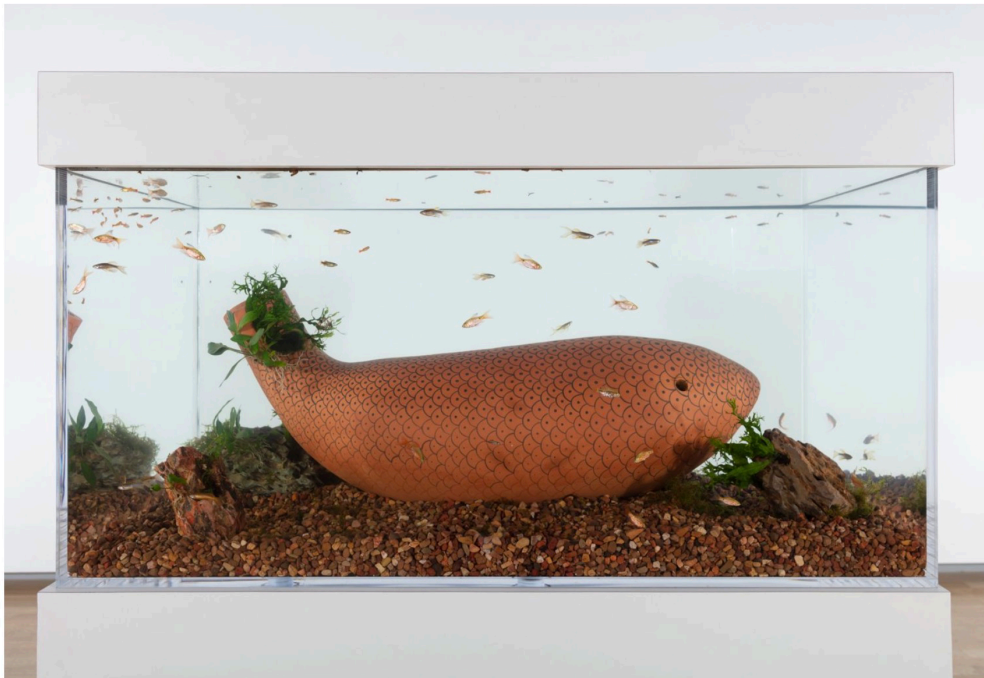
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The pun facilitates, furthermore, the ironic relationship between the shell pots—vessels that *should* hold water but *can't*—and the vitrines—vessels that *shouldn't* hold water but *do*. In true punning fashion, both the museum-vitrine-cum-fish-tanks and “shell pots” ambiguate the uses and meanings of their forms. They demonstrate once more how the recognition and implementation of a pun are not means unto themselves, but an opportunity to further consider the pun's constituent elements. In this case, puns advance the exhibition's metaphors regarding the nonhuman Earth, Classical Western culture, and rising water, activating them with greater depth, formal nuance, and play.



Cammie Staros, *Sculptura Liquefacta*, 2021. Ceramic, acrylic, wood, laminate, water, aquatic filtration system, programmed grow light, river rock (pebbles), Japanese ohko stone, Java Fern, moss, Bucephalandra, Mini Bolbitis Fern, Java Fern Windelov, Java Moss, Marimo Moss, Anubias Nana, Anubias Nana Golden, 61 × 49 × 25 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian. Photo: Morgan Waltz.

Q: Why reference Ancient Greek design to comment upon the Earth's future?

A: Because it's already ruined.

4. Duchamp's pun-laden meddling has left contemporary artists with quite the pot to piss in.

– Dakota Higgins, “The Art of the Pun”

At their best, works of art (like puns) breathe life into dying words, dead forms, and mummified concepts. The art of the pun is to show us what *can* be said by exploring the potential of what has *already been* said, surprising us by slyly confounding the given conventions of the languages (both artistic and spoken) that we use every day. Is this to suggest that good art is but a bad joke, a game to see who can create the most compellingly cross-referenced clichés, dressing them up with clever craft? To this charge, Duchamp may have responded, in a word: “*Sélarvy.*”

KING
&
LYRE

Higgins, Dakota, "Interview with Alex Olson," *King & Lyre*, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2018, pp. 9-14

INTERVIEW WITH
ALEX OLSON

TEXT BY DAKOTA HIGGINS

I have been interested in the ways that formalism can be reconsidered in an art-environment that has seen a proliferation in "social practices" and "relational aesthetics". How might these modes of artistic production provide new ways to both critically approach and create "purely formal" art? Might these discourses provide a meaningful lens through which to examine contemporary formalism?

I encountered Alex Olson and her work at the height of this line of questioning. I understood her to be an artist who was self-consciously using painting's power as a vehicle for generating particular relationships (to painting, the act of looking, decoding signs). This past fall, I sat down with her with the aim of getting to the heart of her practice, and in the process work out some of these questions.

What better place to start than at the beginning?

Dakota Higgins: I'm curious about what things from the past have informed your practice today. What are some defining interests or experiences?

Alex Olson: I grew up outside of Boston, and the Museum of Fine Arts there has a lot of work by John Singer Sargent. There's this one painting of his, *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, that as a kid, my mom told me if I went up close to the painting, the image would disappear into brushstrokes. And when it did exactly that, I thought it was the most magical thing. I think that experience still affects my work and is even a central part of my vocabulary: a brushstroke performing as itself but also adding up to something larger.

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DH: So this John Singer Sargent painting was the first time you were able to see the activity of painting itself as exciting—that there's a certain kind of significance or poetry to the way pigment moves?

AO: I found it astonishing that something could be reduced to its parts, reveal its own making, and then be synced back together to become an image. I think it was more about the amazement of the act of looking and the clarity of both the paint as paint and as image. It was like seeing two worlds at once.

DH: And this doesn't happen in "ordinary" vision or in other forms? I'm thinking of how photography is sometimes described as this tool for transforming information into an image...

AO: I don't think we ordinarily have the time to analyze how we're seeing. And we don't tend to reduce images to their parts; we weave it all together. We rarely question the parts or process.

DH: So, for you, painting is about deconstructing vision?

AO: I think it's a really useful tool for how we consume surfaces and for understanding how vision actually works. The fact that painting only exists in the world as art and to deliver information, as opposed to mediums that have other roles in the world, makes it especially good for examining how we translate perception into information.

DH: The more I listen to you talk, I sense that you care very much about the viewer's subjectivity — about their taste, how they're feeling, how they see, how they relate to objects and signs... How does the audience factor into your painting process? What is their role? What is your relationship to them?

AO: When I'm making a painting, I think about how it's read each step of the way. Ultimately, I'm trying to construct something that puts the viewer in an elongated looking experience where they're analyzing how they're looking. I want to create a very specific experience, but I'm not dictating how they will feel or think. It's about setting up the possibility of an experience rather than making a statement.

DH: What are some ways that you do that?

AO: For one, I try to use very knowable forms like circles and brushstrokes. They're familiar but their meaning isn't locked down and depends on context. I think of these forms as inviting a viewer in with familiarity, but then the viewer can decide how to navigate with them and to think more about how these forms are functioning. I also build in a lot of compare-and-contrast scenarios and dueling motifs, often placing a physical version of something by a sign of it, so the viewer can consider how they are reading the two. And I try to include different ways to perceive that go beyond static vision, such as avoiding a perfect viewing distance and using light in such a way as to create visibility or invisibility depending on the viewer's position.

Hopefully these strategies slow down the time it takes to view a painting and emphasize the process of how looking transitions into defining.



Vessel (with Fish), 2017.
oil and modeling paste on canvas
71" x 50"
Alex Olson

“
WE RARELY
QUESTION
THE PARTS
OR PROCESS.



For Focus, 2017.
oil on canvas
11" x 8.5"
Alex Olson

DH: Could you talk about the importance of taste in art? In the viewing of art, understanding art, making art? It seems to me that the idea of taste is often rejected in favor of a more "critical" lens through which to think about art.

AO: Taste is often not discussed, but I think it's fundamental to understanding an artwork. Anything aesthetic calls upon taste as part of its read. To me, taste is a reflection of aspiration. It's a compilation of signs that stand for how one wants to see oneself. It's also social in that it's an attempt to signal to others one's affiliations. As an artist, you can use these qualities as a tool towards different ends. I think of my paintings as a record of my personal perspectives at a particular time and place, and so I tend to make them sincerely and blatantly aspirational.

DH: Right, taste is important! I can't help but think that those who criticize the role of taste fail to recognize the ways that their position is itself a marker of taste...That the issue of taste is necessarily the medium through which they criticize taste...That's reminding me of something you mentioned in a lecture — that, at some point, you stopped trying to make “smart art”. Could you talk more about what smart art is?

AO: For me, “smart art” was a new-to-grad-school fear. It usually relies on references or repeating accepted ideas of criticality or politics without pushing these ideas further. Some viewers might like that because it's comfortable: they know it and agree with it. But I think that maintains a status quo. It's scarier to make something unknown and potentially not smart, with the possibility that it could be a disaster. But if it's a success, the work offers a viewer something that they didn't already know, and that seems ultimately more rewarding.

DH: I totally agree. I fear that, for some people, “smartness” is a defense — a sort of shield to stand behind. This is a bit of a shift in gears, but I've heard just a little bit about an art's initiative of sorts that you've begun that sounded very interesting! What is it? What do you do?

AO: Yes! I've just started a non-profit with four friends called the Artists Acquisition Club*. We reach out to artists, writers, and other members of the art community to collectively purchase a significant artwork by an artist we admire, and gift it to a major LA institution. We were inspired to start this project by Linda Stark's painting *Fixed Wave*, which we dreamed of collectively owning until we thought a better idea would be to donate it to a museum where a larger public could enjoy and learn from the work. We're forming an advisory board next year to help pick our next acquisition, and we hope to complete one gift per year.

Our goal is to celebrate artists who have influenced the LA art community the most and to also give artists a say in what artwork enters our public institutions.

DH: Such a brilliant and generous project—a topic for a future conversation! 



Lighthouse, 2016.
oil and modeling paste on canvas
71" x 50"
Alex Olson

Dakota Higgins is an artist who lives and works in Los Angeles. He received in BFA from Otis College of Art and Design in 2017.

Alex Olson lives in works in Los Angeles. She received her BA from Harvard College in 2001 and MFA from California Institute of the Arts in 2008. She is represented by Shane Campbell Gallery, Altman Siegel, and Laura Bartlett Gallery.

*If would like to learn more about the Artists Acquisition Club, head to their website artistsacquisitionclub.org

For the interview in its entirety, and more, please proceed to King + Lyre online at: www.kinglyre.github.io

*Lighthouse photographed by Brian Forrest, Vessel (with Fish) and For Focus photographed by Brian Forrest, Courtesy of the artist, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco; Laura Barlett Gallery, London.

CULTURED

Griffin, Jonathan, "Blind Faith," *Cultured Magazine*, February/March 2017: pp. 116-117

BLIND FAITH

Navigating perceptual trickery and visual speed bumps with Alex Olson

BY JONATHAN GRIFFIN PORTRAIT BY JEFF VESPA

For the past decade or so, Alex Olson has been making impeccably refined paintings in which all is never quite as it seems. They pose a number of unanswerable questions: Where does illusion shade into veracity? Is skill simply a way for artists to lie more convincingly? What the hell is truth anyway?

As she prepares for her first solo exhibition with Altman Siegel, opening March 9 in the San Francisco gallery's spacious new Dogpatch space, she tells me how her paintings derive from her studies of neurological perception. The 38-year-old artist, whose fair complexion and tall stature attest to her Swedish heritage, grew up in Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts. Her father was an architect and her mother an editor. She studied sociology at Harvard before moving to Los Angeles in 2005 for an M.F.A at the California Institute of the Arts. Her academic background is reflected in the cerebral terms in which she talks about her work. "I'm weaving together a desire for meaning in terms of how the eye and brain look for patterns and meaning," she says. "And how we differentiate types of information into truths and falsehoods."

If that makes them sound like chilly optical experiments with their viewers cast as the unfortunate lab rats, then think again. I, for one, submit myself happily to her sumptuously beautiful paintings' visual manipulations. To look at Olson's work is to let yourself be taken on a journey of bewilderment and surprise.

Though Olson's heroes include Robert Rauschenberg and Agnes Martin, she also admits to being inspired by the concepts of Op Art and Surrealism, if not always by their results. But recently, she tells me, she has been increasingly influenced by broader cultural sources: the writings of Maggie Nelson, for example, or Andrzej Żuławski's 1981 cult horror film *Possession*.

In her airy Glassell Park studio she is currently

working on new additions to her series of 'blind paintings' begun around four years ago, some of which will be included in the Altman Siegel show. In the latest diptychs, Olson paints one abstract canvas choosing both her brushes and her colors 'blindly.' This process, she says, helps her "bypass preconceived ideas of what the painting should look like in order to create something unexpected."

In tandem with the first blind painting, she makes a second, this time completely blind (with her eyes closed while she applies the paint) relying only on what she calls her "mind's eye." While Olson's work has long distinguished itself through its crisp neatness, these blind paintings are notable for being, well, a little scruffy. The "blind paintings" are a humorous critique of the ideas of truthfulness and authenticity that are historically attached to the artist's gesture. Throughout her work, she balances witticisms with sincerity, theoretical analysis with visual pleasure. "People are complex," she says. "How they take in information is complex, and I hope the paintings are as well."

As such, Olson can always be relied on to throw a monkey wrench the most smoothly running engines. In other new abstract works, she has introduced the unexpected motif of a sailing boat. She tells me that the move was inspired by a story told by her mother, who worked as a children's book editor. One illustrator developed what he called the "blue boat theory" in which he would add an incongruous blue boat to his picture, intending that the editors would remove it and thus leave the rest of his work intact. Olson says that the boat was her answer to the question of "what a visual speed bump might look like" or "a swerve in the viewing experience." By doing so, she transforms abstractions into seascapes, while the little boat symbolizes what Olson calls her "search," a search in which she invites her viewers along for the ride.

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Alex Olson in her studio with works in progress for her upcoming solo exhibition at Altman Siegel Gallery in San Francisco.

“Alex Olson—Why I Paint,” *Vitamin P3: New Perspectives in Painting*, Phaidon 2016

Alex Olson - Why I Paint

Exploring the creative processes of tomorrow's artists today - as featured in Vitamin P3

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Alex Olsen - photographed by Brian Forrest

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.

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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. Here, the [Vitamin P3](#)-featured painter tells us what interests, inspires and spurs her on.



Filter 2, 2015 - Alex Olsen - Courtesy Laura Bartlett Gallery, London and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago;
Courtesy The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Who are you? I'm an artist from Boston, living and working in Los Angeles.

What's on your mind right now? The precarious global state of affairs. Otherwise, I'm listening to a podcast on the invisible forces that impact our everyday lives, which touches on my interests in sociology and perception. I've been newly drawn towards Surrealism and Op Art, both of which I've always had a strong aversion to, but now am finding some resonance with the ideas behind them as opposed to the forms they took. I'm also trying to figure out what a 'visual speed bump' might look like.

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How do you get this stuff out? I primarily think by making, so I need to try out ideas and impulses and then read the results in order to see how to proceed.



Stack, 2015 - Alex Olsen - Courtesy Laura Bartlett Gallery, London and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago;
Courtesy The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

How does it fit together? Each body of work leads to the next, so while I make a wide range of work in terms of how the paintings look, if you could take a macroscopic view, there's a lineage to the whole. Within each body of work, and even within each painting, there are dialectical relationships. Two iterations of an idea are often presented along side one another for the viewer's reflection. I tend to think of the paintings as social, meaning the experience for the viewer is one of an exchange with the painting.

What brought you to this point? I made the worst painting I've ever seen between my first and second years of grad school—one that I thought would please the professors rather than for reasons I cared about—and seeing it made it clear I needed to make work I believed in, first and foremost. What I consider "my work" started right after that, and it's been a slow and steady crawl ever since.

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Gesture, 2015 - Alex Olsen - Courtesy Laura Bartlett Gallery, London and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago;
Courtesy The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Can you control it? Yes, but it's best not to.

Have you ever destroyed one of your paintings? Oh, all the time! I make a lot of paintings that fail. I need to have space to fail in order to learn and react and take chances.

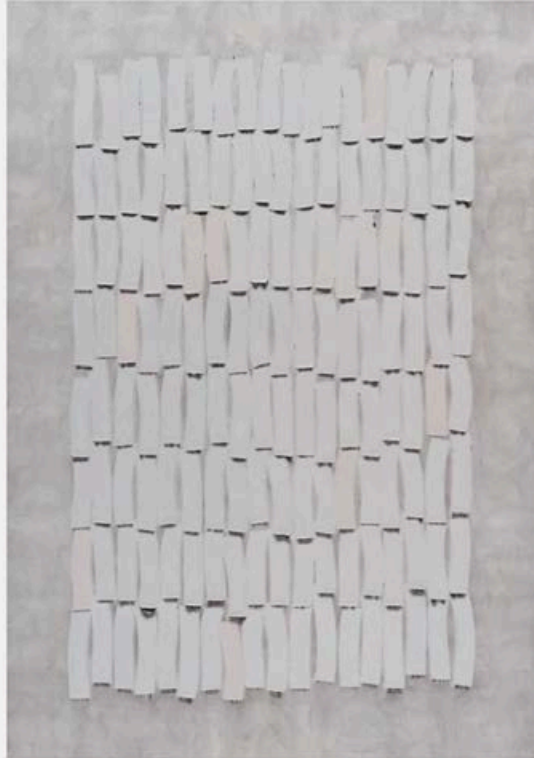
What's next for you, and what's next for painting? I never know what's coming next. I go wherever my brain seems most excited to go. The work builds on past work, combining with my current interests and experiences, to grow into the next body of work. I think of painting as a lot like writing in that it's a language and while many of its elements are already known—marks are like letters and words—how they are combined has endless possibilities. Depending on the context of the times, these elements gain new or shifting meanings, and each generation has the opportunity to recast them in response to the moment she lives in from her point of view.

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Proposal 9, 2012 - Alex Olsen - Courtesy Laura Bartlett Gallery, London and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago;
Courtesy The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

[Vitamin P3 New Perspectives In Painting](#) is the third in an ongoing series that began with [Vitamin P](#) in 2002 and [Vitamin P2](#) in 2011. For each book, distinguished critics, curators, museum directors and other contemporary art experts are invited to nominate artists who have made significant and innovative contributions to painting. The series in general, and [Vitamin P3](#) in particular, is probably the best way to become an instant expert on tomorrow's painting stars today.

Find out more about [Vitamin P3 New Perspectives In Painting](#) [here](#). Check back for another Why I Paint interview with a [Vitamin P3](#)-featured artist soon. And for more [great new artists](#) be sure to regularly check out [Artspace.com](#).

frieze

Griffin, Jonathan, "The Ocular Bowl," www.frieze.com, April 28 2016

Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles, USA

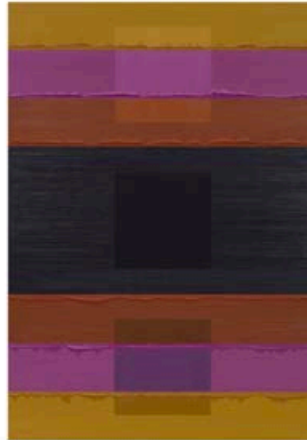
The eye, wrote Jacques Lacan in his essay 'The Line and the Light', 'is a sort of bowl' which is wont to overflow with light. 'A whole series of organs, mechanisms, defences' are required to deal with this excess; the shrinking pupil, in bright conditions, 'has to protect what takes place at the bottom of the bowl'.

The compelling idea that seeing always engages senses beyond vision is substantiated by 'The Ocular Bowl', an immaculately arranged exhibition at Kayne Griffin Corcoran. Alex Olson, Agnes Pelton and Linda Stark each belong to a distinct generation with their own sensibility and position, but in the large gallery (not the easiest room for mostly small pictures such as these) they interact as though they have been dancing around each other for years.

Stark's painting *Spectacled Cobra* (2005) is so goofy that it initially seems to share little with the show's other, more sober works. Hung on its own wall between windows, it depicts what looks like a cartoon smiley face on a distended yellow strawberry. Between the seeds, the flesh of the strawberry bulges out in thickly modelled oil paint. If you Google the painting's title, you will see photographs of a snake whose hood is marked with the same smiley face. Stark's painting is an instance of double camouflage – a snake evolved to look like a face, painted to look like a cartoon fruit. In this context, *Spectacled Cobra* is less about deception than the overflowing material from Lacan's 'ocular bowl'. The snake looks at us (and the other works in the show) with eyes in the back of its head; we touch the raised surface of its skin with our gaze and feel the viscosity of its spackled paint. This register continues in the adjacent painting, Olson's large abstract *Circuit* (2016), in which she has precisely rendered curling crests of paint with

modelling paste – an elaborate simulation of gesture – and conjured a floating square simply by applying paint in a perpendicular direction.

Two paintings by Pelton raise the stakes of this clever formalist chicanery. Pelton, who died in 1961, was a senior member of the Transcendental Painting Group, whose artists were concerned with looking inwards, not outwards, for their inspiration. Both Pelton's paintings are stylized and – one assumes – derived from an inner vision. The less remarkable of the two is *Passion Flower* (1943), a rather kitschy rendition of an eye-like bloom that regards us from the canvas's centre. In the earlier and stranger *Star Gazer* (1929), a vessel points upwards towards a single star in the night sky, as if hoping to catch a little of its light. For Pelton, the ocular bowl was the body's cosmic access point, as well as the psyche's projective lens.



Alex Olson, *Circuit*, 2016, oil and modelling paste on canvas, 1.8 x 1.3 m. Courtesy: the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles; photograph: Brian Forrest

Returning to the work of Stark and Olson, the interplay of optical illusion and formal substance

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now seems to address nothing less than questions of faith in painting. What kinds of mystical powers are summoned by Olson's *Focus* (2016) – a grid of crusty blue dots competing with crepuscular, brushy shapes – or Stark's *Ruins* (2008) – in which a New Age-y pendant floats above a mossy Stonehenge? Stark's *Purple Protection Potion* (2007), with nettle, rattlesnake root and seed quartz crystal embedded in ribbons of translucent paint, goes furthest towards establishing an (ironic?) link between a painting's materiality and its metaphysical powers.

What, ultimately, is the difference between sight and vision? Olson asks something similar in her diptych *Mind's Eye (Eyes Open, Eyes Closed)* (2016) in which the right-hand panel is an approximation of the left, painted without looking. The sightless painting is not bad, but not great; if this is vision, then it is hobbled and groping. But maybe that's OK; it would excuse Pelton's occasional missteps, framing them within a personal and artistic quest that was not only sincere but also radical in its scope, reaching beyond the limits of visual perception.

ARTFORUM

Muenzer, David. "The Ocular Bowl." Critic's Pick, *Artforum*, April 22, 2016

ARTFORUM

"The Ocular Bowl"

KAYNE GRIFFIN CORCORAN

1201 South La Brea Avenue

April 2–May 28

"When you're ready, you can open your eyes." Guided meditations suspend vision in the name of presence, only bringing back sight to close each session. Phenomenological strains of modern painting, by contrast, offer vision as the primary vehicle for experience. With works by Agnes Pelton, Linda Stark, and Alex Olson, "The Ocular Bowl" presents three generations of practitioners whose paintings invoke spiritual consciousness.

In Pelton's 1929 oil-on-canvas work, *Star Gazer*, the roughly symmetrical composition and rich color give it the force of an icon. A flower in the lower third of the canvas seems to look up at, or perhaps receive the light of, a single star in the gradient sky. Stark's work also engages the iconography of spirituality, but with an ironic distance. See, for instance, the square painting *Ruins*, 2008, a part of her torso series picturing cropped figures, which depicts a graphic shirt featuring Stonehenge overhung by a massive full moon in a hot-pink sky. An arrowhead pendant necklace, modeled in painted wood as a shallow relief, cuts into the image. These New Age tropes are complicated by Stark's seemingly sincere pleasure in material experimentation and exacting application.

Olson, the youngest artist here, is most overtly in dialogue with modernism. In her oil-and-modeling-paste painting *Circuit*, 2016, three squares appear immersed in horizontal bands of color. The middle of the composition is a single pigment, but the top and bottom shapes comprise multiple rectangles of different colors keyed to optically interact, producing the effect of individual floating squares. While evoking classic Bauhaus exercises as well as the palette of Anni Albers's textiles, form does not wholly stand in for content here: This image is also a kind of sunset, a dusky echo of Pelton's work for a hazy, present-day Los Angeles.



Linda Stark, *Ruins*, 2008, oil and wood on canvas over panel, 36 x 36 x 3".

— David Muenzer

Williamson, Lisa, Alex Olson, Laura Owens, "The Empty-Handed Painted From Your Streets Is Drawing Crazy Patterns On Your Sheets.," *Mousse*, April 2014

MOUSSE 43 ~ Lisa Williamson, Alex Olson, Laura Owens

<p>THE EMPTY-HANDED PAINTER FROM YOUR STREETS IS DRAWING CRAZY PATTERNS ON YOUR SHEETS.</p>	<p>Lisa Williamson Alex Olson Laura Owens</p> <p>— LOS ANGELES —</p>
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Like modern-day *fauves* ready to attack, the works of Lisa Williamson, Alex Olson and Laura Owens demand a bodily—more than a visual—reaction. They insist on being seen with the heart, mind, fingertips, tongue, wherever the eyes cannot reach. Andrew Berardini experiences the strange bodily forms of Williamson, the pleading personal ads of Owens, the screens impregnated with shadows of Olson, all in our stead, as it were...

BY ANDREW BERARDINI

Consider this an ill-considered party, a portfolio of stories I've wanted to make about all these picture-makers, the prancing of their brushstrokes, the cut of their jibs, the jibe of their colors. The collection perhaps weirdly obvious, perhaps not. If three of their works faced each other on three walls, you plunked against this trio in a Mexican stand-off; laughter and snorts, flirtations and snubs would slither out of all the layers and armatures, colors and marks, actions spilling out of stillness, a triple whammy of paint.

They window into other rooms and out back at each other. They make me want to write "smeary" over and over. I want to imagine different parts of each like characters in anachronistic costume dramas: Constable Oxblood odd-bodying in the cellar with the Colonel and a half bottle of off-year pinot gris. Wet and slathery, tangible reality pokes out of composed fantasies, a swath of unadorned canvas there, the warp and weft of materials here, four corners of a few jutting out like sharp elbows across unadorned walls.

Abstraction, after all, isn't a veer away from reality, only from one way our eyes see it. Burnt orange clouds frost skies bruising from pink to purple. Squiggles drop shadows. That dangle and bend cracks a tart, off-color joke. New colors: neon and fluorescent shimmer with an alien and electric light, excellent for abductions and dance parties. Close your eyes and rub your fingers over them: is that vision abstract or actual? Remove your glasses or squint: is the blur false?

Representation and abstraction are weak words flailing to summarize strange continents. Alone, our eyes are a feeble instrument seeing. Heart and mind, fingertip and hip-crease, tongue and toe-tickle, cocks and cunts all see where eyes fail. Not to mention that third-eye yogis and new-agers

espy dharmic truth with when the Ajna chakra petals open like a blooming lotus in a mudbath.

Across the summer skies waves of strange light ripple across the blue: colors collide, wobble, shimmy in patterns so protean and unpredictable they are untraceable. I still attempt to trace their patterns with language, painting's linear cousin, a method of mark-making with its own expansive spaces and hard boundaries.

Hallucinations are just another kind of real, patterns repeat out of nature, interior visions wrestle with materials into surfaces daubed and decorated, stabbed and stroked, whorled and colored, here at least with paint.

A history of humans making marks give us only conditions, not directions. When it comes to tradition, we have to paint our way out of that corner on our own.

The stand-up comedienne all droop around the white room, speechless. They wear off-colors, tertiaries and strange shades, powder-coated and drapery: a fleshy hue, a cream blushed with ash, lavender clay, teal legs and tuxedo blues, a sliver of star-bright yellow.

(COUGH)...

Leaning against the wall stiffly, all of their odd bodies shape just so, hanging and angular, bulbous and planar, bumptious and slim, snicker-worthy, inspiring guffaws, suppressed chortles. Different than one-liner yuck-yucks, their shapes and hues wryly bend, a subtler wit. Staged, their routines change very little from the still, motionless concentrated clustering on view. Separated, each a real somebody, they could snappily fill all the empty sightlines without wasting a breath to crack a joke; you can hear it without a sound.

(SNIFF, SNIFF)...

The room doesn't have any windows, except the one out to you, but windowless blinds shiver along the walls in the wind, whispering and peeking trim shades. These tightlipped cowgirls sing the loneliest tunes, excepting the lack of lips, cows, and any song these comedienne sing is not of the sonic variety. And though feminine form folding off the end of "comedienne" feels like a natural gender epithet, this gaggle bends those terms too (along with their shapely bods) whenever they damn well feel like it.

(SIGH)...

Tiptoeing past, you try not to interrupt them silently practicing their material.

LISA WILLIAMSON:
THE COMEDIENNES

I had an idea I'd try and write a play.... He sits there longer and longer until the audience gets more and more bored and restless, and finally they start leaving, first just a few and then the whole audience, whispering to each other how boring and terrible the play is. Then, once the audience have all left, the real action of the play can start.

David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*

(AHEM)...

LOS ANGELES ~ Lisa Williamson, Alex Olson, Laura Owens

LAURA OWENS:
THE PERSONALS

I'M THINKING TONIGHT of my
BLUE EYES, over these prison
walls I will fly, *HAPPY BIRTHDAY*
HAPPY BIRTHDAY
KP (with love)

Each personal is a person. All samed into individual bricks of text, the bricks columned and organized, stacked and contained. So much currency a line, brevity is the soul of an empty wallet. That section of a newspaper sometimes marked classified delivers private passions and secret stories with public ardor, signposting for searchers any variety of offers and requests, a collection of needs and desires, fantasies of couplings and possibilities, acceptance and companionship, teases for possessions priced to sell, promised delivery of spiritual truths, and, doubtlessly, spankings.

WE HAVE A GREAT MESSAGE
will share priceless truth.
Farley or Jim 841-5044 eves.

All flattened and rastered out into just a single layer, the plaintive messages demand, question, search, solicit, dream. Stare hard enough and rainbowed layers leap out. These papers have been painted with polychrome ink, kaleidoscoping and tie-dying with abandon like a throwback acidhead jiggling for a Dead cover band.

THE GOD OF OUTER SPACE IS
A Living Electronic Cybernetic
Computer, Who procreates people.
M. Strong Gen. Del. SF 94101

An interruptive phone call invites a playful squiggle to ribbon and curl, a squirt of color across all those words. Doodling plays across the lines, almost sploogey, they fill with gooey color, splattery and harlequin, cakey dollops of sugary frosting, all wholly contained in those viscous discursions. The colors quiver, boldly vulnerable.

WHAT JUSTIFIES my existence
Peterson 3542 Carroll, Chicago

We read the personals because we're curious. We feel the creaking loneliness of being human, we yearn for connection (and maybe we declare it with the shy bravery of our own ad). We read to see how our shivers and fantasies lie alongside others, all the random interests and defining traits. On every street corner, still in the back pages of the right papers but mostly and more ethereally on one website or another, your fingers can trawl the appeals for companionship. Dollar amounts are sometimes offered, and loneliness certainly has its price, both spiritual and sometimes monetary, but in this cavalcade of weird fetishes and spiritual truths (a Bruce Nauman chestnut jumps to mind, about artists and deliveries of said truths with a spiraling neon luminescence), in this troop of personals, if there isn't what you need, with a few phone calls to the editor and the transfer of a few dollars you can supply and demand with the rest of them.

If you can't locate your bliss, the personals might at least point in you in the right direction to chase it.

SNOOPY
FOR PRESIDENT
& 249 other underground buttons
1/25c, \$51., 50/\$5., 125/\$10...
(415) 775-3140

It's a space of possibility.

In the personals, there's room for all pendants and passions. Finger the pages long enough, and all manner of goods and services will present themselves: a slightly used scrap of Matisse cut-out will gust forth, a Japanese monkey looking to move off his screen will offer to split gas in a rideshare to Rousseau's animal reserve, a Jacobin embroiderer will recruit a consciousness raising group to defeat the tyranny of unadorned surfaces, an unwashed Bayeux tapestry rescued from a flea market will weave a spell around potential buyers, a hundred wonky clocks and a herd of loose wheels will spin off the pages, and a prancing pony with the ability of speech will neigh at you from the classifieds, though all she can say is "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride."

MURAL PAINTING—Fine Arts
M.A. breathing colors by hand
in a million years 346-9281 SF.

Here there is freedom, yearning and assistance, anything you might want and plenty you don't, a thousand would-be dalliances and junk that might be treasure and treasure that might be junk.

Here, the underground is only a phone call away. Perceived naïveté of one might only be a willingness to let go, the big brain on that other hides a tender heart, that shy girl looks unblinking and proud out from these pages daring you to mock the colors that ripple out around her, unfurling like the wind-whipped flag of a rebel republic, hand-daubed on an unbleached bed sheet.

ALEX OLSON:
THE SCREENERS

Down a desert highway, warm winds whip past a lone car creeping across its stripped landscape, two headlights cutting out a path along a black ribbon of highway, the bisecting dash a most utilitarian painting. A few hundred empty stalls, each with a pole holding a speaker meant to dangle inside a window, a thousand actors' voices still rattling inside from a half century of serious romantic dramas and period slapstick epics, action-adventure dramadies and sci-fi musicals, cartoon fantasy slashers and avant-garde westerns, the dust perpetually ghosted by exhaust and popcorn.

A giant screen looms over the lot. A screen is a protector, a partition, a concealment, folded panels hiding the holy of holies and a finely woven net to keep out bugs. A screen is a detachment of troops detailed to cover and a protection against electromagnetic interference and a sieve made to separate, a medical test for disease, contamination, impurity.

A screen is a blank surface in which an image can be projected. An empty space for fantasy to find form, shimmering with light in the dark, luminous with prowling pictures.

The white surface looms out of the desert, daring the light of a distant projector to play its magic lantern over the pristine, silvery expanse. The right instrument can tattoo an encyclopedia of dreams across the taut skin of a screen, lash the last hidden thoughts out from deep caves to dance in the moonlight, and beam back out of the limits of the visual spectrum a diary of subconscious thrills and chills. Screens are just movie catchers after all, what better movements can be captured than those interior shifts and shudders, crackles and swoops that some people call emotional, some intellectual, and a few scattered visionaries might still profess as spiritual.

But a projector isn't always the right instrument. Its light, shot through celluloid or translated digital binaries, can only dumbly shine and magnify. It cannot dream the projected dreams.

Imagine the beams of light shooting from your eyes. The black mountains above hide against a backdrop of stars, and neither they nor the moon mind another shimmer in the hard darkness. Thoughts and memories, feelings and intuitions play out not in the literal shapes seen by our blinkered eyes but in the shift of interior movement made manifest in color.

Each stroke of color (such a lovely word for paintings, couplings, and knives) scintillates with marks, tracing patterns of hue across the wet skin of that thin surface, calendaring days like a prisoner's tallies. One stroke cuts open a gray skin, peeling back to reveal varicolored guts, almost patterns peek out like musical notation in a steady rhythm, just enough jiggle of variety to keep it lively.

These untethered visions spring from the weak shadows on the walls of Plato's cave, that suicidal Greek's metaphorical movie palace. Split atoms and helixing DNA, the swirl of galaxies and the mapped trajectory of snowflakes, moved by the pure touch of the wind and the heavy pull of gravity, can never match the static pictures we might snap of them, only a thing that scars with every action, marking time in a long sweep. Tony Conrad made screens in which movies take decades to occur, a slow shift that cares little for the ceaseless activity of nervous mortals.

On the naked surface of this desert, the screen here imprints with every shadow that crosses its surface, every flicker of life you affix, every possible vision over time.

Opposite - Lisa Williamson, *Teal Legs*.
2011. Courtesy: the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Sam Lipp

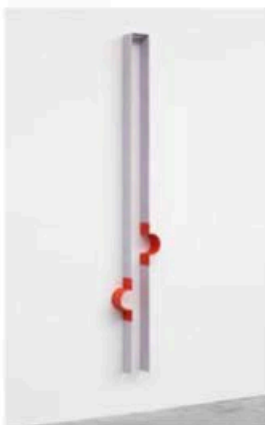
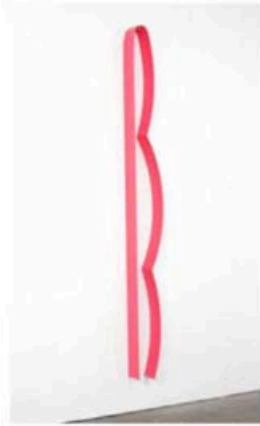
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MOUSSE 43 ~ Lisa Williamson, Alex Olson, Laura Owens



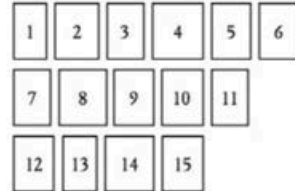
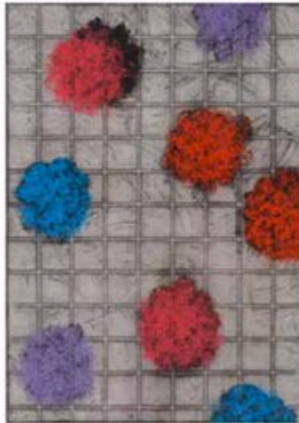
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LOS ANGELES ~ Lisa Williamson, Alex Olson, Laura Owens



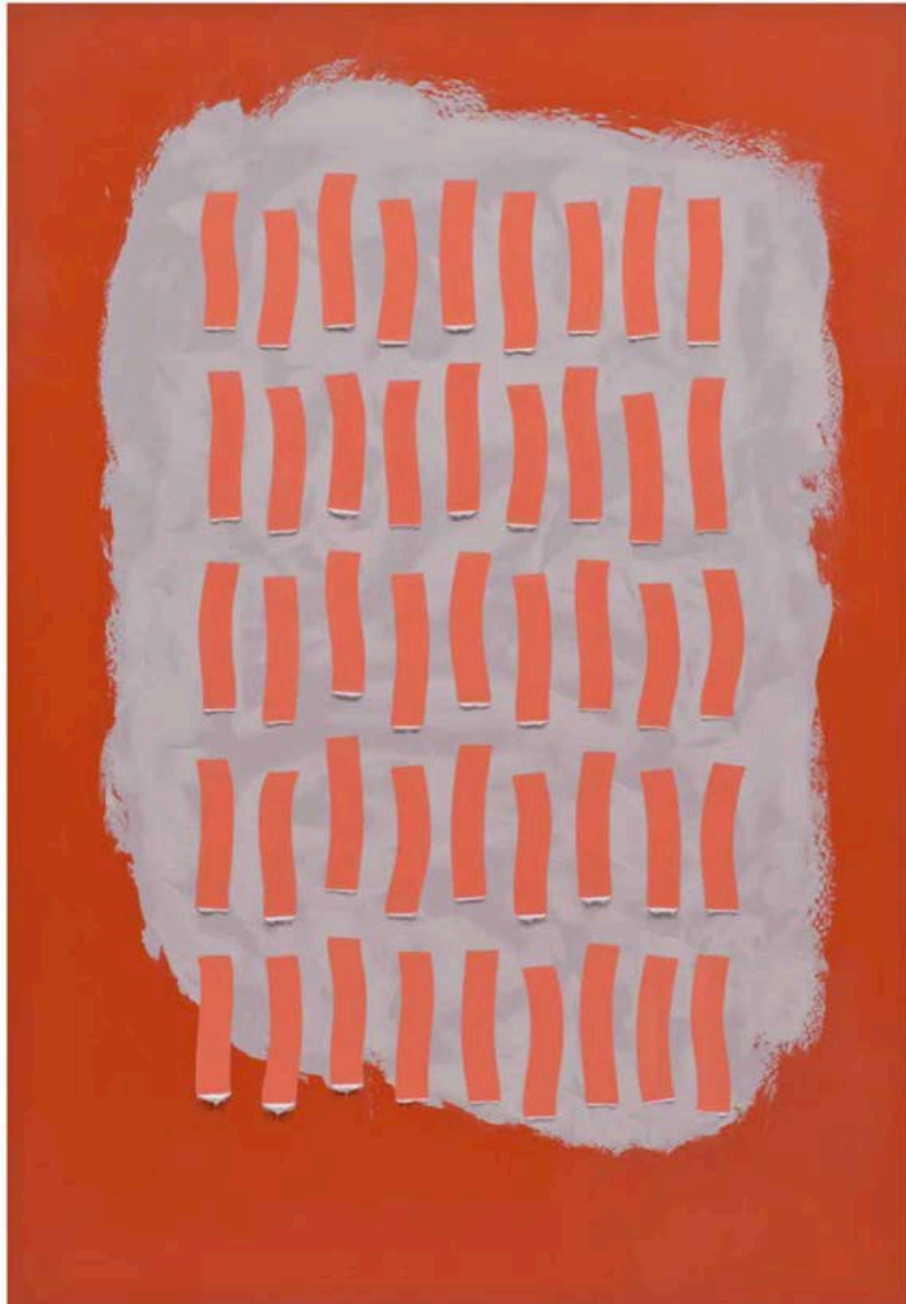
1. Lisa Williamson, *Bump*, 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Lee Thompson
2. Alex Olson, *Primer*, 2010. Courtesy: Laura Bartlett Gallery, London and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago
- 3) Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2011. Courtesy: Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne
4. Lisa Williamson, *Red Shade with Margins*, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Lee Thompson
5. Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2012. © the artist. Courtesy: Sadie Coles HQ, London
6. Alex Olson, *Iterations*, 2012. Courtesy: Laura Bartlett Gallery, London and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago
7. Lisa Williamson, *High Tilt*, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Lee Thompson
8. Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York
9. Lisa Williamson, *The Outline of a Pressed Object (Portrait)*, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Lee Thompson
10. Alex Olson, *For the Cyclops*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist; Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo: Brian Forrest
11. Alex Olson, *Days*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist; Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo: Brian Forrest
12. Lisa Williamson, *As a Beer Mat and a Cutting Board*, 2010. Courtesy: the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Orange County Museum of Art
13. Lisa Williamson, *Bump, Neoprene*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Lee Thompson
14. Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013. Courtesy: Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne
15. Alex Olson, *Proposal_11*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist; Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo: Brian Forrest

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Alex Olson, *Proposal_12*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist; Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo: Brian Forrest



Hudson, Suzanne, "Alex Olson," *Artforum*, October 2014

Artforum
October 2014

Alex Olson
by Suzanne Hudson

A METONYM OF SORTS for the modernist picture, the painterly mark has gotten a bad rap: too expressive, too authorial and therefore authoritarian, too sure of its inexhaustible plenitude. Every smudge of pigment at least potentially renews the old fantasy that the painter's mark can escape the fate of being a sign at all that it can embody a material immanence and immediacy alien to signification. But as an inchoate index, it also gives the lie to that fantasy, haplessly referring to itself, to the medium and its traditions, and especially to the painter. It is this last point that Los Angeles-based artist Alex Olson makes into something like a subject in her witty, prepossessing paintings, which often take their cues from written texts, including posters and fashion editorials. Olson also makes ready use of what she deems "stock signage," by which she means "flexible" forms that elude specific meaning because they've been deployed so variously. For instance, a dash or an X suggests the interpretive aspect of reading; the immediate context, i.e., the painting, constitutes the semiotic structure that will determine how we apprehend these signs that are empty, or almost empty, of any intrinsic connotations of their own. Such forms flourished in "Palmist and Editor," Olson's 2012 show at New York's Lisa Cooley gallery, for which the artist filled the space with



Jane Birkin Autograph, 2009
Oil On Linen
18 x 14 in

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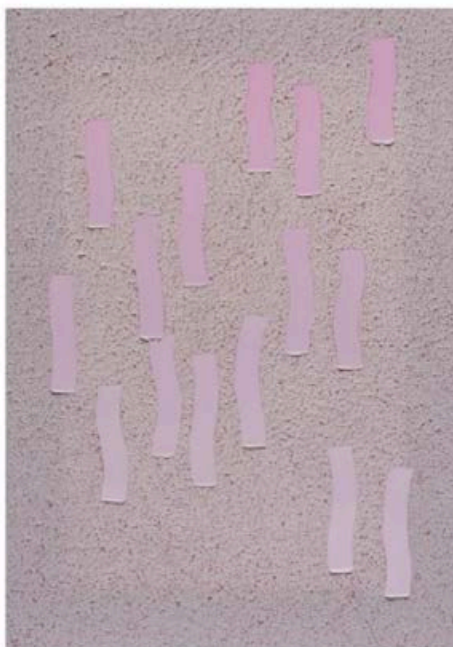
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paintings that set textured marks alongside more graphic counterparts, thickets of impasto against scored reliefs of sgraffito passages akin to inscriptions. Yet all of her canvases are strikingly thin, the better to insist that the action-shapes, whether built up or incised, arranged on a flat ground-is happening on the surface.

In some ways, this work follows directly from activities Olson undertook while at CalArts, especially xeroxing brushstrokes. Mediation doesn't so much distantiate the mark as serve to recuperate it as an image, a point Olson furthered in a pair of 2009 paintings, both titled *Jane Birkin Autograph*. These near identical works draw attention to the signature-here, a gliding, giddy, pictorialized scrawl that represents a legibility ultimately obviated by style-as a gesture that may be infinitely, pseudomechanically replicated. (As such, Olson rendered the production of the work homologous with its content, highlighting the hypothetical possibility of its remaking beyond the two almost, but not perfectly, selfsame versions.) A more recent print portfolio, *Portmanteau*, 2013, makes even more patent the alignment of iterative substance and the method undertaken to achieve it. And if the autograph paintings initiate interplay between the spontaneous and the automatic, *Portmanteau* takes these same oppositions to a kind of comic extreme. Each print features two contrasting, superimposed patterns of brushstrokes or dabs, the first offset in light and faintly varying gray ink, the second colorlessly blind-embossed. The sheets yield a disjunctive effect akin to Jasper Johns stenciling the word red in sunny yellow.

Still, since 2009, Olson's paintings have become less about the translation of givens than the conditions through which the conjuring of forms-which is to say, accumulations of marks-happens. Two paintings called *For the Cyclops*, 2013 and 2014, in which dense, near-



Disperse, 2013
Oil And Modeling Paste On Linen

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monochromatic geometric sections jostle for primacy, were painted with eyes both open and shut: Olson would blindly choose two colors, open her eyes to mix them, close them to make a gesture, then look at what she had done and refine it. For *Of an Interior*, 2013, and *Whole*, 2014, she never looked at the developing compositions while they were under way, except when completing the borders that peel back to reveal cosses of salmon, evergreen, turquoise, and lemon. Portraits of an interior, they maintain, seemingly without apology, the possibility of the deposit of pigment as an extension of the self. *Whole* might almost be said to function as the unconscious of the group of paintings of which it is part, a register upon which formative events leave indelible if cryptic traces. It quite literally indexes a number of paintings Olson made around the same time. Its streaks of color aggregate the colors used elsewhere, as Olson dabbed her finger onto and across this support each time she introduced a new paint to any of the pieces in progress. She's made several similar works, the first being *Mark* (November 2011-February 2012), whose confetti-like gestures offered an accounting of the hues of the works shown in the artist's 2012 exhibition at Shane Campbell Gallery in Chicago.

If *Mark* provides a proverbial key to Olson's process, it also offers a way in which to understand that process: in short, as a verb and a noun, the action and its residue. Olson called her first solo outing at Lisa Cooley, in 2010, "*As a Verb, As a Noun, In Peach and Silver*"-a description of painting in general and hers in particular, of what painting is and what it does. In a funny way, Olson's incorporation of the mark, paint, and surface fashions a lexicon of painting that insists on the discipline's operation and condition, its means and ends, as one and the same, even-or maybe at its best-when slippage elides the distinctions among usages or among multiple parts of speech. Word smithing is central to Portmanteau, and Olson clearly regards communication as a function of her work, however imperfect or wonky communication may inevitably be. (In *Through the Looking Glass*, Humpty Dumpty offers Alice a succinct definition of the portmanteau: "two meanings packed up in one word.") With Olson, the lexemes aren't words but gestures, and the gestures are at once



Transpose, 2011
Oil On Linen
24 x 18 in

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paradigmatic and her own. Her oft-used title Proposal admits this communicative function, and felt downright forthright in *Made in L.A. 2012* at the Hammer Museum, where five pictures offered wholly dissimilar visions: the allover pattern, the broad linear curve, etc., each both a picture and an element in a syntagmatic sequence. Beyond being "a written character or symbol," a mark, according to just some of the myriad items in the Oxford English Dictionary, is a "boundary, a frontier, or a limit," although it is also an "omen, indicator, or characteristic" and a target. Nobody these days seems to mind primary colors-or abstraction, or, for that matter, Virginia Woolf. But who's still afraid of authorship?

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"Painter Painter," The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (cat), ed. Pamela Johnson and Kathleen McLean, 2013

Walker Art Center



Painter
Painter



Notes
for an
Exhibition

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Artists

Matt Connors
Sarah Crowner
Fergus Feehily
Jay Heikes
Rosy Keyser
Charles Mayton
Dianna Molzan
Joseph Montgomery
Katy Moran
Alex Olson
Scott Olson
Zak Prekop
Dominik Sittig
Lesley Vance
Molly Zuckerman-Hartung

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At a time when artists may work without obligation to medium, why choose the materials of painting? What does it mean for an artist to assume the role of painter today? And just what is at stake for a new generation committed to the medium?

This exhibition, the Walker's first group painting show in more than a decade, presents the work of 15 artists from the United States and Europe in a focused survey of emerging developments in abstract painting and studio practice. Our collaboration as co-curators began with a shared interest in the current state of the medium as well as a set of questions about the ever-shifting role of the painter in contemporary art and culture. A series of ongoing conversations and studio visits with the artists have culminated in this presentation of new work made specifically for the occasion. In the entries that follow, we offer our impressions of each.

Through our research, we have come to understand abstract painting today as a means, not an end. For these artists, painting is a generative process—one that is rooted in the studio but nevertheless open and receptive to the world. In recent years, as abstract painting has once again become more prominent in the field, a new generation has opened up fresh territory by sidestepping its entrenched discourses. Each freely pursues new languages of abstraction and eccentric methods of making, yet also affirms new relationships beyond the specificity of the medium. Indeed, painting today increasingly crosses paths with sculpture, poetry, film, design, fashion, music, and performance as well as disparate histories of art, craft, and visual culture.

The simple repetition in the show's title—*Painter Painter*—is meant to highlight the term's slipperiness as artists recast its various meanings in our present moment. While the painters in this exhibition identify as such, their roles remain as fluid and open as the medium itself. Within that freedom, painting becomes a conduit—a way to make contact with a world beyond the frame of their formal invention.

Eric Crosby & Bartholomew Ryan
Exhibition co-curators, Walker Art Center

Alex Olson

There is an elegant directness in Alex Olson's handling of paint that I admire. Her style is accessible and welcoming, and her means are modest. She uses inexpensive brushes, palette knives, and trowels to produce fluent, obvious marks (which she calls "flat-footed") with oil paint on linen. Each piece is the result of a careful process of making and evaluation—painting and reading. Proceeding layer by layer, she develops a distinctive architecture of conflicting visual cues for us to decipher. Yet despite their economy of means, her paintings yield complex and shifting optical effects of texture and color.

Grazing, swiping, scraping, carving, imprinting—every mark seems to signal a unique condition of surface. They offer up paint as a kind of information to be read. Olson collects these gestures as "stock signage," or a repertoire of characters that may be familiar from the history of painting but that resist a definitive interpretation. Each is at once an image of a brushstroke and the thing itself—a signifier and its signified. This relationship to language also extends to her titles, which often reference speech acts and include ambiguous words that may function simultaneously as verbs or nouns. Olson reminds us with her work that "painting" is one such word.

With her new works in the exhibition—*Proposal 9* and *Proposal 10* (both 2012)—Olson offers two further propositions for the painted surface. Each canvas features an overall iteration of woven "curls" created with a large round brush—a magnification of her smaller "commas" used in earlier pieces. Then, based on a sequence of moves, such as scraping, dragging, and inpainting, each piece develops differently. In *Proposal 9*, the artist executes an irregular grid of "ribbons." Paradoxically, they appear to rest on the surface of the layer below as well as cut through it. Black has carefully been dry-brushed over the entire canvas to amplify the graphic presence of each gesture in relief. As a result, certain aspects of the painting begin to read as a printed or photocopied image. Colorful scrapes dominate *Proposal 10*, making its central field take on the appearance of a textile or a torn poster. A border of shiny black curls further complicates our reading of figure and ground. —EC

b. Boston, 1978;
lives and works
in Los Angeles

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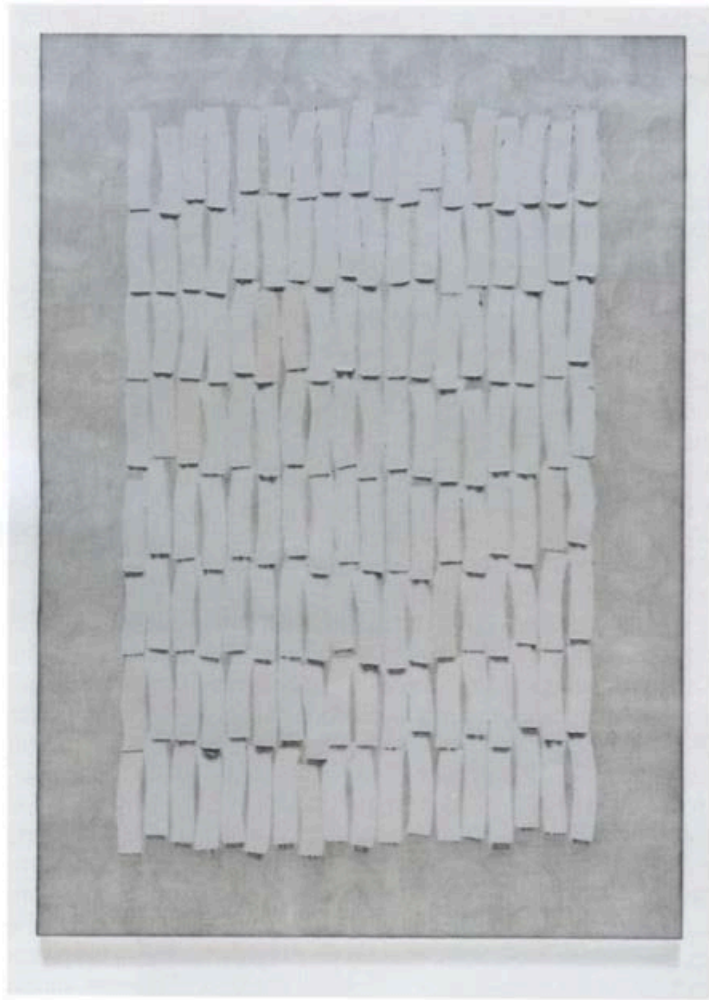
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Proposal 9 2012

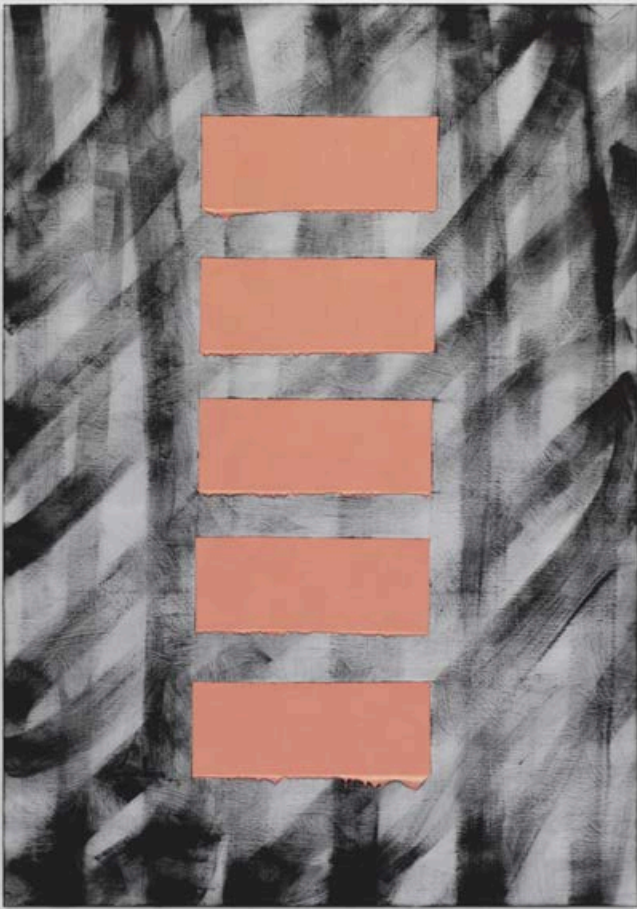


WALKER

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



10

DATE

October 5, 2012

CATEGORIES

[Studio Visits](#)

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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Alex Olson

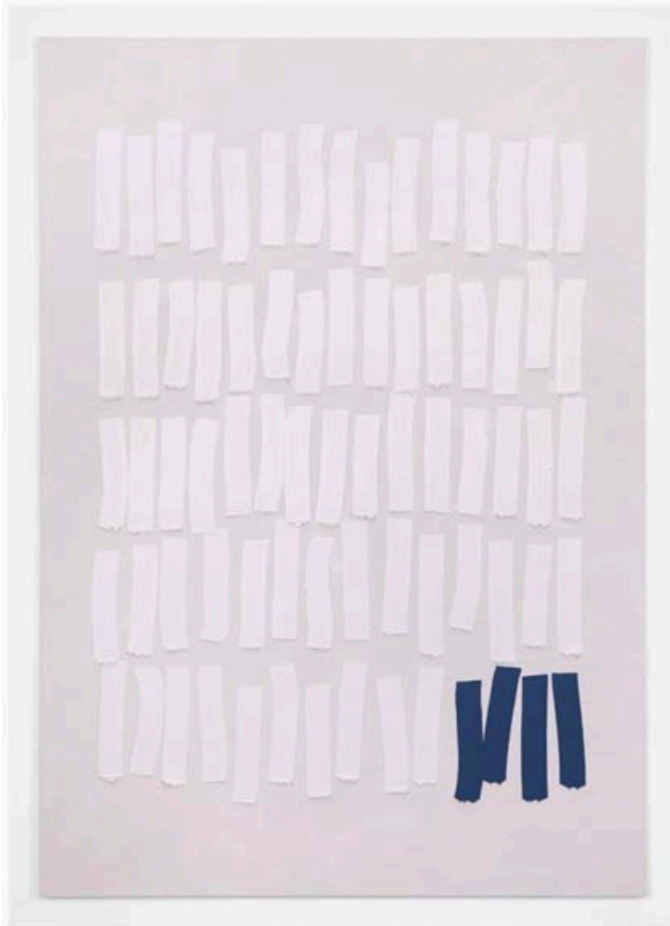
I'd say there are two main qualities of paint, specifically oil paint, that especially appeal to me. One is its enormous range as a material. Depending on how it's applied, it can read from graphic to visceral. Most of my paintings take full advantage of this quality, incorporating a variety of tools 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

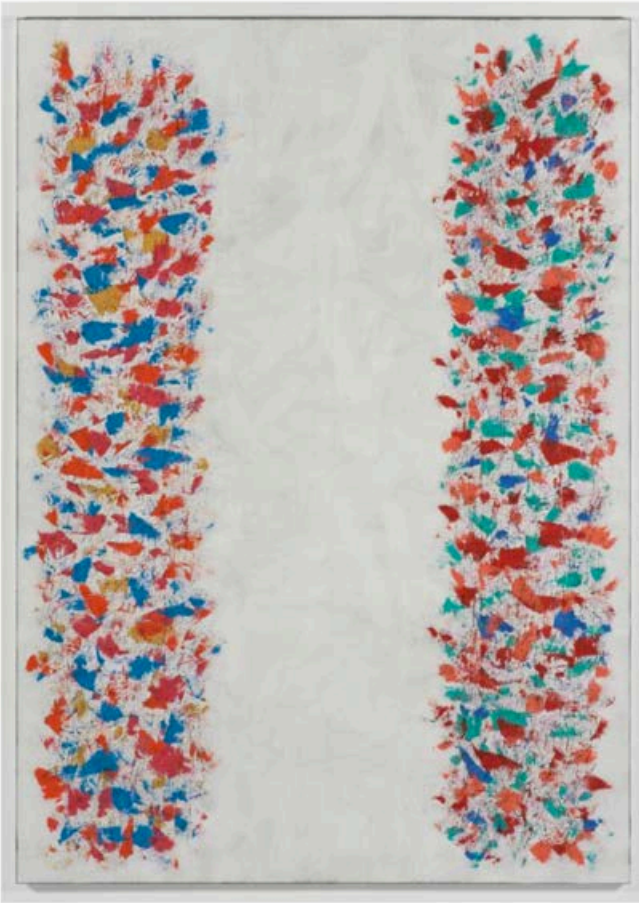
I do think that painting is a language, as all marks are referential, but that's just one element that comes into play for me when making a painting. My focus is on choreographing these marks in ways that prompt a desire to read, but without providing precise language to do so. It's about suspending 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

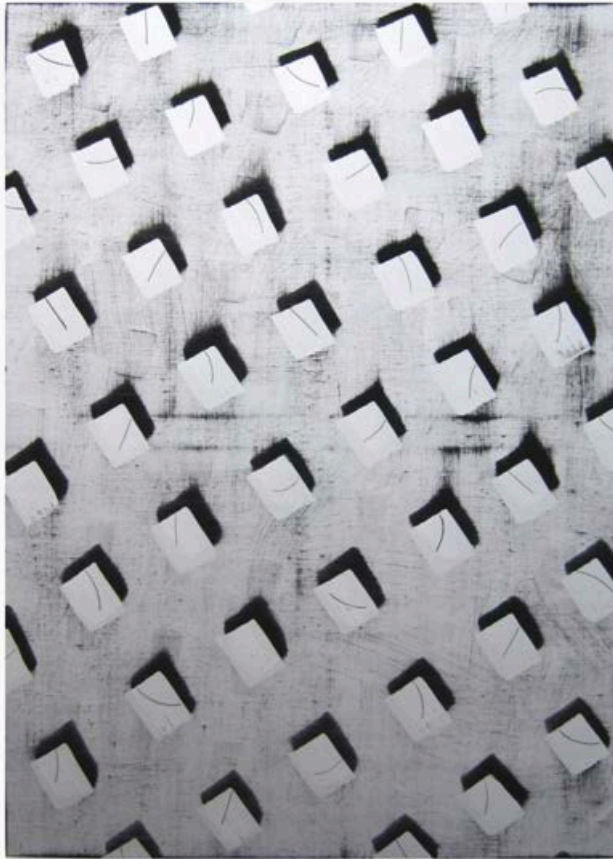
Illusion rarely comes into play in my work, and when it does, it's made in a flat-footed, obvious way. The paintings are very present and external, and all the marks are to the scale of the tools used to make them and to the hand. The scale of the paintings is also in relation to a viewer's body, ranging 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

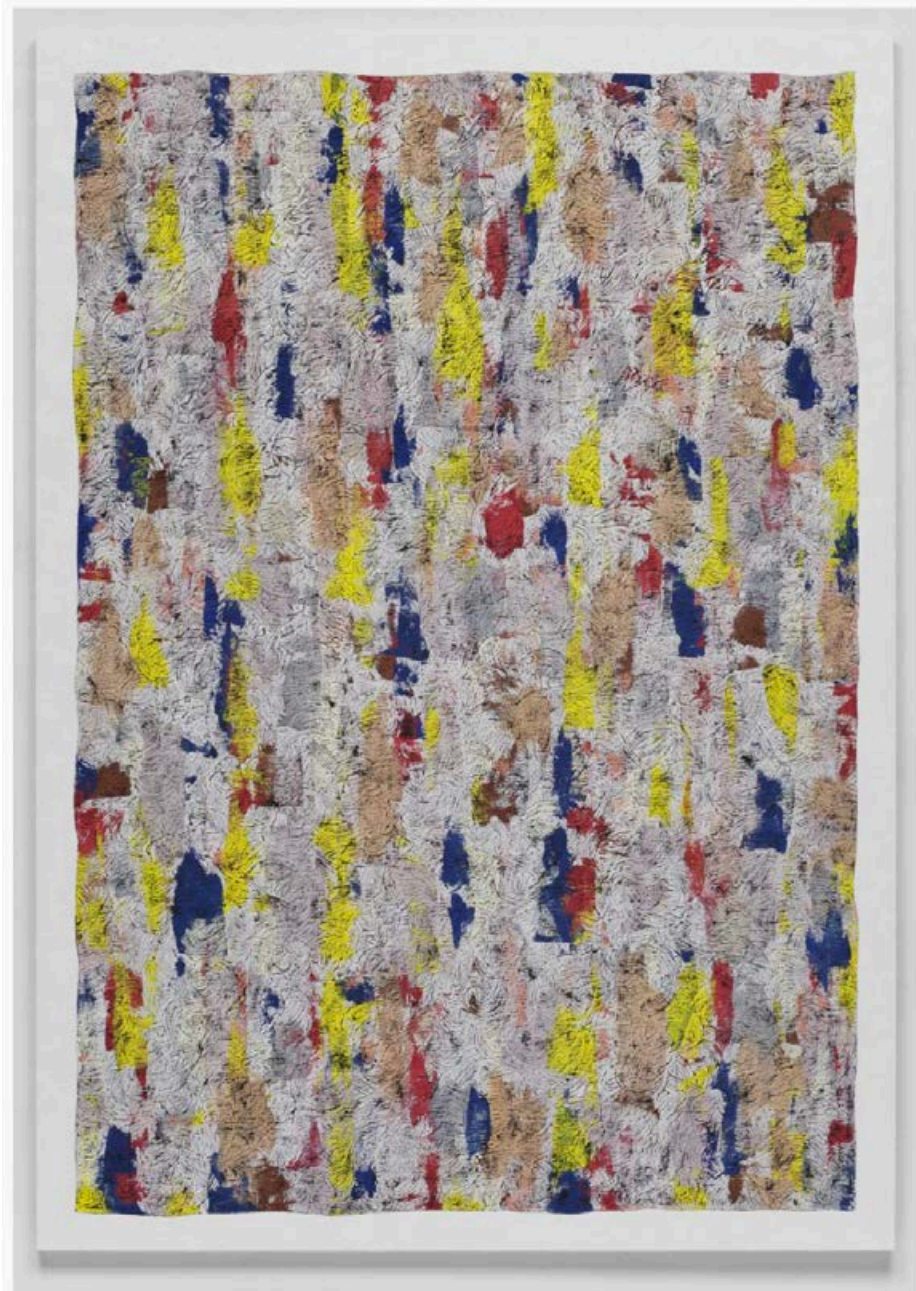
Yes, the paintings are created simultaneously or in response to one another. When I'm making a show, I consider how each painting will perform a different role, offering a range experiences: some are quieter than others, some more pronounced, some are tangents, and so forth. However, while each painting 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 Forrest

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.

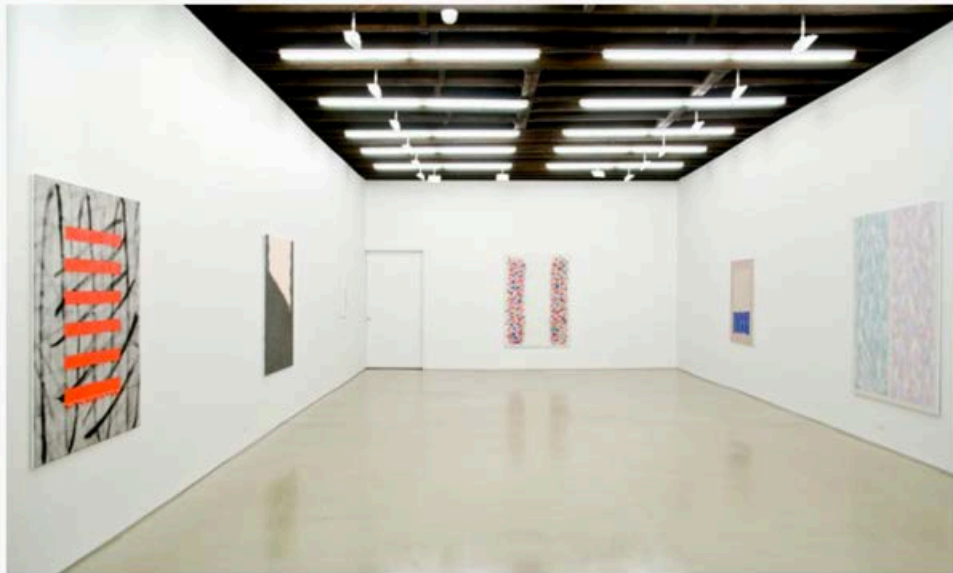
Specifically, I consider myself to be coming out of and responding to the Robert Ryman camp of how-to-paint over the what-to-paint. The BMPT group [Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, Niele Toroni] was very significant to me in grad school, as well as Supports-Surfaces. From these artists, 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.