

JULES OLITSKI
MITT PAINTINGS

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

2014

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JULES OLITSKI: MITT PAINTINGS

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Most importantly, we thank Jules—truly missed—whose legacy lives on in these tremendous paintings.

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THINGS SEEN

ALEX GRIMLEY

*Thinking is a kind of response to something seen, remembered, or projected.
I seem to be especially responsive to things seen. That is, my eye will note things which will bring to
mind related things. That in itself is not thinking, but is probably an element in thinking.*¹

—Jules Olitski

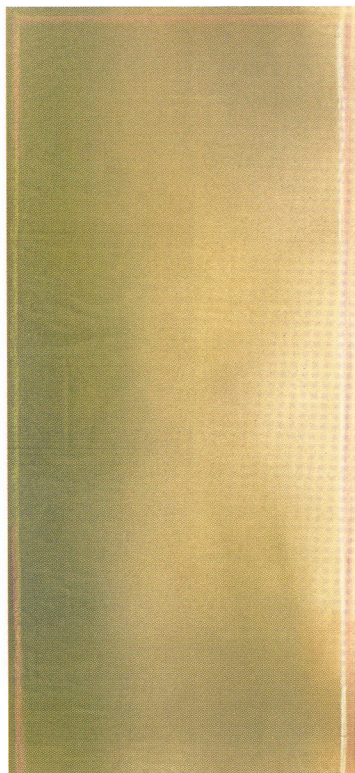


Fig. 2. *Galliloo*, 1967,
acrylic on canvas, 93½ x 43 inches

The soft availability of Olitski's gesture in his mitt paintings, together with the dynamic luster of its color, articulate an image perpetually shifting and unfixed. Similar effects had appeared at other times in his body of work. Where commentators saw change, Olitski sensed continuity. His spray paintings of the 1960s are characterized by shadows and depths of color (Fig. 2). Then, in the mid-1970s, using translucent glazes and ruggedly variegated surfaces, he created paintings that seemed to pulse with an internal light (Fig. 3). "The look changes perhaps, but the work always comes from the same source," Olitski explained, "even if it may be turned inside out."² In the years just before the mitt paintings, Olitski had been working on shaped pieces of colored Plexiglas. The idiosyncratic edge drawing of his earlier canvases was displaced to the irregular shapes of the Plexiglas. The neon reflectivity of these surfaces became a motivating factor in his next body of work.

The specific spatial and chromatic effects in his mitt paintings, and the materials which produced them, were new to Olitski's work, having been only recently developed and sent to him by the paint manufacturer Golden Artist Colors. Mark Golden recounted Olitski's initial apprehension at the new pigments. At the insistence of Darryl Hughto, a painter and friend of the artist, a case of these paints and a chart describing their application arrived at Olitski's studio.³ Through experimentation

and play, Olitski began exploring the properties of these colors. Like the metallic iridescent colors he had already been using (Fig. 4), the interference pigments in the mitt paintings yielded a range of indeterminate effects, shifting in hue and luminosity, responsive both to changes in light and to the position of the viewer. As one moves in front of these paintings, their saccharine pinks and yellows scream out from the three-dimensional surface. From a side view, these same colors flatten into limpid areas of creamy white, the interference of light from one angle amplifying the pigment's radiance, from another angle shifting the surface towards monochrome.

After his thickly impastoed surface had dried, Olitski might first spray a light warm color before final sprays of blue, purple, or black, as in *Beauty of Leah* (Plate 1, page 21). He often sprayed paint across the surface from a parallel position — so that instead of covering, the spray would catch the elevated contours of the surface and accumulate around its ridges. Looking at the painting from the angle of the oblique spray, these ridges seem to curl into darkness, engulfed by shadow; from the



Fig. 3. *Rephahim Shade - 2*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 90½ x 120 inches

Opposite: Fig. 5. *Beauty of Leah*, 1989 (detail)



Fig. 4. *Gold Blaze*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 87 x 75 inches

opposing angle, the same peaks are glowing and radiant, the sprayed paint having missed the outer side of the ridge entirely (Fig. 5, page 8). These dark sprays of shadow alternately fracture and amplify the luminous effect of a painting by materializing, in a sense, the refraction of light upon the surface, a quality dramatically realized in *Ascendant Regard* (Fig. 6).

At the same time that Olitski's application of sprayed color seems to dissolve the paint surface, it relies upon and calls attention to the physical dimensionality of that surface. Around 1991, Olitski began amplifying the variety and particularity of the paint surface, using granular mediums like pumice gel, a gritty, sand-like substance. As his applications of sprayed pigment became more variable, ranging from a fine mist to a splatter, concrete material effects and sheerly pictorial illusions become harder to distinguish. The solid, obdurate texture of a painting like *Cleopatra Flow* (Fig. 7) seems to melt into lambent zones of soft-focus color and shadow before one's eyes. The play of material effect and pictorial illusion, and the correspondence of their appeal to the senses, is a main characteristic of the mitt paintings.

John Cage offered one of the twentieth-century's most lasting definitions of experimentation in art, describing "an experimental action [as] one the outcome of which is not foreseen."⁴ The mediation of a vision ("something seen, imagined, or projected"), with materials whose interactions and effects were new and unknown to him ("not foreseen"), characterizes Olitski's experimental practice. He never schematized



Fig. 6. *Ascendant Regard*, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 79½ x 81 inches

his experiments — that is, he did not plan or sketch paintings in advance — nor did he conceptualize their results, often finding it "difficult to recall the sequence of what went on" in the studio.⁵ His paintings neither display the steps of their process with studied neutrality, nor do they merely inventory the effects of the materials employed. Olitski's studio practice was impassioned, open-ended. The questions he asked of himself were practical and straightforward: "How to make it [the vision] real?"⁶ And, after he had attempted just that, "Does it work?"⁷ Reserving his self-questioning to before and after the fact of his practice, Olitski sought insight into these questions only through the activity of painting.

The composer Morton Feldman, working at the same time as Olitski, conceived of his compositional practice in an analogous manner, as the exercise of "action and thought as a simultaneity."⁸ Their approaches mirror each other. While Feldman worked against the temporal aspect of music, searching for aural sensations "more direct, more immediate, more physical," Olitski sought to undermine the fixed, static quality of visual art.⁹ The intuitive complexity of his process, and the multivalent surfaces it yielded, require of the viewer a slower tempo of looking. "I never wanted to make... paintings to be seen at a single glance," Olitski explained. "My interest is not in instantaneous impact."¹⁰ Sensations are gradually enriched as they shift: the physicality of the painting frozen at first glance, melting at the next, visual and tactile associations seamlessly and reciprocally yielding to one another.



Fig. 7. *Cleopatra Flow*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 59½ x 80 inches

Olitski did not distinguish conceptual concerns from material means, nor did he separate the execution of his work from its inspiration. He kept reproductions of Old Master paintings close at hand in his studio — things seen, like the works in progress that crowded that space — to be remembered and projected as he created new work. To Olitski's pragmatic mind, thinking and doing were one thing — and together they became synonymous with painting. In a body of gestural paintings as closely related to one another as the mitt pictures are, the viewer senses the activity not only of the artist's hand, but also of his intuition. Seeing a group of these paintings together, one senses modulations of emphasis and emotion, reflections not only of the artist's aesthetic judgment, but also of his character — often, in these paintings, ebullient and vital. The image he creates — like Feldman's "action and thought as a simultaneity" — affords a holistic appeal that energizes as it transits the senses. Frank Stella captured this vivifying quality when he characterized Olitski's painterly gesture as "of the hands and the body and ultimately the mind."¹¹ The transparency of Olitski's thinking persists in his paintings. Like Feldman, who remarked, "There is no secret to [my] music,"¹² Olitski wrote of his art, "There is nothing — either in the making of it, or the experiencing of it — that is known by me and not known by you."¹³

Characteristic of his thought process, the decisions he made in the midst of a painting were intuitive, unsystematic. Olitski thought with paint on his hands. Empiricist that he was, he did not believe in evolution

in art as progress or advancement, but as change. The changes among the mitt paintings do not afford the viewer a linear progression from one idea to the next, or from a germinative state to a full realization. The specific choices Olitski made as he brought a painting into correspondence with his vision reflect the artist's sensibility. "I look at them as individual works," the artist said of these works. "I want each painting to speak for itself."¹⁴ Subtle shifts in proportion, texture, pressure, and shadow characterize the paintings that date from these years; the shifting balance of commonality and variety is an aspect of their appeal. Those changes that presented themselves in the making of a painting were as much a result of openness and happenstance as of intentioned activity. Conditions of chance, choice, and change, conjure one another, and Olitski's painterly gesture affects all three fluidly and reciprocally.

Through the activity of his art, Olitski sought the experience of experimentation, not merely the outward appearance of it. In the studio, he chased the sensation of selflessness, of being lost to himself by the emergence of the work at hand.¹⁵ Experimental in practice, Olitski's paintings communicate a sense of imminence, the mind's gesture seeming just now to realize itself, concrete effects and phenomenological sensations available but perpetually evanescent. A product of inspiration and intuition, each vision Olitski actualized provided the artist a new impetus, a vehicle for further exploration: the next painting.

1. Studio note entitled "Written by J.O. December 10, 1973," in the archive of the Jules Olitski Family Estate.

2. Olitski quoted in Barbara Rose, "Interview with the Artist," in *Jules Olitski: Recent Paintings* (New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc.), p. 10.

3. Interview with the author, January 8, 2014.

4. John Cage, *Silence* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 39.

5. Louise Gauthier, "An Interview with Jules Olitski," *Perspectives* 8, Spring 1990, p. 83.

6. Rose, "Interview with the Artist," p. 10.

7. Olitski, quoted in Jennifer Sachs Samet, "Making Art that Works," *New York Sun*, 17 April 2006, p. 18.

8. Morton Feldman, "Speaking of Music at the Exploratorium in 1986," streaming audio at <https://archive.org/details/MFeldmanSOM>

9. Morton Feldman, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street*, (Cambridge: Exact Change, 2000), p. 5.

10. Rose, "Interview with the Artist," p. 10.

11. Frank Stella quoted in the film *Jules Olitski: Modern Master*, (Ames Hill Productions, 2011).

12. Feldman, "Speaking of Music."

13. Undated note in the archive of the Jules Olitski Family Estate.

14. Gauthier, "An Interview with Jules Olitski," p. 84.

15. See, for example, Rose, "Interview with the Artist," p. 11; or Gauthier, "An Interview with Jules Olitski," p. 83.