

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.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

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.