

Artforum  
October 2014

## ARTFORUM

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

# ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

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.



*Disperse*, 2013  
Oil And Modeling Paste On Linen

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-

# ALTMAN SIEGEL

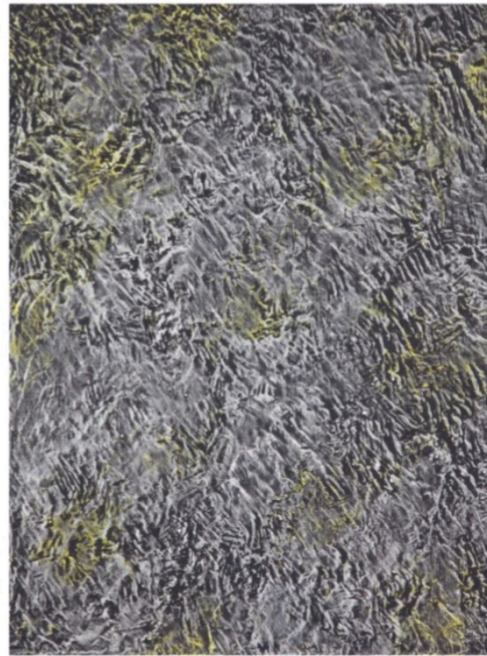
1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

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 coves 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

# ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

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?