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NEW YORK

HYPERALLERGIC

A Minimalist Transformation of Minimalism

Otis Jones proves that painting's parameters continue to be commodious — even reductive painting has not been used up.

By John Yau | Published March 18, 2018



Otis Jones, "Pink with Tan and Black Circles" (2018), acrylic on canvas on wood, 13 x 23.5 x 3.75 inches
(all images courtesy Marc Straus Gallery)

Otis Jones, who was born in Galveston, Texas, in 1946, belongs to the generation of abstract artists that includes Nancy Haynes, Harriet Korman, David Reed, and Stanley Whitney. However, in contrast to these New York-based painters, all of whom are entering their seventh decade on this planet, Jones lives and works in Dallas, and has shown regularly in his home state since the early 1980s.

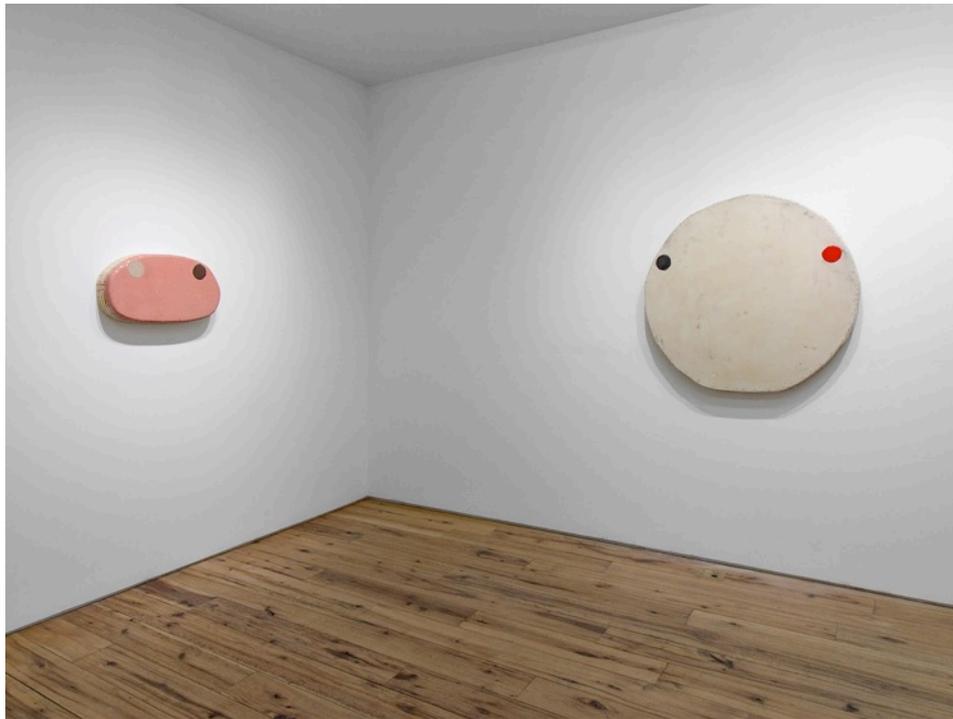
I am not sure exactly when Jones hit his stride, but if the work I saw in his first solo New York exhibition, *Otis Jones*, at Marc Straus (February 16 – April 1, 2018) is any indication, it likely happened years ago. Everything he presents has been thought about and worked through, from the shapes of his surfaces, to the making of his forms, to his various methods of applying paint; even the location of the staples attaching the canvas to its wooden supports feels purposeful, if not expressionistic. The foundation upon which Jones has built his art is reductive painting and painting-as-object, which

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dominated much of the art world's attention between the mid-1960s and early '70s, when he was a young artist. His work is not a variation of these ideas but a transformation of them.

Jones seems to have been inspired by Jasper Johns's dictum: "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it." The object that Jones takes and does a number of things to is the monochrome painting – a classic Minimalist form – placed against the wall. Strictly speaking, Jones's paintings are made from a stack of irregularly cut sections of plywood – or "pancake stack" – that he has glued together.



"Otis Jones" at Marc Straus Gallery, installation view:
"Pink with Tan and Black Circles" and "White with One Black One Red Circle" (both 2018)

The stacks can be round and irregular, square with rounded edges, horizontal and narrow (panoramic), or elliptical. Some of the circular forms look like someone gave them a gentle squeeze. The stacked supports stick out from the wall as much as three or four inches. Jones attaches a section of cut canvas to the stack's surface, often using an excessive number of staples.

He applies the acrylic paint in highly tactile ways – from rubbing apparently dry paint into the canvas's weave, to laying what feels like a skim coat across the surface. Each application calls attention to the materiality of both the paint and the canvas. His formal vocabulary consists of bars and circles, which makes by removing or adding paint, or a combination of both. He might gouge the painting's surface, revealing an earlier layer of color. Or he may apply a skim coat over a temporary circular shape, which is later removed to reveal a slightly indented circle. He then might leave the circle bare or add a palpable layer of color – a physical disc that is thicker than the indentation.

Jones has developed an inventive approach to being true to materials and process. From the making of the shaped, homemade support, to his expressive use of staples to attach the canvas, to the

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application and removal of paint, everything he does underscores the material identity of the thing itself. Essentially, Jones has taken Frank Stella's clarion call for opticality, as encoded in his dictum "What you see is what you see," and stood it on its head. By eschewing the optical in favor of the visceral, as well as rejecting the mechanical for the handmade (while downplaying gesture and overt mark-making), Jones proves that painting's parameters continue to be commodious. Even reductive painting has not been used up.



Otis Jones, "Red with One Red and Two White Circles" (2018), acrylic on canvas on wood, 47.5 x 36 x 4 inches

A number of writers have suggested a connection between the circles, lines, and rectangles in Jones's monochromatic paintings and anonymous tantric art, which was first brought to the art world's attention by Jean-Hubert Martin, who included the works of Acharya Vyakul (1930-2000) in the 1989 exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris. While much of Vyakul's art contains figurative elements (a serpent's body, for example), there are also circles, ellipses, ovoids, and lines. It is even possible that Jones saw Vyakul's work, which Lawrence Markey first showed in his San Antonio gallery in 2000.

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However, whether or not Jones was directly inspired by the vocabulary of tantric art seems beside the point. What is more pertinent is that his painting appears to be driven by the tantric paradigm of anonymous labor, style, and vocabulary. In an [interview](#) I did with Suzan Frecon, which was published in *The Brooklyn Rail* (November 2005), we discussed the exhibition, *Field of Color: Tantra Papers from India*, at the Drawing Center in New York (November 6, 2004 – January 22, 2005), organized by the French poet Franck André Jamme. This is how she described the tantric art:

They came off the walls, stayed in your mind. I liked them so much and they're anonymous which is nice. I like it that art is anonymous. I think all art could be anonymous [*laughs*] so that you just look at the art, there's no story. Those pieces reached a high plane of abstraction. That's what I liked about them. They were made to be meditation pieces, not art per se, but they succeeded in being art.

I think of Jones's palpable, muted paintings as art that became "meditation pieces" — works to be closely scrutinized and mulled over, looked at from all sides.



Otis Jones, "Natural with Two White Rectangles Far Apart" (2018), acrylic on canvas on wood, 17.5 x 85.5 x 4 inches

In "Natural with Two White Rectangles Far Apart" (2018), he locates two vertical bars on the far ends of a painting that measures 17 ½ inches high by 85 ½ inches wide. The tonal shift from the off-white ground to the white rectangles makes you conscious of the widening field of your attention.

I would claim that this is one of the underlying effects of Jones' work. In contrast to the pure opticality that Stella and others who were associated with Minimalism tried to attain, Jones wants to make you aware of your experience, particularly along the spectrum running from the optical to the visceral. In the irregular circular painting, "Red with Two Black and Two Blue Circles" (2018), the placement of the black and blue circles along the painting's circumference makes you conscious of the empty field between them.

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Otis Jones, "Red with Two Black and Two Blue Circles" (2018), acrylic on canvas on wood, 14.5 x 14 x 3.5 inches

Meanwhile, the alignment of the two black circles directly opposite each other about a quarter of the way down the circle's circumference and the two robin's egg blue circles, which are opposite each other about a quarter of the way up from the canvas's bottommost point, can be read as the corners of an empty square.

Jones's paintings do not recall anything from our experience. They exist on what Frecon would consider the high plane of abstraction, which is something unto itself. This is the power, surprise, and revelation of the exhibition. Jones has taken an abstract, reductive possibility and made something fresh and austerely sensual (or is it sensually austere) out of it. Rather than commenting on history, he is moving its possibilities down the road a bit. In the age of nothing new under the sun, that's more than an accomplishment. It's practically a miracle.

Otis Jones continues at Marc Straus (299 Grand Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 1.

This article first published on: <https://hyperallergic.com/432481/otis-jones-marc-straus-2018/>