



## Scott Olson Harmonia Mundi

**Contemporary art fairs do not really encourage delectation, but they do offer the occasional exciting discovery, of the kind made by Richard Leydier, when he chanced upon Scott Olson. Here he describes how it happened, and how the painter's work has evolved.**

A few years ago I was walking around the alleys of the Grand Palais. It was the Fiac—the 2013 edition in fact. Well, rather, I was shuffling. Because, as we all know, visiting a contemporary art fair can be quite an ordeal. Fatigue and boredom can quickly stifle even the most ardently kindled flame of hope, the obdurate belief that somewhere lies an epiphanic encounter with an artist you've never seen before. By now, though, I was on autopilot and had reached the Salon d'Honneur on the upper floor, when something on my left caught my eye. There seemed nothing unusual about the booth in question. On the three walls delimiting its territory a dozen small pictures hung, none bigger than 40 x 60 cm. And yet, even from the central aisle where I had glimpsed them out of the corner of my eye, they must have exuded something powerful and irresistibly attractive. So I went closer.

The booth was that of the Angeleno gallery Overduin & Kite, and the artist whose solo show they were presenting was called Scott Olson. His paintings were abstract in appearance, painted in a vein both geometric and organic. Each one invariably preserved a perimeter of unpainted canvas. At the center were dense compositions tight with manifold colors organized in what one might call a geological way, in schist-like strata interweaving in various fashions. All extremely dense. At the same time there was something very musical about these paintings in which the very deft chromatic harmonies brought to mind the luminosity of stained glass, but also the precision and concision of illuminated manuscripts. Of course, I was also reminded of a whole modernist tradition in early twentieth century Europe embodied by the likes of

Cette page, de haut en bas/*this page, from top:*

«*Untitled*». 2017. Huile sur panneau de bois.

57,1 x 71,1 cm. *Oil on panel*

«*Untitled*». 2017. Huile sur panneau de bois.

57,1 x 71,1 cm. *Oil on panel*

Page de gauche/*page left:*

«*Untitled*». 2017. Tempéra à l'œuf, cuivre sur panneau de bois. 21,6 x 25,4 cm.

*Egg tempera, copper, and bole on panel*

Frantisek Kupka and Robert Delaunay. I thought, too, albeit more distantly, of American examples, of certain paintings by Marsden Hartley and, even more, of the musicality, of the post-war Californian movement Dynaton in which Lee Mullican was one of the leading figures. It seemed clear that the artist was referring to a known heritage, yet shifting it towards unexplored, utterly personal domains. This painting was familiar and at the same time new.

### A SCULPTURAL TURN

We don't always know what it is that makes us "fall in love" with a given artist's work, and the whole point, indeed, is to try to isolate the reasons for this attraction after the event. In fact, as I get older, I don't really see any basic reason to write about art unless it is to learn a bit more about one's own tastes, and therefore about oneself. Over the last few years I have kept more or less distant tabs on Olson's work. Last winter his New York gallerist, James Cohan, gave him a solo show at the remarkable ADAA (Art Dealers Association of America) fair on Armory Park Avenue) and, concomitantly, in his gallery on the Lower East Side. Olson was still making those small pictures (on linen, and sometimes on wooden panels), but his painting had changed. The compositions were no longer necessarily limited to a quadrangular format framed by unpainted canvas, but sometimes showed more biomorphic developments. The forms that people them, too, seemed less hemmed in and spread more freely in curves and scrolls that were not without echoes of Arab calligraphy and its lively, sharp forms. The paintings appeared to have lost some of their earlier density in favor of airy movements, but fairly soon I realized that, thanks to the play of transparency and the occasional use of subtle gradations, the superposition of colors generated volume and a sense of depth, with effects that in some respects reminded me of Lyonel Feininger. Olson's painting was taking a more sculptural turn and its density was expressed less in the two-dimensional plane than in an almost illusionist space. I asked myself if there was not, in these paintings, something of a disjunct between abstraction and figuration—even though the image resisted projective interpretations—in which form might play the role of fuse.

I know very well that one of the reasons why I loved Olson's paintings in 2013 is that they reminded of some of the works painted by Philip Guston at the end of the 1940s, during a figurative period that came just before he switched to abstract expressionism, which I particularly admire. I am thinking in particular of his *Performers* (1947), at the Metropolitan Museum. It shows musi-



cians with wire-thin bodies in a dense composition in which horizontal, vertical and oblique fragments of wood interweave between the figures. Very similar types of structure can be seen in Olson's earlier paintings. I am not saying that the artist consciously drew from the older artist's work—judging by what was said in our exchanges, Guston was important in his formative years—but it does neatly illustrate the way artists decades apart can take parallel paths because they are trying to achieve results that are very similar on a philosophical level. Whether they aim for it in an abstract or figurative vein is ultimately not very important because the primary concern is formal effectiveness. Form (and the understanding of complex operations from which

it arises) contaminates the gaze to begin with in terms of emotions. The subject comes just afterwards.

The working processes developed by Olson are artisanal. The frames of his paintings are made from maple or cherry wood. The support itself is sized with a gesso made of marble powder and skin-based glue, a technique that comes straight from the Italian Renaissance. The carefully chosen pigments are applied with great economy then abraded to reveal the archeology of the painting. The artist sometimes includes copper or gold in his compositions, which brings a touch of the Byzantine icon and, even more, Florentine marquetry. In any case, the shine of the metal heightens the sensation of looking at a precious object, a sensation that

the small format of the paintings in fact produces when you first see them.

**DRAWING IN THE GAZE**

The working technique stems from the small formats: the paintings are laid flat on a pivoting plateau which facilitates fast handling and intervention, and means that the direction in which we read the work is only determined right at the end. Painting small is primarily a philosophical choice. The artist believes that he would lose density and, above all, intensity, if he took to bigger

Page de gauche/page left:

« Untitled ». 2012. Huile, tempéra à l'œuf, cire, poudre de marbre sur panneau de bois, cadre en bois de cerisier. 62,5 x 45,5 cm. Oil, egg tempera, wax, marble dust ground on panel, mahogany cherry frame

Ci-dessous/below: « Untitled ». 2017.

Huile sur toile de lin. 60 x 72 cm. Oil on linen

formats. He would run the risk of dispersing the gaze. Because Olson's paintings do draw in the gaze. Contemplating them is almost like sticking one's eye to the lens of a microscope to observe tiny, subtle phenomena: how colors and forms come together or push apart, and how light illuminates these interactions.

That leaves the question of what this life of forms does to us. I may just be imagining this, but the feelings I have in front of these paintings are contradictory. First, there is something joyous and solar, the vision of a miniature universe, the feeling that measureless forces, at once chthonic and cosmic, are working together to set up a lasting harmony and peace in that very small space of the painting. But, at the same time, I cannot get out of my mind the melancholy idea that beauty (for that is the word we have to use for what goes on in Olson's paintings) has become so rare, in

a time when art has become a spectacle, that its existence is inexorably threatened, relegated and imprisoned in modest areas, which are the only ones capable of concentrating and revealing—to those who still wish to contemplate it—its immoral aura. ■

Translation, C. Penwarden

Critic and curator Richard Leydier is based in Paris.

**Scott Olson**

Né en/born 1976 à/in New York

Vit à/lives in Kent, Ohio

Expositions récentes/Recent solo shows:

2009 Misako & Rosen, Tokyo, Japan

2010 Taxter and Spengemann, New York

2012 Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles

2013 Wallspace Gallery, New York

2014 Galerie Micky Schubert, Berlin

2015 Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm

2017 James Cohan Gallery, New York

Transformer Station, Cleveland (automne)

