

under different clouds

by Rose Bouthillier

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How to write about Scott Olson's work has been a puzzle for me since I first visited his studio in 2012. I recall this initial experience as difficult to articulate. Excitingly confusing to read, his paintings appeared familiar but elusive, timeless and time-*full*, shifting in a way that toyed with coherence. Worn surfaces and muted palettes gave the impression of age, and my mind scrambled to recall things that parts of them looked like. Abstract antecedents echoed: Paul Klee, Sonia Delaunay, Stuart Davis, Wassily Kandinsky, Naum Gabo; Suprematism, Precisionism, Abstract Expressionism, Synchronism, Theosophical and Tantric art, domestic design from the 1950s to the 1970s. These referents pattered and twisted through my reading of the work but didn't pin anything down. They ricocheted in a vocabulary of form that, rather than being mimetic or retro, conveyed something about form in time and place, the impulse to classify and interpret, and the challenge of staying in the moment with the thing in front of you.

From the first, Olson has left all of his paintings, and exhibitions of them, "Untitled," suggesting that they are not in need of words, as explanation or afterthought. ("Why does language have to attach to a work like an appendage? I do not want to add anything superficial to the work, besides a frame.")¹ Many artists have expressed a resistance or skepticism toward words, for the ways in which they can be reductive, redundant, or irrelevant. Though Klee spoke eloquently on his work, he admitted unease about the point of doing so, as it "ought to speak for itself in its own language" and that words inevitably fell short of the subject, as they lack temporality and the means to "discuss synthetically a multi-dimensional simultaneity."² Mel Bochner felt that "the messiness of real thought is cleaned up to make discourse possible," whereas "painting—because it is in, and of, the material world—offers an access to the *processes* of the mind, to the messiness that philosophy can't cope with."³ Olson is wary of positioning or qualifying his work, be it through theoretical, literary, or poetic concepts, precise references, or art historical constructs. "Stupid as a painter" is a maxim he returns to, preferring to leave his works completely open to viewers' interpretations.⁴ So rather than attempting to situate Olson's work, I take it as my task to reflect on what they articulate to me, about themselves, their maker, their viewers, and their world.

Olson began studying and making art in the 1990s, at a time when new digital technologies were being rapidly taken up, and his early work was primarily sound and video based. It wasn't until 2005, when he inherited a set of oil paints from his father, that he started to explore the medium. Even in their spare beginnings, these early paintings contained elements that have since expanded and evolved: rhythmic repetitions of interlocking and overlapping shapes, floating interior spaces, nimble energy, and a dulcet and roughewn tenor. Over the years, natural materiality and an interest in traditional methods have been constant. The toothy, knobbed grid of raw linen presses up through and variegates color, or serves to structure "empty" areas. An antiquated gesso recipe of marble dust and glue absorbs pigment just as it reflects light off its burnished face, collapsing depth in a tile-like surface. Frames are sourced from a wealth of Ohio trees, lending a physical correlation to the artist's locality (left simple and naked for years, lately the frames have been shaped and coated). Most recently, clay bole and metal leaf have added additional layers, dimension, textures, and speeds.

Painting almost daily has allowed Olson to learn process through materials, building up a deep knowledge of substrates, pigments, binders, and suspensions. Interest in these matters extends not only to how they appear, but also to what they know (the histories they carry, the geographies and economies they evince) and how they behave.⁵

¹ Email to the author, July 2017.

² Klee didn't mean this as a reason not to try at all, offering: "In spite of this glaring inadequacy, we have to involve ourselves in a thoroughgoing way with the parts." Paul Klee, "On Modern Art," in *Paul Klee: Philosophical Vision; From Nature to Art*, John Shallis, ed. (Chestnut Hill, MA: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2012), 9–10.

³ Mel Bochner, "How Can You Defend Making Paintings Now? A Conversation between Mel Bochner and James Meyer," in *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, Philip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon, and Stephen Melville, eds. (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 2001), 202. Original emphasis.

⁴ Email to the author, July 2017.

⁵ Olson sites the 2001 exhibition *As Painting* at the Wexner Center for the Arts as a meaningful encounter. It included diverse approaches, with a strong representation of French artists, including Martin Barré, Christian Bonnefoi, Jean Degottex, Simon Hantaï, and François Rouan, who, as curator Stephen Melville describes, were influenced by "a particular strand of materialism that

A molecular-grade curiosity about each element attends to their fluidity, flexibility, and capacity, individually and in contact with others, under fluctuating conditions (temperature, moisture, age). This knowledge is multisensory (the telling scents of egg yolks fresh and rotten, of walnut or linseed oil, of a toxic and potent solvent) and muscular (degrees of pressure, the steadiness and flexibility of fingers and hands).⁶ The tools that Olson creates—combs, knives, scrapers, and edges—each present a new object through which to study a new set of limits and possibilities. Such slow, accumulative learning can't be hurried, and looking at Olson's work over the span of ten years reveals much about how this knowledge builds and grows. Although this doesn't apply only to the intricacy and complexity of the compositions and surfaces—which is certainly an aspect of it—Olson's continual return to simpler and swifter drawings and watercolors shows ongoing exploration and refinement of the most basic components.

It's important to note that mastery doesn't interest Olson so much as familiarity, a grasp that makes way for intuitive flows of action. Each painting emerges through a series of decisions, carried out by variations within a vocabulary. Olson doesn't work from sketches or studies, and while a body of work may evolve through a set of parameters, individual paintings are not preconceived. He has likened this approach to improvisation in music: an embodied intelligence allowing for spontaneous response, repetition, and deviation within a structure. While this knowledge, and trusting in it, allows the process to become less self-conscious and more meditative, it is tempered by a necessary not knowing, a balance allowing for dexterity while limiting the potential for overdetermination. Surprise and accident are given room in a way that smudges the distinction between intention and chance, which even in a finished work gives a sense of perpetual assembly.⁷

Viewing Olson's paintings is likewise a complex, iterative process. You might start by focusing out and in against borders and edges; assessing an architecture of windows and planes; searching a center through constituent weights; tracing lines and curving shapes; burrowing into fine ridges of a scratched surface; soaking into a stain; gliding up to a glint of light on the surface. At any point any of these aspects might revise what came before or after and the process flutters, bounces, reverses, or starts back up. One of Olson's most distinctive compositional approaches is a frame within a frame, often off center or plotting greatly uneven outskirts (nearly abutting on top and bottom, with wide distances on either side). There's illogic to these multiple edges, a complicated piling up. The boundaries and what they contain assert very different natures, each making the other possible, while also pointing out its absurdity.

When it comes to the question of affect wrought by Olson's work, I am met with a peculiar sticky stumbling between my eyes and heart and brain. I find no clear symbolism, in form or color or gesture, which I take as attempting to convey or imbue something specific. Which is not to say the paintings are unfeeling, quite the opposite. I've looked at them and felt joyous, regretful, impatient, fragile, calm, bleak, open, and stuck—at different times and in myriad combinations—which tells me that these emotions are reflected rather than imparted. Or, if they were sprung from artifacts of their maker's frame of mind, Olson's process of moving between many pieces at a time, working with multiple pallets, and bringing paintings in and out of storage would render them obscure, buried in a complex archaeology of empathy.

Olson consistently paints on a scale that pulls the viewer in, inviting personal encounters and focused, individual experiences. His works have a domestic spirit; they are paintings to be lived with. While hanging beautifully on gallery walls, they always seem to imagine other types of warmer space around themselves, spaces that they could settle into and fully inhabit. It strikes me that in this way each of the paintings extends a powerful invitation to become known. And this rapport would, if nurtured, grow in complexity, as painting and cohabitating viewer are seen in different kinds of light, from under different clouds, through different window coverings, in various temperaments and states of mind, from new angles and distances. In such a relationship there is room to learn and unlearn a painting, a process that is also accumulative.

I return to my first encounter of Olson's paintings, a feeling of not knowing how to see them. Just as they reveal themselves through attentive experience, they teach something more general about looking, when it's forgotten and

emerged in France in the 50s and 60s," that had at its core "the proposition that 'matter thinks.'" It follows then that "the thought that painting might also think would be a corollary of this." Melville, "Counting / As / Painting," in *As Painting*, 6.

⁶ Email to the author, July 2017.

⁷ Klee also valued an unsettled quality in painting, writing "Form is never to be considered as something settled, as a result, as an end, but rather as a genesis, as becoming, as essence. Form as appearance is an evil, dangerous specter. [. . .] What is good is forming. What is bad is form." Klee quoted by John Shallis, "Klee's Philosophical Vision," in *Paul Klee: Philosophical Vision; From Nature to Art*, 15.

how it's rewarded. So often these days my eyes feel tired, my visual life narrowed and constantly accelerating. The effects of shifting visual environments and technologies are just as physical as they are psychological. Cones and rods adapt to new color gamuts; ocular muscles pull more quickly and in tighter patterns. Spending time with Olson's work, I become acutely aware of my perceptual habits, how my sight moves, what it glosses over in my physical environment, and the ways in which I slip outside my body when this happens.

The question of how to write on Olson's paintings follows from how to think about them. And being thought about is something they seem to resist. What they propose is to be thought with or thought through, and in a way this thinking cannot really happen apart from the experience of them. Formulating this text, I was struck by a very clear and deep feeling of longing, a sense that if I could spend a few hours or days in the presence of each painting, only then might my thinking through them become substantial, developed through some new perceptual faculty. Given the limitations of time and space, I am left considering what the longing itself tells me about the work.