

FRIEZE

Gerald Jackson Transcends the Self

Across two new exhibitions in Los Angeles, the polymath showcases work from the 1980s to the present that reveals a talismanic power



Gerald Jackson, 'Psychic Rebuilding', 2022, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Paul Salveson.

In a 2016 Bomb magazine interview with the painter Stanley Whitney, Gerald Jackson tried to explain the difficulty – for a Black artist, like himself – of accessing an authentic sense of self when his identity is a construction imposed on him by a dominant white society founded on a history of slavery. He had to reconstruct, he said, his entire subconscious: 'I'm not a crazy person; I'm not a Black person. I'm only what I make myself up to be.'

Jackson grew up on the Southside of Chicago, as he tells it in the interview, wearing a suit and carrying a gun. In the early 1960s, he escaped to bohemian New York, via a stint in the army. A polymath whose work has taken forms including (but not limited to) figurative painting, minimalist abstraction, gritty assemblage, collage, poetry and fashion, Jackson has tried out many identities. Exhibitions of his work last year at White Columns and Gordon Robichaux in New York introduced many people to the breadth of his achievements and the sometimes-confounding heterogeneity of his styles. Two new exhibitions in Los Angeles prudently opt to focus on narrower tranches of his output.

Jonathan Griffin, "Gerald Jackson Transcends the Self." *Frieze* (June 1, 2022), accessed online.

'Psychic Rebuilding', at Parker Gallery, features two interrelated bodies of work made in the 1980s: a group of mixed-media paintings on canvas employing stencils and spray paint, and his 'Skid Paintings'. Skids, in this context, are the wooden pallets that Jackson salvaged from the streets around his Bowery studio, initially to burn in his furnace during winter months but latterly as supports for rough-hewn abstract paintings that might also include knotted strips of fabric, shredded paper and his own earlier canvases nailed onto the wood.

Jackson's stencils were mostly found objects, too, or else transposed found images: Native American and Ancient Egyptian symbols; illustrations of nursery rhymes; floral patterns. In *Untitled* (1985), the largest and arguably best work in the show, they are arrayed higgledy-piggledy alongside erratic stains, wide swipes of enamel and spray-painted scribbles. The painting evokes the fury and freedom of a graffitied subway wall. 'Psychic Rebuilding' gives the sense of Jackson forging an unsteady alliance between his present-day reality, his imaginative aesthetic projections and allusions to the past, both ancient and personal. The wooden skids convey strength and endurance; what hangs off them seems delicate and provisional.



Gerald Jackson, *Untitled*, 1985, acrylic, enamel, spray paint and oil pastel on canvas, 1.7 × 2.5 m. Courtesy: the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Paul Salvesson.

At Marc Selwyn Fine Art, more refined acrylic paintings – on canvas, fibreboard panel and paper – surround the space. Almost all are based on rectangular swaths of green (below) and blue (above), as if to signify rudimentary landscapes. The green is not grass-green, however, and the blue is not sky-blue; these colour-field experiments are aligned more with Whitney's deceptively simple abstractions.

Jonathan Griffin, "Gerald Jackson Transcends the Self." *Frieze* (June 1, 2022), accessed online.

The exhibition's press release states that, in these paintings, which were made between 2003 and 2021, Jackson aims to 'transcend the self', with blue and green 'mov[ing] beyond social constructs like race and class, to tap into a universal realm of human spirituality'. I'm not sure if that's possible, but I understand the impulse. The work only came alive for me when I registered some of the paintings' supports: scraps of battered board with nail holes and fuzzy corners, printed red logos peeking from behind the paint. The exhibition is titled 'The Remedy of Colour: Blue and Green'. If the self, for Jackson, is something inherited, an impression imperfectly moulded by external conditions, then it is understandable to want to counter that pain with the salve of pure colour.

None of the works in either of these exhibitions is truly transcendent, but neither would I want them to be. It is their palpable histories – manifested in their materiality and in the confluence between their maker's biography and the story of race and class in the US – that imbues them with talismanic power.

Gerald Jackson's 'Psychic Rebuilding' is on view at Parker Gallery, Los Angeles, until 4 June. 'The Remedy of Colour: Blue and Green' is on view at Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles, until 18 June.

Jonathan Griffin, "Gerald Jackson Transcends the Self." *Frieze* (June 1, 2022), accessed online.