



JULES OLITSKI : LATE WORKS

October 15, 2022 – March 3, 2023



Sam & Adele Golden Gallery, New Berlin, NY

theSAGG.org

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ISBN# 978-1-7327509-5-1

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ALIVE!

Jules Olitski awoke to find out that he was still alive. He was convinced prior to undergoing a serious operation in January of 2000 that he would not survive. 'I'm alive! I'm alive!', the 78-year-old shouted to his daughters Lauren and Eve and wife Kristina upon his rousing from the surgery. Lauren reports that Jules, given that he did not expect to survive, and with the welcome prospect of recovery, was 'gleeful' and 'excited about everything'.

On a follow-up visit to the hospital the next month, despite his enthusiasm, and unfortunately it being winter, Jules slipped on the ice and broke a leg. The attending doctor pronounced to Jules, '...you can't go anywhere.' The concerned family reaction was '...he needs to work – if he stays in New York he's going to die, we've got to get him to Florida!' With some difficulty they packed him up and got him to Florida to his winter studio where Olitski resumed painting and embarked on his final stylistic trajectory.

For several years prior to his hospitalization Olitski had surprised his audience and familiars by diving headlong into figurative works – his decades of abstract paintings and abstract sculptures were subsumed into the 'informalism' of trees, sailboats, sunsets and lake vistas.

Olitski had been on the record about his feelings, '...I don't make any distinction between abstract art and representational art – to paint a tree was thrilling – and then a boat – a sailboat, no less – a sailboat and trees – that's pretty outrageous!' But such a change seemed a puzzlement to those admirers who adhered rigorously to a dividing line between abstraction and figuration.

A wholly nocturnal artist, Olitski would leave his New Hampshire summer studio after working through the night and as the dawn was breaking. Making his way down the path from the studio to the house he was repeatedly in awe of the sunrise above the lake. He was determined to capture the grandeur that he observed. Setting up at the water's edge he tried pastels in witness of the vista for a week with no positive result.

On the verge of abandoning the impulse to paint this 'waterscape' that he observed every morning, Olitski found in his house a

museum postcard of Eugène Delacroix's 'Sea at Dieppe' of 1852. Instantly he recognized Delacroix's use of value, light and dark, and Olitski understood what he needed to do to actualize his inclination to paint from nature. For Olitski, this figurative period, lasting several years, became less of a metamorphosis or pivot, but more of an embrace of his artmaking origins as a teenager and then as a young adult when he painted from nature and learned from the influence of the old masters.

Many of Olitski's figurative works, as does Delacroix's 'Sea at Dieppe', afford the distant view characteristic of much of landscape art. Olitski's mid to distant depictions of lakes, hills, and the fog-shrouded suns, contrast to the frontality of the Orbs in our exhibition at The SAGG. The Orbs confront the viewer with a foreground planarity, reminiscent of a Rembrandt self-portrait, where we see the master up close and personal (often gazing directly at us).

...in the matter of Prince Patutsky...

Olitski visited the 1939 New York World's Fair held at Flushing Meadows – Corona Park, Queens, NY, where the Masterpieces of Art building held over four hundred European old master artworks amongst which were displayed nineteen paintings by Rembrandt whose influence became central to him. (We'll never know if Olitski, while at the Fair, paid the 25 cents to marvel at the Salvador Dali 'Dream of Venus' building in the Amusement area – surviving photos show it to be the envy of any Asbury Park NJ boardwalk attraction circa 1960).

Another visitor to the exhibition gave him a copy of the catalog for the exhibited works as she saw he was smitten (he could not afford the \$1.00 price for the catalog and had admitted that he only had money enough for bus fare back home). Mostly a checklist, the catalog had a few pages of black and white illustrations with four images of Rembrandt paintings. Included in the exhibition was the Rembrandt Self-Portrait of 1659 from the Mellon Collection at the National Gallery in DC – a work possessed of that stunning and singular Rembrandt 'aura' that distinguishes itself from the nearby Frans Hals portraits in the 1939 exhibition. Not to cast

shade on Hals – but so many of those painted smiling subjects – wasn't anyone sad (or sober)?

The visit to the Fair, the first time seeing a Rembrandt in person, confirmed to Jules a vow he had taken as a 13-year-old in 1935 at the burial of his beloved grandmother Freida, as she was being lowered into the grave. The vow was that he would be an artist.

In 1923, on the chaotic cusp of the end of the Russian Civil War and the formation of the Soviet Union, Olitski's mother, the baby Jewel Demikovsky (Olitski's given name), and his grandmother Freida, made an arduous exit from the Ukraine and Byelorussia. His mother remarried upon arriving and settling in Brooklyn. Jules remembers being terrorized in his youth by his stepfather and stepbrothers (who, he recalls, believed Jules would end up in the electric chair or worse). He secretly made drawings and hid them from the disapproval of his stepfather Hyman Olitsky.

Ever the vivid storyteller, Jules has recounted other horrors of his youth including the attempted drowning perpetrated on him by the stepbrothers. (As if escaping the Soviet Union as a newborn with his mother and grandmother Freida after the execution of his father, then arriving in the USA 'tempest-tost,' had not been enough). Hyman berated Jules with the diminishing nickname of 'Prince Patutsky' – a sobriquet not meant to inspire affection ('Putz' – if you will).

Reflecting on the trials and experiences of growing up, he expressed the following in 1997 at the Lemelson Symposium at the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, in Washington DC, "I am very...grateful, pleased to be here at the Smithsonian, as an American, as an artist. It means a lot to me. I only wish it was true that once people die that they still hang around – 'cause I wish that my stepfather was hanging around to hear how well I've been received." (Nevertheless, over the years 'Patutsky' has appeared in many titles of Olitski's paintings).

In the several decades after the revelation of the old masters seen at the exhibition at the 1939 World's Fair, Olitski was in the military, spent time in Paris on the GI Bill, and endured many years of privation working on his art. Relief began to arrive in

the form of a teaching position at CW Post and then Bennington College, as well as one person shows in New York City at French and Company in 1959 and 1960. In 1966 Olitski was one of four representatives in the prestigious XXXIII International Biennial Exhibition of Art, American Pavilion, in Venice (the others being Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland and Roy Lichtenstein). By this time in the mid-1960s, Olitski's omnivorous appetite for media: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking was underway.

NUMINOUS

More from Olitski at the Smithsonian Lemelson Symposium in 1997: '...if I just picked up these big gobs of Golden paint – and picked it up and put it on the canvas – then move it around – this would be sacrilegious – but the image of the Almighty taking the mud or clay and shaping it into a man and then breathing into it and comes alive! The rib! The rib! I better not dwell on that too much...'

Uh-oh, his statement gives some inkling of Olitski's invocation of the creative act, infusing said act with the energy of life, with soulpower, as if painting were a sort of life-confirming act, aided by forces supernatural.

But we must not attempt to assert too, too strongly that Olitski was trying to call forth heavenly powers himself, or that he was claiming any special influence at the Pearlescent Gates, but just to muse that he was possibly hearkening back to the old lore of such legends as the creation of the Golem. The Golem being formed out of clay or mud with varying and discordant interpretations of its meaning, but carrying an inscription of truth. As Olitski told the audience at Lemelson, he had an 'image' of 'breathing' life into his materials thus making something out of near-nothing, insofar as it would be possible for a human. It may be enough to say that he was attempting to capture awe.

LATE WORKS

Kenneth Clark in his lecture 'The artist grows old' delivered at Cambridge University in 1970 states, 'There is nothing more mysterious than the power of an aging artist to give life to a blot or a scribble...'. He goes on to reference the last years of Cézanne and Manet, '...they began their furious battle with time, not

staining, but scarring the white canvas of eternity...'

We don't simply pay homage to the advanced age of the artist because they've outlived everyone else, or only acknowledge their past achievement, or their 'staying power' over a lifetime, but note that their late works can possess more than the expectation and presumption of maturity. Examples of remarkable late works by artists are abundant.

In 1914, on the eve of World War I, Georges Clemenceau, friend of Monet, cajoled the truculent 74-year-old Monet (who Clemenceau described as 'the king of the grumps') to resume painting after Monet had put down his brush for several years following the death of his second wife and stepson. The result was several hundred canvases including the most distinctive of his signature Water Lilies.

Titian, living to an astounding old age for his time, in his last works, paints in near monochrome, getting so much from so few pigments, and is said to have forsaken his brushes and used his fingers to paint. (Thus, sharing a bond stretched across four hundred years with Olitski whose 'paint-mittened' hands produced the Mitts series in the last decade of the Twentieth Century).

'I am still learning' is an inscription left by the 80-year-old Francisco Goya on a black chalk drawing – it was used as the title of a 1992 education department guide at the National Gallery in Washington DC. Frances Feldman, the author of the guide, remarks on, '...masters who retain astonishing vitality in their brushwork and undiminished inspiration in old age...'. Well, yes, brushwork, or whatever is at hand or necessary to get the job done.

The end game – the denouement that refocuses the early works, wherein are combined inspiration, aspiration, and regrettably the aging of the body. Renoir seen on film from 1915 is suffering from rheumatoid arthritis with his paintbrushes placed in and



Janus-12, 1963, Oil Pastel on Paper, 12" x 9"

removed from his hands by assistants – still managing a cigarette on his own though. On the day of his death, in 1919 at age 78, Renoir is said to have worked several hours on a still life painting and remarked, 'I think I am beginning to know something about painting.'

There is no reason to go quietly.

ORBS

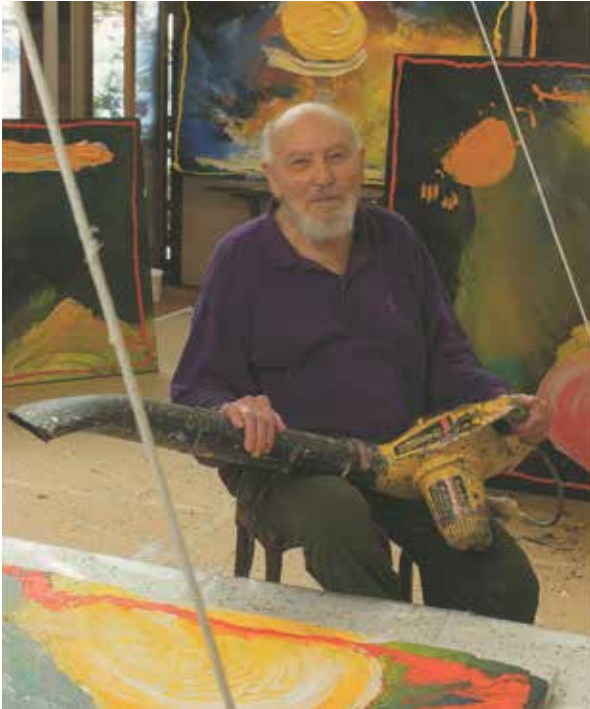
The winter of 2000 in Olitski's Florida studio bring the Orb paintings into focus. Figure ground relationships become evident and are relished. The Orb shapes, 'drawn'

by hand in Pumice Gel or Light Molding Paste respond to liquid paints flowing underneath that are tempered and spread through the use of an electric leaf blower. The paint applied with spray guns, characteristic of his works from the 1960s and on, gave way to forced air as wet paint on canvas now rippled and blended.

For context: an Olitski oil pastel drawing on paper from 1963 titled 'Janus-12' anticipates imagery that re-emerges forty years later in the Orbs. In 'Janus-12' the proto-orb shapes flex dislocations of compositional pressure. Four of the five shapes are ballooning into the rectangle that is already owned by purple – all jostling for position – fun is had by all – gravity suspended.

ROMANCE FELT, ROSE of 2002 has enclosing and affirming interior rectangles of sinuous paint slightly offset to the actual rectangle of the stretcher bar. These black and white lines recall Olitski's signature edge drawing of the mid 60's that he used to describe the resonating color modulations of the bulk of the painting. From that era, fields of stained or sprayed acrylic could gently modulate to near monochrome with subtle nuance of shifting color.

Olitski's paintings developed parallel to the progress in acrylic paint technology: Magna, gels, polymer mediums. He was able to embrace the latest developments as new paints rolled off the production line without skipping the proverbial beat.



Bear Island Studio, Meredith NH, August 2005

In *ROMANCE FELT, ROSE* these interior framing lines immediately prevent 'leakage' out of the rectangle of the activity of the shapes and colors within. The action of their making becomes solidified, amplified. Olitski recounted the origin of the 'edge drawing' which became one of the characteristics of his works of the 60s and 70s, '...since line is drawing the colors could be put along the edge 'as drawing'...it was useful for me and whatever will work is what works....'

ROMANCE FELT, ROSE, decidedly pink, (Olitski has done more to valorize magenta and its variants than any other painter) and brimming with buoyant foreground orbs gives us a lot to look at – the balance, imbalance and interaction of these actors onstage, why look at them at all? How does squishy paint applied and dried hold our attention, and much more, how does it confirm something essential about our humanness? Sheepishly, I'd say the answer would be divined in future by some fastidious neuroscientist and is beyond the scope of our simple means. Not to disappoint those who turn to fractals, string theory, super-determinism and such

like to decode the mystery of art – but, more likely, some neuron connecting eye to heart is to blame.

The Orbs are Olitski's Late Works. Olitski's decades of studio engagement toggled between abstraction and figuration, color and surface, a range of painting that includes near colorlessness, matte black voids, whispers of artless non-colors, the deep wilderness of spectral color, and everything in between. Olitski wreaks sweet havoc with the celebration of joyous space and color. The Orbs invoke the solidity of hue, and chromatic resonance. We see 'gene lines' of greater or lesser Orbs, some dominating the picture space, some tiny, some solitary or choral and all in conversation. For taxonomists of style in art there is an abundance here.

Olitski allows painting to be itself. Over his lifetime he satisfied his own interest, his own impulse, his own inquiry, wrestling with shapes and colors and squishy paint that somehow coalesces into visual pleasure. Color: you want rivers of it when Olitski presides over the deluge.

The Orbs are a how-to book for building a universe, grabbing at the limitless and aimed straight at the viewer. They are visceral, appealing to a belly-gut response, but sharing their power with the eye. Olitski did not waste anyone's time on desaturated ambition or desaturated aesthetics. Within the Orbs we see ecstasy, glee, reverence, imagination – the paint imbued with life.

– Jim Walsh, August, 2022

SOURCES

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XXXIII Biennale International Exhibition of Art 1966
USA Catalog



ROMANCE FELT, ROSE, 2002, Acrylic on Canvas, 28 ½" x 24 ¾"



DELIGHT, ORANGE, 2002, Acrylic on Canvas, 30" x 24"



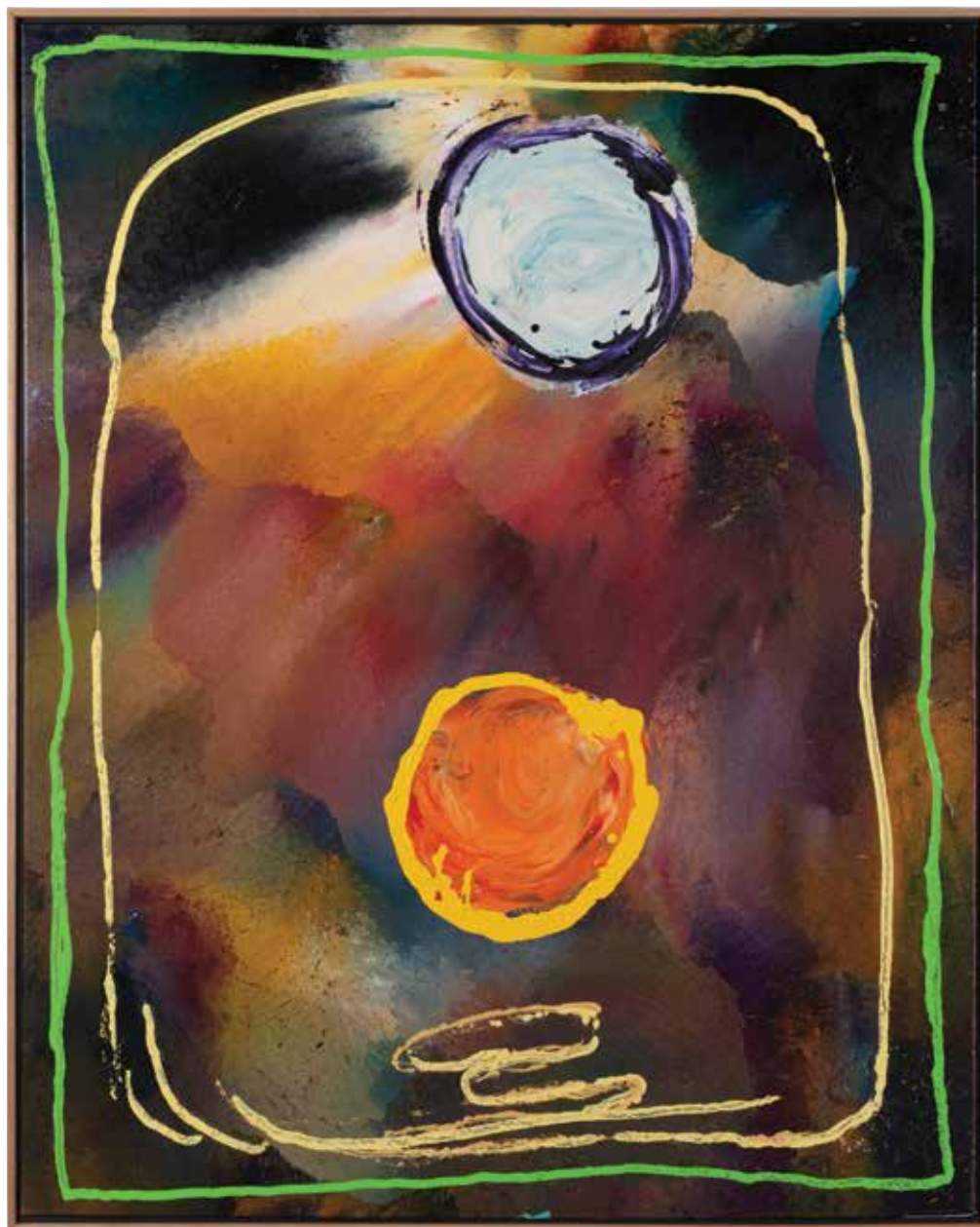
MOSES PATH - CRIMSON AND ORANGE, 2001, Acrylic on Canvas, 40" x 48"



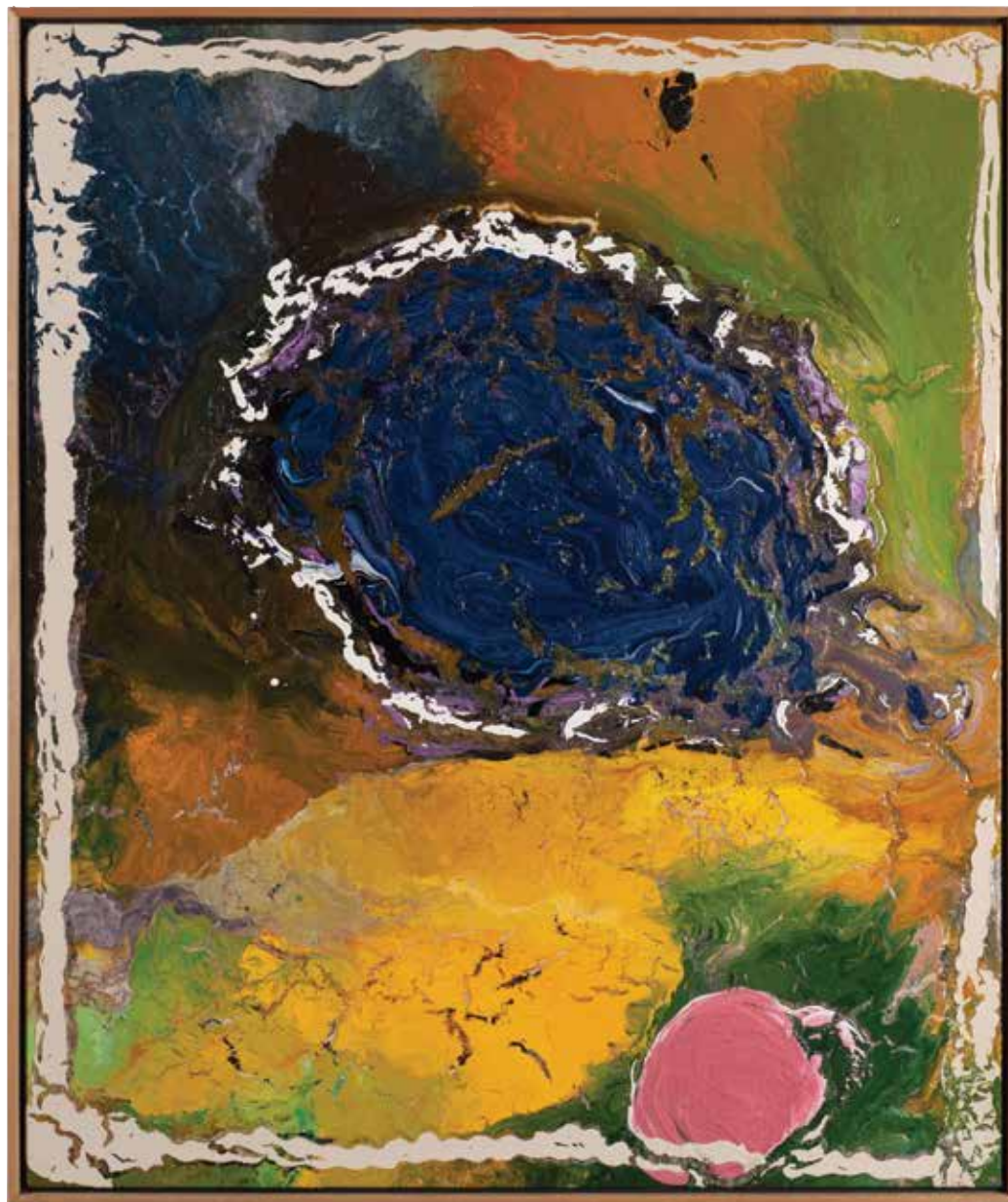
EMBRACED: YELLOW AND TURQUOISE, 2005, Acrylic on Canvas, 48" x 36"



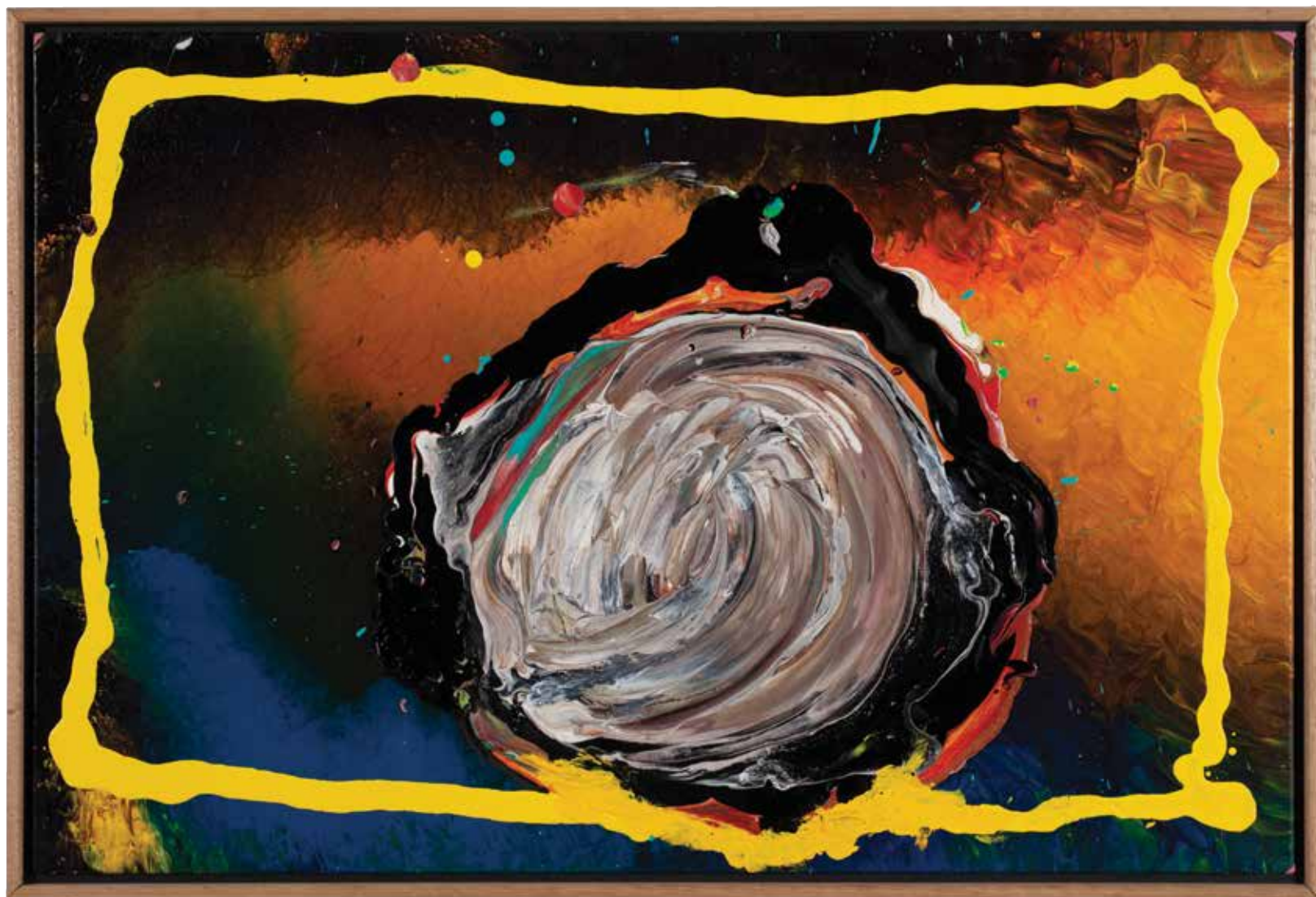
EMBRACED: DEEP PURPLE / LAVENDER, 2005, Acrylic on Canvas, 48" x 36"



EMBRACED: PALE BLUE AND ORANGE, 2005, Acrylic on Canvas, 60" x 48"



WITH LOVE AND DISREGARD: JOURNEY OF NOAH, 2002, Acrylic on Canvas, 48" x 40"



THE FIFTH VISIT, 2006, Acrylic on Canvas, 24" x 36"



ROMANCE TOUCH, WHITE AND GREEN, 2002, Acrylic on Canvas, 21" x 21"

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Lauren Olitski Poster

THANKS TO

Bradley Poster

Ann Walsh

Steven Ginsburg

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Gallery Director: Jim Walsh

Catalog Design: Christopher Farrell

Photography: Richard Walker



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ISBN# 978-17327509-5-1