

What's It All About?: Meditations on Abstraction / Jenkins Johnson Projects
By Amarie Gipson

What's It All About? is as much concerned with abstraction as it is with finding a way to name the unfamiliar. The exhibition brings together a multigenerational group of contemporary artists, primarily of color whose individual approaches to abstraction range from painting to sculpture and assemblage. Recent works by renowned artists and educators, Dewey Crumpler and Lisa Corinne Davis provide a roadmap for navigating the intersections amongst the six featured artists of focus: Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola, Patrick Alston, Carmen Neely, Esteban Ramón Pérez, Emma Soucek and Jason Stopa. In a global climate riddled with precarity, how can abstraction be a bridge into the future? Each of the artists in *What's It All About* suggest a myriad of ways that abstraction can aid us in making sense of our world.

The exhibition opens invitingly onto two large scale paintings and a wall drawing by Chicago based artist, Carmen Neely. Born in Charlotte, North Carolina and galvanized by the matriarchal forces in her lineage, Neely began to develop a practice rooted in abstraction around 2014. Reflecting on her journey towards adopting the genre, she shared, "I was always drawn to abstraction as a consistent form of expression, but when I was younger I didn't think it was something that was accessible to me because I wasn't aware of many Black people working within it. I grew to realize that I have the right to communicate in this way." Through the work of pioneering figures like Howardena Pindell and Julie Meretu, Neely found possibilities for herself within the practice. Driven by a desire to archive intimate encounters with her loved ones, Neely's expressionistic paintings transfer memories into gestures. In a work entitled *If you really love me, you'll talk to your therapist about me* (2021) soft, subdued colors are enclosed within a red circle that is embroidered onto the surface of the canvas as a way to emphasize the complex feelings that arose while in conflict with a cherished friend. For Neely, abstraction operates as "a bridge between the gaps," a form of memory retention and visual paraphrasing, one that allows for the translation of emotional experiences.

Nearby Neely is a sculptural work by Esteban Ramón Pérez entitled *Burning Bush* (2020). Made of brown leather scraps fashioned to create a bulbous effect, the work makes reference to both the Biblical narrative and the wildfire crisis facing the artist's native state of California. During his time in Yale's MFA program, Pérez became uninterested in working within traditional conventions of painting. The result was a turn to alternative materials and objects which were initially sourced directly from his father's upholstery shop in Los Angeles. Partially a homage to his father and the experience of apprenticing for him as a child, Pérez's method of abstraction is one that embeds his Xicano heritage and familial legacies.

On an adjacent wall are two paintings by Brooklyn based artist Jason Stopa whose recent work explores ideas of utopian architecture. Stopa's paintings are equal parts sensual and playful in nature, punctuated by saturated colors and geometric forms. *Reflection Pool, D.C. 63* (2021) makes reference to the National Mall in Washington, DC—the site of Martin Luther King Jr's iconic "I Have A Dream" speech that was administered during one of the largest civil rights gatherings in American history. The painting, composed of architectonic lines, overlapping hues of blue and accenting reds, commemorates the area imbued with the spirit of that historic moment. With a focus on time and space, abstraction allows Stopa to provoke questions around the humanitarian aims of architecture, it's optimistic possibilities and its subsequent failures.

Above the mantle and in between two of Stopa's works is one of three works by Nigerian-American artist Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola. Known for his subversive readymades and paintings made with durags, Akinbola's relationship to abstraction is unique. His method is less interested in the aesthetic or formal qualities of the work but more concerned with highlighting the cultural significance and specificity of objects—especially those with a proximity to Blackness. Originally used for the protection and preservation of Black hair, the durags are stitched together to create mural sized monuments of Black life and identity. Within these works, Akinbola takes an everyday fiber scarf and elevates it to exist within the history of painting.

In the downstairs gallery, viewers encounter Emma Soucek's paper pulp painting *Seen was Set, Love Inferno* (2021) whose title and composition is inspired by electronic music producer Omar-S. Like Neely, Soucek's paintings function as a way to activate memories captured in photographs. An aspiring fashion designer in her youth, the California born artist became well versed in photography during her studies at the Rhode Island School of Design. Soucek began to abstract photographs into paintings composed of acrylic and pleated paper pulp. The pulp is made using sheets of colored construction paper, pigment, water and a kitchen blender. The resulting surface is a textured and somewhat pixelated fusion of collage and paint. Close by, materiality and gesture combine in a single work by Bronx born abstract painter Patrick Alston. Rendered in various shades of blue, the surface of this large painting combines sewn fabric, paint and objects sourced from the everyday to create a cosmic, multi textured assemblage. His method of abstract gesture is rooted in his early years of traversing urban space and absorbing graffiti and murals throughout New York. Also like Neely, Alston sought the contributions of Black artists in the genre and found himself positioned within a rich lineage of makers like Mark Bradford, Raymond Saunders, and Stanley Whitley.

From Neely and Soucek's preservation of memory to Akinbola and Pérez's use of alternative materials with cultural significance, Alston's textured mark making and Stopa's considerations of space and history, *What's It All About?* foregrounds the next generation of abstractionists. The exhibition, in all its variety and congruity, reminds us that abstraction is a practice of intuition. Both in its conception and absorption, abstraction demands introspection. It is a genre of provocation, one that questions and encourages nuance in the way we view ourselves within the tension of inevitable change. (1011)