

BOMBLOG

ART

Scott Olson

by Veronika Vogler Oct 15, 2013

Painter Scott Olson on stumbling upon materials, the Ohio art scene, and the importance of frames.



All images of Scott Olson's studio, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

The density and intricacy of Scott Olson's work can be attributed to his meticulous attention to material as well as his overall commitment to the debris of abstraction lingering in contemporary art today. Olson's skills find congruity between hand-crafted and sleek aesthetics, exemplified by the work's surface polish. Olson meticulously fluctuates between the permanence in frame construction and the levity of pigment mineralization, building up the surface of his works through the mixture of marble dust and rabbit glue. His work incorporates the legacy of such artists as Kupka and Chagall, allowing him to create an abstract lyricism between color and form.

VERONIKA VOGLER You used to live in Brooklyn and have recently moved to a more intimate location in Ohio. Do you feel that you have to be in certain environment to create your work?

SCOTT OLSON I wouldn't say that I have to be in a specific environment. My environment affects me a lot, of course. I loved the camaraderie of having my studio in Brooklyn, but also love watching the sun cast shadows across the enormous white barrels of the grain elevator we have in Kent along the river and the railroad track. I feel very adaptable to any environment. Technically, painting isn't very portable unless you are looking at the tradition of *plein air*, and my movements are like those of a landscape painter. I've pared down my studio so it fits in two small boxes, including my complete set of paints. I use very little paint so some of my colors have been travelling with me for several years- they seem almost endless. I move my studio every summer to the coast of Maine, very far north. I cannot help but be affected by the changing light at any time of day. The tidal estuaries make it feel like the landscape is dramatically shifting in constant intervals, almost heaving up and down.

VV There has definitely been a shift toward sleekness within the parameters of art and design that seems to want to eliminate “clutter” while at the same time relying on locally sourced materials. Your frames are often sourced using local wood and your pigments are mixed with local soil. It appears your work is impacted by your surroundings in a very direct way.

SO I’m always curious about what a place has to offer. In Italy, they have the most incredible brown paper for wrapping breads and meat on which I did many silverpoint drawings. In Ohio there are amazing trees and a lot of people who work with lumber and milling. I am a scavenger in this way. Although I am using local wood for my frames and panels, I am not exactly using local pigments for my paint. I love that some of my paints are literally made from Italian dirt, and there’s no reason I couldn’t mix a pallet from my yard. I think it would be very subtle but there would be a multitude of discrete colors. In Paris I discovered a group of pigments in small dusty bottles on a back shelf in Magesin Senellier. Called *pigment vegetal*, they include cosmos pollen, powdered chlorophyll, indigo and cochineal (which is actually ground beetles). The origins of these various materials, or at least the opportunity to stumble upon them, are directly linked to the places in which I have lived.

The frames have gradually become more important. The thin wooden frames are permanently attached and are always made in my studio. I like the tensions that exist between decoration, composition, and anti-composition. I build frames into the composition, into the painting itself. In this way, I am calling attention to the structure of painting as an isolated entity on a wall. One of the most important aspects of this is that the work hangs completely flush against the wall rather than being hung on a wire and allowed to tilt forward. There is a closeness with the wall and hence the architecture of a given space. I realized that I could also achieve this closeness between the frame and the painted surface. During the gessoing process, the marble dust and glue mixture is poured onto the surface and self-levels when the panel is laying flat. In the end, it can appear the painting was poured into a mold and allowed to settle there.



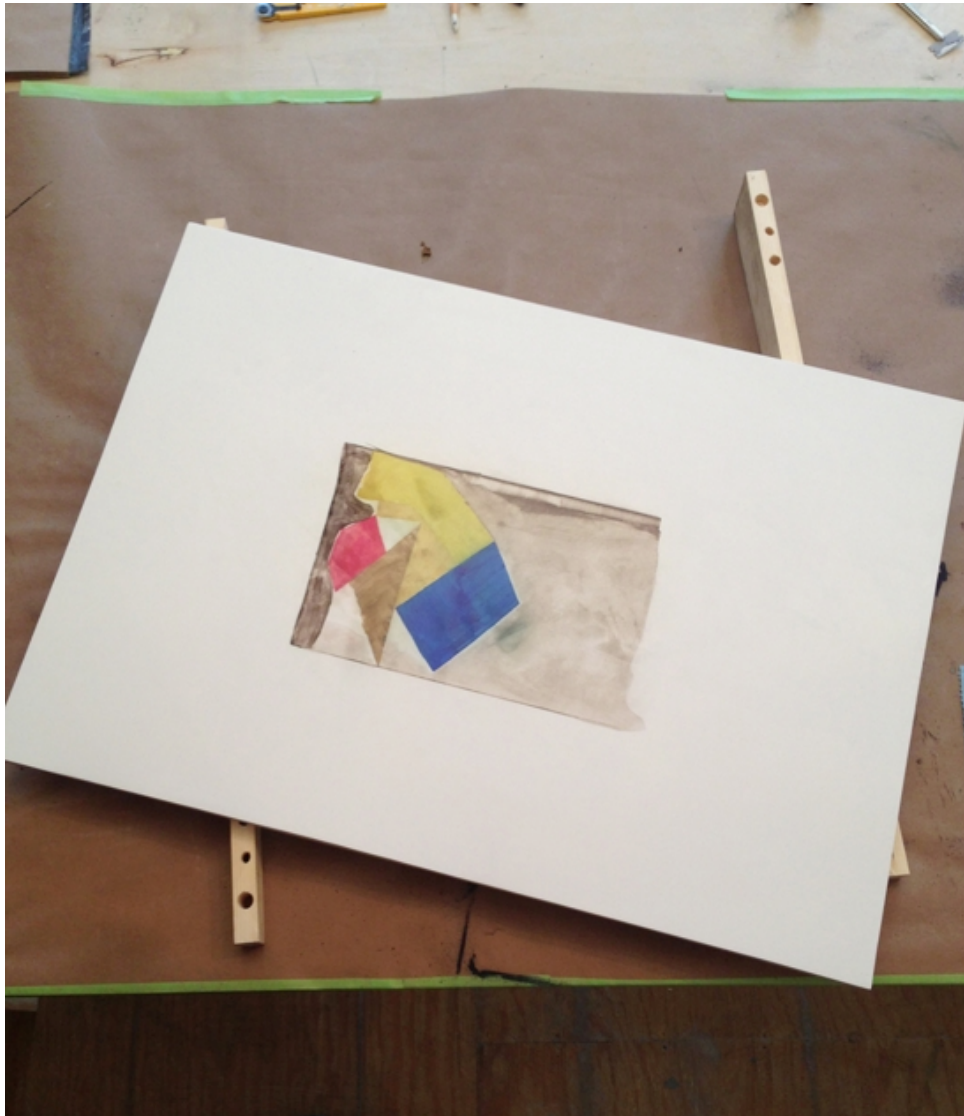
VV Are you always reacting to the same things in different environments or do different environments create unique situations, which you incorporate into your work?

SO This question addresses the split between working and not working. When I am in my studio, I am standing at a table and completely focused on the surface in front of me and my access to nearby tools, colors, and mediums. I'm not really attempting any kind of meditation but it is most comparable to that. It is a very relaxed yet focused state. Outside of my studio, the pace and movement of information is much farther from my control and it can be difficult to navigate. I'm exposing my reclusive side but there definitely is a psychological aspect to this. I'm usually in a room alone all day, so mood and temperament might be key aspects in my painting. I see attempts at distancing oneself or work from the vagaries of mental states but I embrace the calm and upheaval the same.

VV Do you start with a vague idea of how a painting is going to be laid out in your mind? And where do you start? By laying down background color and

working from there, or—

SO It is the most incredible and unexplainable experience. Nothing is planned, though some things are set up in a pragmatic sense. I may start with a system or a boundary (which is where the borders and framing often come into play). For years I was stuck in the mindset that it is difficult or almost impossible to begin making a piece of art. This may have been because I had no money and taking risks with material had certain consequences and limitations. Eventually I took the risks (small ones to any outside observer) and built up, over time, a knowledge of which tool and gestures produced which results. Vast amounts of time and labor are obscured in the final stages by accidentally discovering that a painting can be built inversely by blocking out areas rather than building them up.



VV When is a work done? Simon Hantai referred to his art as not finished but abandoned. Do you ever leave a painting and come back years later to work on it or do you try to work through each work before starting a new one?

SO I believe Hantai also abandoned his career as painter entirely for political reasons. Could you imagine? That is the ultimate statement and reflects the seriousness of the times. It is very hard to tell when a painting is finished. My best strategy is to extend the working period to several months or years. I have horizontal shelves of paintings that have been sitting for long periods of time. They are like cheese in a cave. Every once in a while, I take them out and rotate them or look at them under different light. I am certain that I have put unfinished paintings out into the world. It's so hard to tell.

VV How do you solve a problem in your work?

SO There are so many problems. I am attracted to painting because of its problems. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish inherent problems in painting from the ones we make for it. I am drawn to them especially as they change over time through different periods of art history. I resisted painting for a long time, working in a completely digital realm. It was part of my education in art school. It was the late 1990s and computers were cheap enough and smart enough to do amazing things with images in studios and classrooms. I was seduced by it and painting was this old worn out and restrictive medium. At some point, I turned those questions around on my self and became drawn to the nagging off-limits feeling I had about painting. The digital influence remains but it has become ubiquitous as a functional aspect of our lives rather than a revolutionary way of making art.

VV Is there a narrative between works? Are elements of one painting ever incorporated into another work?

SO I wouldn't say narrative but there are connections by way of similar processes and devices. Time also plays a factor, so I guess they could create a kind of non-linear, abstract narrative.

VV What is the art world like in Ohio?

SO The economic realities are apparent when you compare Cleveland and New York. There is, in fact, a strong collector base in Cleveland, especially supported by large corporations and hospitals that are based here. In some sense, the Cleveland Clinic and Progressive Corporation function as de facto museums. I am currently in an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art. My new-old looking paintings are hovering alongside Leza Mcvey's 1970s pre-digital, but "pixelated" textiles which evoke, for me, Cleveland's odd collusion of domesticity and industry.



VV What inspires you in terms of how you spend your free time?

SO I have a wife and a young child so they are an obvious inspiration. I don't really consume media the way I used to, but I'm sure there will be a time again in my life where cinema, for example, plays a large role as it did once, for me. Truthfully, it is difficult to take breaks at this point in my career. There is a constant negotiation between work, family, on-time, off-time, recharging and charging forward.

VV Do you listen to music while working? Are you one of those artists that tunes into NPR? I was surprised when I found out that Paul Klee had very conservative taste in music. Does the music that you listen to correlate to your work at all?

SO I definitely listen to NPR. I'm obsessed with political commentary and you can't beat NPR for that. It does affect my thought and emotion, in terms of positive content and horrific content. I have noticed that I have become more politically-minded since leaving NYC. The beliefs and actions of political actors on a local or regional level here in Ohio can be terrifying, but I feel as though I have the luxury of living within a truly politically mixed demographic.

I listen to music as well. Music is an important tool in my studio to help me focus, and it too is powerfully mood altering. I know there are allusions to music

or musical structures within my painting but that is never intentional. There may be some osmotic transference as there is visually when walking through museums or even down the street. These could come also from the echo or trace of my movements when music is playing, like micro-seismic waves reflected through my wrist while tapping my foot.

VV There is a vibrational pull in your work, which is meditative in its stillness similar to the progression of a strung guitar chord. Do you play instruments and have you ever recorded music/sound? How would you differentiate your reaction to sound versus imagery?

SO I have decided to separate them entirely. I made a limited edition vinyl record under the name Olson/ Sasanecki. It is my collaboration with a jazz bass player. The thread that could be drawn between the music's new age sensibilities and my painting is the artwork that I made for the covers. I taught myself to marble paper and hand decorated each of the 12" covers. The marbling process was absolutely influential to my painting practice, especially the method of floating pigments on a pool of thick liquid carrageenan (a kind of seaweed) which, when the paper has been dipped to the surface, allows chance, movement, and time to develop the image. Otherwise, the music is a way to completely get away from painting.

VV How much of the work is dictated by the materials you use?

SO The materials I use are guiding the creation of each painting completely. I can feel it on a molecular level. I've thought about this term, *molecular*, whether or not that could really be true. Am I actually experiencing painting at a molecular level? Not in a visual sense but perhaps in a broadly defined perceptual sense. I believe my process is that sensitive. I was discussing this with my father-in-law who is a marine biologist and has helped me understand the nature of calcium carbonate, the primary material I use to make my own ground. The calcium carbonate that I use is finely ground white marble but it is also the material sea shells are made of. Mussel shells were used by 14th century Italian painters as vessels for mixing gold paint. Since they were also painting (usually with egg tempera) on the same marble dust ground, the shell surface would ensure there were no adverse chemical reactions or impurities that would corrupt the expensive gold.

VV There is definitely a nostalgic depth to the texture found in Old Italian Masters which was reinvented in the '80s in the works of artists such as Pat Steir and Stephen Mueller and seems to be making resurgence now. Have you ever made sculptural works?

SO I have and learned, mostly through failure, that sculpture is very different from painting. Any knowledge I have about painting has come from practicing it for many years. I don't have this experience with or of sculpture and yet feel very compelled to continue attempting it. I would like to work with small sculpture made from silver in the scale of fine British tea services. This particular scale and material suggests, without clearly defining, decoration, value, and functionality.

VV Your works are untitled—has this always been the case?

SO It is a puzzle that remains unsolved. I am ok with this being an open question although it maddens the people I work with when trying to organize, catalog or even reference certain works. *Untitled* is not perfect and is a convention like so many titling conventions. Ryman titled his work using the UPC labeling on the cans of household paint he used, many artists rely on dates or other indexes. I have no idiosyncratic strategy for attaching further meaning to my work, especially through text. I am definitely not a writer and don't like the idea of poeticizing the painting by giving it a written title.



VV Titling a work does seem to be a way of intellectualizing the ephemeral characteristics of an artwork. Do you believe that an artist needs to go to graduate school and how much responsibility does an artist have towards coming back and teaching at some point in their career?

SO This goes along with the earlier questions of environment. It all gets soaked in. Reading, research, and study are difficult tasks and require real work. My main job is painting and so this relationship can be challenging. I very much believe in Hubert Damich's proposition that painting is a means of enacting thought, as if the two are inseparable. I try not to take any one stance too seriously. I am really not a dogmatic painter or thinker. I realize the importance of having a position on something and making that clear to oneself, but I also think this can be taken too far and create limitations. As much as I can paint from a theoretical position, I can also paint in order to be free from it.

I enjoy teaching, but I don't think there is any responsibility for artists to teach. I view it as a social exercise. I have been fortunate to have met and worked with

Thomas Bayrle, first at a residency in Japan and then in NYC during his visits to Gavin Brown's. Thomas is a tremendous artist and teacher and part of a European tradition of mentorship and influence that seems largely positive—fostering a community, almost a family tree of artist and collaborators.

I don't believe artists need to go to graduate school, although it does offer many important things. Before I went to graduate school, I spent two years at a residency in Japan and five years working in New York City. When I eventually felt I could benefit from school, I went for free and was paid a monthly stipend. I learned to teach and had tremendous freedom to work. I also studied very hard and read more than any other time in my life.

VV Where do you see yourself in ten years?

SO I would be very happy to continue painting. From this vantage point, I feel like there are some aspects of my practice that are inexhaustible in terms of learning about the interplay between images and materials. Painting will go through its changes as it has for centuries. There is certainly some insecurity in that. Painters have been both outcasts and celebrities. I don't see how an individual painter can work in either of those extremes but if I had to choose, I would aim for outcast.

For more on Scott Olson, visit Wallspace Gallery's [site](#).

Veronika Vogler is an artist and writer who lives and works between Brooklyn, NY and her native city of St Petersburg, Russia.

If you like this article, you might also like:

Three Drawings by Vicente Grondona
Arturo Herrera by Josiah McElheny