

In a Liquid Medium

Better known in Europe than in the U.S., Richard Jackson has been testing the confines of painting for over three decades. Recent shows in New York and London prompt new consideration of this quietly influential Los Angeles artist.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

I've been fascinated by Richard Jackson's work for years without ever seeing any of it in person. Poring over photographs in exhibition catalogues and art magazines, many of them from the 1970s, I perceived an artist whose boundary-breaking energy and painterly intelligence came through even in two-dimensional black and white. Many of the images I found were of installations in which stretched canvases were employed not only as supports for paint but also,

indeed, chiefly, as tools for paint application. Beginning around 1970, Jackson, who was born in Sacramento in 1939 and has been living in Los Angeles since 1968, started sliding still-wet canvases across gallery walls to create temporary, abstract murals of impressive graphic power and formal variety. Yet, they don't come across as simply innovative formal experiments; even in photographic documentation there is a sense of critique, even of affectionate satire, directed against more conventional abstract painting. In these works, Jackson incorporated the canvases themselves into the murals, affixing them to the wall (painted side facing away from the viewer) to show how the work was made. There seems to be a tension between a passion for painting and an equally strong urge to thoroughly dismantle it.

Just as interesting as the wall paintings are installations in which Jackson used canvases more structurally. At the Rosamund Felson Gallery in Los Angeles in 1978, for instance, he propped a 30-by-18-foot diamond-shaped canvas off the floor at an oblique angle and then pushed a rectangular canvas freshly painted with primary colors over it, realizing a piece that was half architecture, half abstract painting. In the 1980s, he built huge enclosures and sculptural forms out of hundreds and even thousands of painted canvases.

Part of my attraction to Jackson's early work has to do with the way it seems to anticipate more recent work by Polly Apfelbaum, James Hyde, Fabian Marcaccio and Jessica Stockholder, New York-based artists who began to reengineer abstract painting in the mid-1990s. I doubt there was any direct influence: I've never heard any of them mention Jackson, and opportunities to see his work in person have been rare, particularly in New York. In some ways, it seems even more interesting if these trans-generational affinities were coincidental rather than causal, the result of artists arriving at the same place by different routes.¹

Having missed, to my great regret, Jackson's 1997 New York show at David Zwirner (his first solo exhibition in New York since 1974), I still hadn't seen any of his work until last winter, when Jackson was given a pair of simultaneous shows at two New York venues, HauserWiediger & Co. Gallery and Foundation 20 21. These were followed up by a show this summer at Hauser & Wirth Gallery in London. For several decades, Jackson has exhibited more frequently in Europe than in the U.S.; he's one of many important veteran American artists who are better known in Germany than in their own country, where a hunger for novelty and youth all too often ends up marginalizing older artists.

Reflecting how Jackson's work has evolved over the last 25 years (a subject that must wait for another occasion to be fully explored), the pieces in the two New York shows seemed to have little in common with the early works. At HauserWiediger, Jackson presented two new pieces, *Living Room* and *Dick's Deer* (both 2004), sculptural installations that were completed just prior to the opening of the show by brief performative actions by the artist. The work at Foundation 20 21 (a Gramercy Park space that has since been reborn



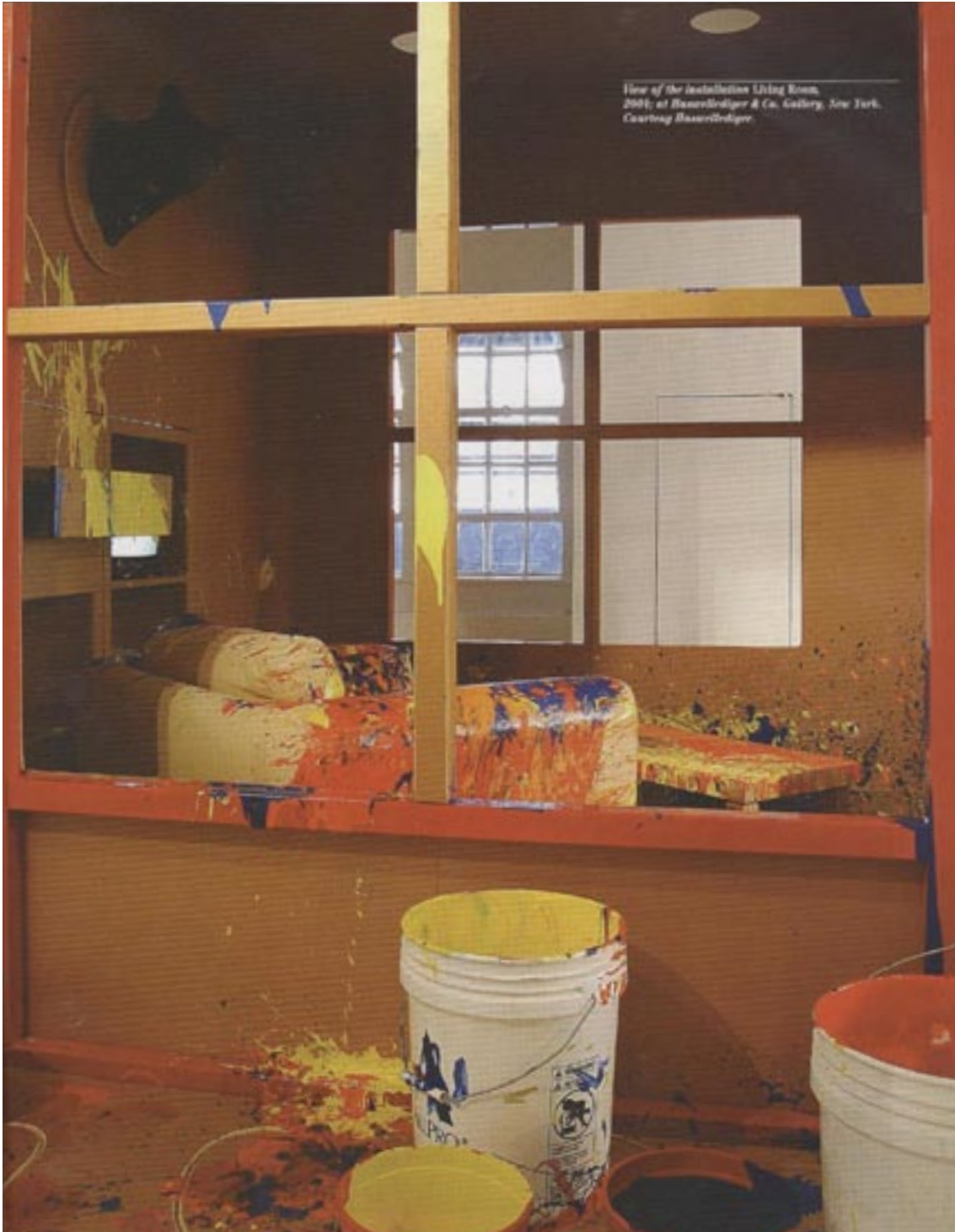
View of Richard Jackson's *The Three Bears*, 2004, mixed-media installation, at Foundation 20 21, New York.

PUBLICATION
CONTEXT

Art In America
Richard Jackson

PUBLISHED
PAGE

September 2005
2/5

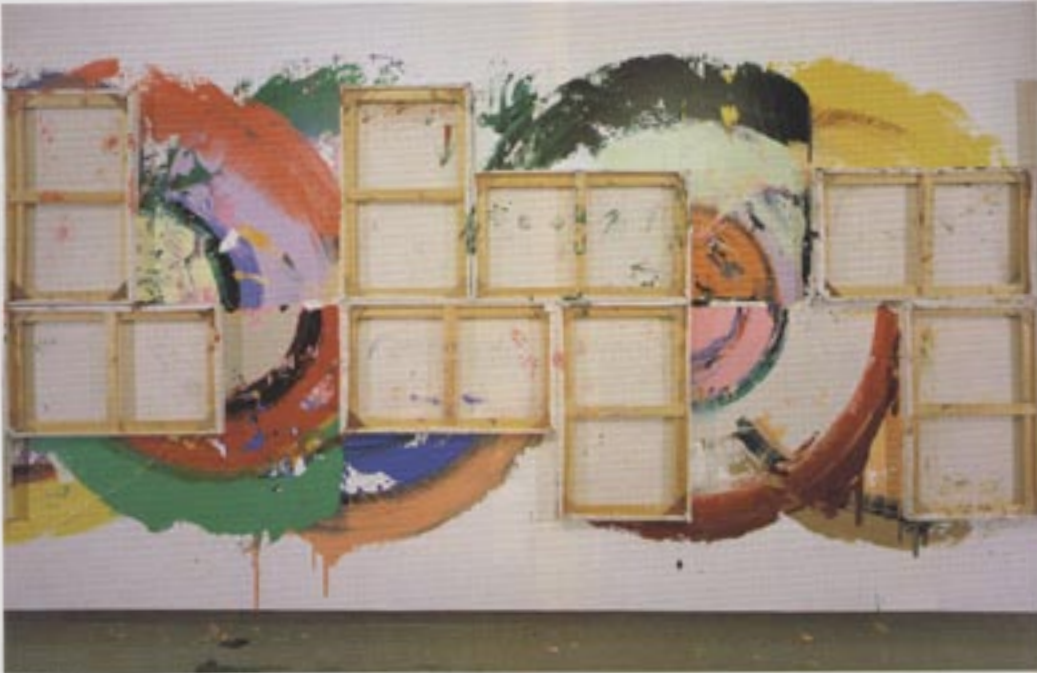


PUBLICATION
CONTEXT

Art In America
Richard Jackson

PUBLISHED
PAGE

September 2005
3/5



*Untitled, 1978, enamel, wood, acrylic paint, 11 by 72 feet; at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Photo this spread courtesy Hauser & Wirth, Zurich/London.
Untitled, 1978, enamel, wood, acrylic paint, 16 by 19 by 26 1/2 feet; at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles.*



What Jackson terms “the possibility of failure” has long been a central element of his esthetic, and perhaps a factor in his relatively low profile.

blatantly alluded to and borrowed from other artists. Works of the 1970s make brilliant use of Jasper Johns’s device of smearing paint with broom or a ruler; a later Jackson work involving a Ford Pinto is titled like Johns’s famous 1960 work, *Painting with Two Balls* (1967); he also stuck a copy of a Kenneth Noland target painting in an installation/performance titled *Deer Beer* (1967-68).

Of course, witty references and the vis-à-vis equivalent of intertextuality are no guarantee of artistic success—a work needs to stand on its own merits. To my eye, Jackson’s works *Haswelllediger* and *Foundation 20 21* do entirely do enough with their allusions, nor do they transcend their influences. Too close to the work of Nauman, McCarthy and Rhoads they seem almost culturally redundant, a perhaps overly reliant on the easy transgression that has marked so much recent contemporary art. In the 1970s, by contrast, Jackson frequently alluded to Jasper Johns and others, but, ultimately, he was concerned with very different artistic questions. It’s not that I think Jackson should go back to scraping canvas across walls (as much as I would like to first see such works), but perhaps his art is more compelling when it finds a better balance between painting and sculpture, when the object, performance and the splattered upon paint are given equal emphasis. Happily *The Pink Empire*, a new work in Jackson’s London show over the summer, seems to have found a better solution to the challenge. The piece involves a large enclosed cube whose paint-splattered interior is visible only through means of video projections on the walls of gallery it sits in.

But perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised at the unevenness of Jackson’s work. What he terms “the possibility of failure” has long been a central element of his esthetic (and perhaps a factor in his relatively low public profile). As he told Hans-Ulrich Obrist in a 1998 in-



Dick's Deer, 2001, mixed media, dimensions variable; at *Haswelllediger*. Courtesy *Haswelllediger*.

been friends, and occasional deer-hunting buddies, since the 1960s; Jackson and McCarthy are old friends and former colleagues at UCLA, where Jackson was Rhoads’s teacher and mentor. I suspect that in all three cases, influences have been exchanged in both directions, with Jackson consciously riffing on his friends, while they in turn have borrowed ideas from him. In 1970, about the time Nauman began his corridor pieces, Jackson was building similar structures in his studio out of stretched canvases. Both Jackson and McCarthy have fashioned a lurid performance style out of the liquid properties and visceral messiness of paint. From 1976 to 1982, Jackson worked on *The Bedroom*, an installation in which every piece of furniture was handmade by the artist (Jackson’s work ethic, his insistence on doing without assistants even for the most large-scale projects, is a central part of his esthetic—he once built 1,000 clocks for an installation) and then subjected to a wild onslaught of paint, leaving it looking not unlike the aftermath of one of McCarthy’s performances. There are similar affinities between Jackson’s large-scale kinetic works of the 1990s and Rhoads’s hardware-store-gone-haywire installations.

If Jackson has been quietly influential, especially in L.A., he has also





Above, view of the installation The Pink Empire, 2003, mixed mediums, at Hauser & Wirth, London. Left and opposite bottom, details of The Pink Empire. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.



view, "the thing that is wrong with the painting process is that it is an editing process, you make ten paintings and have an exhibition showing the best five. My work doesn't edit anything, it's evidence of a work performed, of a process."¹

Two exhibitions of Richard Jackson's work have been on view at Hauser&Wirth & Co. Gallery, New York (Nov. 18, 2004-Jan. 15, 2005); Foundation 20 21 (near Nyctean), New York (Nov. 18, 2004-Jan. 22, 2005); and Hauser & Wirth, London (June 2-July 22). The three shows are documented in a forthcoming catalogue that includes contributions from Paul McCarthy and others.

1. In 1986, I cited Jackson's Rosamund Felton piece in my contribution to the catalogue of a traveling show that featured Agb-Boam and Marcaccio along with 18 other contemporary painters. See Eghaïel Shukstein, "The Life and Afterlife of Painting: A Descriptive Chronology of Six Decades (1920-1990)," in *Abstract Painting, Once Branded*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Boston, 1998, p. 25.
2. "Unusual Behavior: Pong," in *Richard Jackson*, Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zurich, 1998, p. 18.