

KELLEY JOHNSON

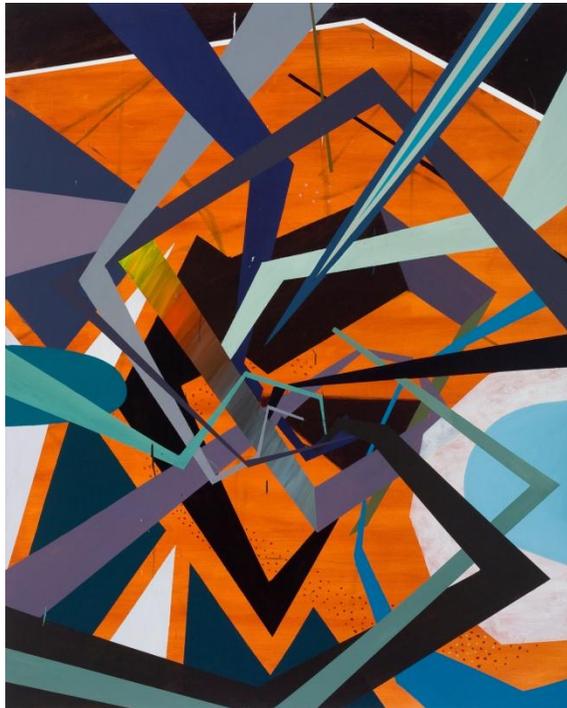
RECENT PAINTINGS

September 2010

Ed Paschke used to say that painters should spend time thinking about how to keep a viewer in a picture. By that he meant that there were avenues one could investigate to overcome the short attention span of most viewers of art, their four or five second terse perusal followed by moving on to the next picture. How could you slow that up, how could you cajole the viewer to stay in a few more seconds, how could you extend the visual engagement until that fulcrum point where the viewer was hooked, where the balance had shifted and the painting was more or less in control of the viewer and not vice-versa? I thought of Paschke when I first encountered the recent work of Kelley Johnson. Every image—and I mean every image—became like another pool to dive into, a realm of visual intrigue that wouldn't allow me to turn away, each work absorbing and self-sufficient.

It wasn't pictorial tricks that Paschke was talking about, no gimmicks or manipulative gestures (though some of those do exist, some interesting color combinations that attract the eye, certain ambiguous treatments of the figure or push/pulls between abstraction and representation, these will slow up a viewer's rapid scan until they puzzle them out). Rather, Paschke had in mind a call for determination and intensity on the part of the artist, a kind of committed integrity and conviction that would somehow invite closer examination and lead the viewer to make that leap from looking to seeing. Johnson's work surprised me, it didn't matter much if he was slathering on paint in amorphous gestural abstraction or setting up taut and rigorous geometrical patterns, it became secondary if he was setting up meandering loops that hugged the surface or different pictorial planes that seemed to careen into deep space, I stopped caring about whether he was effacing his images with bold areas of black or skirting at the edge of cartoon imagery. All that mattered was that each painting was absorbing, completely and totally internally consistent, each one taking a path, sometimes a differing path, sometimes a surprising path, to what became its inexorable conclusion.

The ten large paintings on display here seem to me to represent ten tough and hard-won journeys, ten ways a painter works his or her way through one of the core questions often asked by an artist alone in his or her studio—"OK, I've done this to the painting, now what is it telling (offering, challenging, denying, impeding, preventing, etc.) me to do next?"



Johnson certainly begins these journeys with a level playing field. Each of the ten canvases is vertical and measures either 74 x 60 or 48 x 38 inches. He stretched ten white voids, ten templates of the abyss, and then, as painters always have and always will, he made a mark, a beginning toward an uncertain and distant end. And only Johnson knows what came next, certainly the ebb and flow of decision and counter-decision, certainly hours and hours where he was economical and focused, and then those hours where he was undoubtedly disconcerted and lost. All we as viewers get to see is the final moment in this process, when the mark-making stops, when it becomes irrelevant to his intentions to make one more brushstroke.

It's fairly common for an artist's hand to have habitual tendencies, ways of manifesting personhood that while successively modified over the course of a career bespeak certain core attitudes and concerns. For Kelley Johnson it seems that for a long time those have been forceful and ambiguous shapes and forms that sat firmly in the front of deep spaces, richly painted in a usually dark palette, a predilection for stripes and differing paint textures, a kind of churning of allusive subject matter into tense psychologically fraught compositions that, if it did not seem clichéd to note, remind one a bit of Max Beckmann, another artist with great connection to St. Louis. There is almost always a darkness to Johnson, a kind of restlessness, a tumult that makes his work exercises in the changeling and inconstant nature of reality that seemed to me at times powerful descents into a maelstrom.

While I'll argue for some important differences in this new body of work, the images that appear closest to what earlier concerned Johnson are *Untitled I*, *Untitled VI*, and *Construction to Avoid Drowning*. Bold diagonal arcs sometimes suggest just themselves and sometimes seem to accrete toward some kind of actual structure. But the spatial order that underpinned most of Johnson's work a few years ago is gone, or at the very least has been turned upside down, imploded into some topsy-turvy realm where everything seems to careen about wildly, ready to come asunder, chasing after itself in a largely fruitless effort to escape the chaos that everywhere threatens it. Light still carefully models most of the elements in these paintings, and two (*Untitled I* and *Construction to Avoid Drowning*) in different ways take the viewer into layers of space, but without offering a place as well.

Untitled II and *Untitled V* also contain elements that recall earlier interests of Johnson, the meandering loops in the former and the bold stripes in the latter. They seem two very wistful paintings, almost elegiac and tender, and they provide a kind of respite here, a breathing space where the eye can relax a bit. They're rich images that in their way delight in the chromatics and tactility of oil paint, its inherent lusciousness that for six or seven hundred years has never lost its allure.

But those same elements almost seem employed against themselves in *Slow Hum* and *Untitled IV*. Here most forcefully Johnson seems to suggest turning away from the skills and experiences of more than a decade as a professional artist, here he returns painting to something instinctive and fundamental, almost a primal messing about of liquids. *Slow Hum* looks as if it could have been painted with either end of the brush or with the artist's fingers. There's a velocity to both images, a hurried and impetuous quality that teeters at the edge of losing control. The beauty

of the colors only slightly ameliorates the relentless surging of paint here, these are an examination of how much a trained hand can go wild, work against skill, and through the slathering and slithering of paint evoke a sense of a world gone asunder. Johnson puts a thick hood of the severest black around *Slow Hum*, as if he could cap the chaos, stop it from running wild, impose his will on the passions seething below. But he can't, and this and its colleague are true expressionist images, apertures into something very raw and visceral.

All of these paintings are, in their own ways, similarly edgy and engaged. They become like open-ended chapters in a stream of consciousness narrative, more suggestive than specific, but windows toward an acknowledgement of the slender threads that hold existence together. Their wisdom seems bought at a high price, and as each image absorbs our attention, keeping us in Paschke's few extra seconds and more, Kelley Johnson offers that most profound of all engagements, the glimpse into the mind of another human being and, if even for a succession of moments, possession of it and all that implies.

—James Yood



James Yood directs the New Arts Journalism program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he teaches modern and contemporary art history. He writes regularly for Artforum magazine. This essay is one in a series of the gallery's exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.

Images:
Untitled (I), 2010. Oil on canvas,
 74 x 60 inches
Untitled (VII), 2010. Oil on canvas,
 74 x 60 inches

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.