

## “The Subject is Light”

Julian Jackson's new abstractions from the series 'the Elements' are not so unlike the paintings that came before. They have the same refined, sensitive touch that is almost more felt than visible, the same inflected, slightly unfocused luminosity, a glow both natural and cinematic that suggests more idyllic times and places. That said, the new paintings have also changed radically, if radical is not too abrupt a word for work that is so mulled over, so carefully conceived and executed. One point of departure is that they are no longer abstracted architectural interiors based on a grid but skyscapes or pastorals instead, mediated through the history of art, channeling the spirit of Tiepolo and Constable, say, especially in their respective depictions of the celestial. Jackson has also brightened his palette considerably, taking as his main subjects light (as always) and cosmic spaces filled with hovering, softly blurred globes of elusive color. The scale, accordingly, has expanded. Jackson said that they were a return, of sorts, to paintings he had made ten years ago for his father, soon after he died. At the time, he wanted to paint images of the night sky, since Jackson had always thought of his father as a special star. These canvases, however, are not about night. Instead, they are extraordinarily buoyant, celebratory even, like champagne, but held together by an understated structure that lends ballast and formal tension. The rich colors layered between more nuanced shades, the stream and sensation of billowing clouds (you suspect that if you blew on them they would shift direction) are anchored by Jackson's meticulous—if intuitive—placement of various-sized, variously shaped and colored globes, some opaque, others diaphanous but all radiant. They constitute the path he wants your eye to travel.

*Ryōanji*, titled after the famous Japanese temple, is emblematic of Jackson's profound and longstanding interest in Asian art. Its format is an extended horizontal rectangle, the field a lovely, light-shimmered, barely-there green. A bundled shape of wine and other softened blue-reds occupies the left side and seems to be irresistibly drawn to a gorgeous poppy-red bloom with an unexpected blue center on the right, a compositional trope that occurs in other paintings as shapes attract each other. But it is the color of the ground that is the most alluring, like the light under a leaf or the pale froth of beaten tea, then delicately warmed, cooled and bound with a creaminess that is utterly seductive. *Arc*, while smaller than *Ryōanji*, has a similar rectangular format and is a yellow-orange-green filtered through other colors. It features a uneven bridge of golden orange ovals that traverses the painting. *Solar* is bolder, sultry, suffused with golds, reds, violets, always touched by some shade of blue here or there, some greens and suggests heat, high summer (as do most of these paintings; Jackson says you can pretty much tell what season of the year he has made a painting in) while *Flare* is also seductively warm, balanced by cools, consisting of many gradations and shades of oranges, corals, reds, with one red that is particular arresting, glowing with jeweled clarity. *Moment*, on the other hand, looks like pure sky, only more perfect, more pink, blue and white, full of racing, flirtatious rococo clouds and while there are no putti visible, it seems their kind of habitat. As is evident, Jackson believes that sky is one of the most beautiful things that exist.

As the result of expert, elegant crafting and close observation of phenomena, the formal pleasures of these pitch-perfect paintings are many: the complex interplay of color and

light, the mutable relationship of the shapes that seem to crowd and disperse, gently pushing and pulling against each other, the rhythms, the ambiguous, indeterminate space. But Jackson also prefers to see them in more experiential ways, as the outcome of personal events in his life, as a means to understand the natural world. He is not a theorist and he would like to seize something from the flux of life, to link his art with primal, current experience. He also thinks of painting as a place to enter as “one might a forest” and to “revisit often as one would a favorite mountain, tree, garden, or building.”

These paintings, he said, in a recent studio visit, are the ongoing ripple effect of an epiphany he experienced several years ago at an artist’s residency. He had spent a month there, mostly among the trees, looking at the light filtering through the leaves. It helped him see other possibilities, other directions for his work, a quiet shift that still inspires him, that still refreshes his practice. It also resurrected memories of childhood summers. During those summers, he spent a lot of time in trees, gazing upward, the hazy, spangled light falling down on him through the leaves, like a blessing.

Lilly Wei

Lilly Wei is a New York-based independent curator, essayist and critic who writes regularly for *Art in America* and is a contributing editor at *ARTnews* and *Art Asia Pacific*.