

Olitski's Light: The Unending Love Affair

Abstract:

Divided into three sections and informed by my own light/photographic studies, this essay will demonstrate the recurring motif of *light* and a simultaneous freeing and containing that occurs throughout modernist painter Jules Olitski's oeuvre.



Jules Olitski, *Harlow Flow*, 1964

Cloud Containers



My first reaction to *Harlow Flow* in the collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery was a dismissal on the grounds that it was 'too pretty.' My own rejection of the obviously beautiful, the obviously Jules Olitski, *Prince Patutsky's* likeable, was a denial of feeling in favour of criticality, but this in turn *Command*, 1966 also nearly prevented a close reading of the work, nearly prevented this essay. It wasn't until in hindsight I saw the painting, in my mind, I saw the moment I saw the painting, and I saw myself in that moment,

The contemporary Western world's emphasis on (let alone academia's requirements of) rationalisation creates compulsions to constantly try to convert visuals into words. The point is, they are not words. Painting is a language which does not adequately translate to cognitive definitions. It expresses the intangible, *is* the visual equivalent of the intangible. Painting is in the silent brief moment that we first see something beautiful, before interruption, before question - pure chemical reactions - unseen movement. It seems now that to access this moment is a feat. To keep it I must look away before I see too much, so that what I do see remains wonderful. Before the edges of the frame start to kick in, start to pin down the wonder, start to put the clouds into labelled containers.

Harlow Flow is a container - not just any container, Olitski's container, that is to say, a container that is free and freeing.

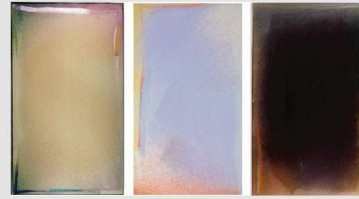
Both sides and the bottom feature the same colour; these are the 'boundaries.' They are broken. The right side of the painting bleeds in a gradient that extends to fade across the canvas. I imagine this to be the suggestion of, not (ever) a certain telling of, form. Suggesting that the container is lit from the left, producing a shadow that extends from the edge, disappearing as it gets closer to its creator, the light. Because of Olitski's ability to fulfill painting's freedom, what I have described here as the light, may actually be the shadow, and the shadow, the light.

Abstract images produce an uncertainty of orientation. How does the artist themselves know which way is the right way? I believe a painting's orientation is influenced by the suggestions it produces. The top of *Harlow Flow* is the only side that seems to not feature an 'edge.' Here we see the paint stop before it expands outside the 'container,' suggesting a rule, gravity. The non-uniform line that the tops of the colours produce would suggest that the contents of the container are not still, and can almost barely be held down (by any rule). Perhaps this

substance is half cloud, half liquid. Olitski had a desire to paint 'a spray of colour that hangs like a cloud'¹ I can imagine he may not have wanted to include any edges, but the canvas itself made this decision for him regardless. And so in sighing stroke he contained his clouds, knowing they would always be bound by some kind of edges. To me, Olitski's corpus is a collection of *cloud containers*.

Even upon surfaces without them, worlds not bound by them, we read rules, we read gravity, we read edges, we read light and dark to define space, we read depth, even though *there is none*.

We understand the world within the painting, through our understanding of the world the painting is situated within. If we were to look at a painting, without ever looking at a room, looking at a landscape, we would only see the surface, we would only see the paint. It is our experience of the 3D, tangible world that grants us the tools to see and create worlds within these paintings. As 'freeing' as these alternate worlds are to visit, our unbreakable tether of reliance to the one we live in is binding. We are bound even when standing in the face of a world that wishes to free us. Olitski does not abide by the rules.



Olitski's series of 'cloud containers' titled 'Looshas' share the same name as his dog at the time. **Loosha** is a Polish name that means *light or bringer of light*.

Imagine it's a rainy night. All of the street and car lights are reflected *in* the road. Now imagine you can't see any of the light bulbs, any of the cars, just the reflections of them *in* the road. This world of intangibilities is dependent on, and only accessible through the one we're bound to. Olitski's containers are invitations, windows to these alternate worlds, through alternate ways of seeing the one we're in. We are granted access, yet we insist on running laps around the edges. We take our permanent markers and repetitively run lines over the boundaries to lock them into place. We rationalise, more concerned with who made the painting, when, how, and where they made it. We draw the frame around them, again and again - *we are the containers*.

1. "Jules Olitski Biography, Art, And Analysis Of Works". *The Art Story*. N.p., 2017. Web. 2 Apr. 2017.

Signifiers

How do we perceive surface? If two surfaces possess identical qualities - same colour, texture, transparency - then how can we know the difference between the two? How do we differentiate a surface facing forward from a surface facing to the side?

Light. Light is the signifier of form. She alters our perception of the same surfaces through her interactions, and so we see multiple variations of the same surface. Light shows us what a surface feels like without us having to touch it. Light becomes The Creator of feeling. What is lit, is what we see. In an ocularcentric world, light is Goddess.



Rembrandt, *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, 1633

So what happens when only the signifiers of form are transferred into picture?



Olitski, title unknown, approx. 2000

Through my own readings of Olitski's paintings, I was quite quickly convinced that every one of them was in some way a love letter to light. After a little research, any doubt I had towards my theory had slipped away.. I learnt that Olitski had a love for the renaissance painters, and unsurprisingly, "...always had reproductions of the Old Masters in his studio and worked from them."²

2. "Jules Olitski: "Expect Nothing, Do Your Work, Celebrate"". *Artsy*. N.p., 2017. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.

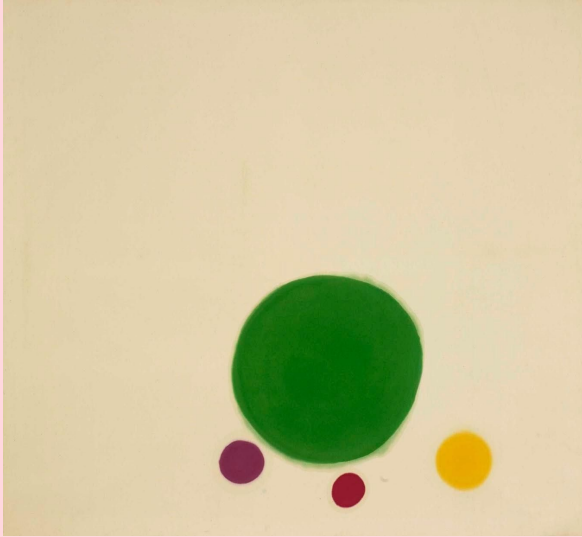


Rembrandt, *A Young Woman Trying On Earrings*, 1657

A quote from his daughter revealed a particular fondness for Rembrandt, "As a boy he saw Rembrandt at the 1939 World's Fair and was deeply affected by that experience. They were the first real paintings he'd ever seen, and I believe they gave him courage to think that being an artist might be a worthy career."² This made complete sense to me, as the renaissance painters' chiaroscuro is still studied today as a method of depicting *light*. In my first year of photography I recreated Rembrandt's *A Young Woman Trying On Earrings*; the assignment aimed to further students' experience in controlling light to produce atmospheric effects. To be trained in photography is to be tuned into the light. What the light does not touch is excluded from registration left undrawn by the emulsion/sensor.

With painting's freedom, Olitski frees the light. We can imagine the source inspiration for *Prince Patutsky's Command*, may it be a small shine on the nose of a young woman, or a fabric crease's highlight, the reference becomes irrelevant, it disappears and we are left with the delicate cloud of light existing self-contained.

3. "Jules Olitski: "Expect Nothing, Do Your Work, Celebrate"". *Artsy*. N.p., 2017. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.

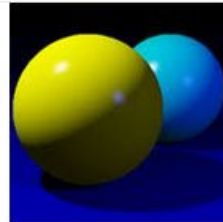


So how does a painting like *Monkey Woman, 1964* fit into my theory of floating light and cloud containers? Their solid edged shapes on raw canvas don't evoke the cloud like floating feeling that a painting like *Prince Patutsky's Command* does. There's no sense of light or shadow, no depth, and other than the canvas edge, no frame. *Monkey Woman* looks more an arranged still life of peas or pom poms sitting on a table than it does clouds or light.

It's not immediately readable, but these shapes *are* a variation of the same thing I described in my reading of *Prince Patutsky's Command*. They

are highlights. Yes these round forms are sitting Jules Olitski, *Monkey Woman, 1964* together on a surface, but not in a 3 dimensional

A **specular highlight** is the bright spot of light that appears on shiny objects when illuminated (for example, see image at right). **Specular highlights** are important in 3D computer graphics, as they provide a strong visual cue for the shape of an object and its location with respect to light sources in the scene.



[Specular highlight - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Specular_highlight)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Specular_highlight

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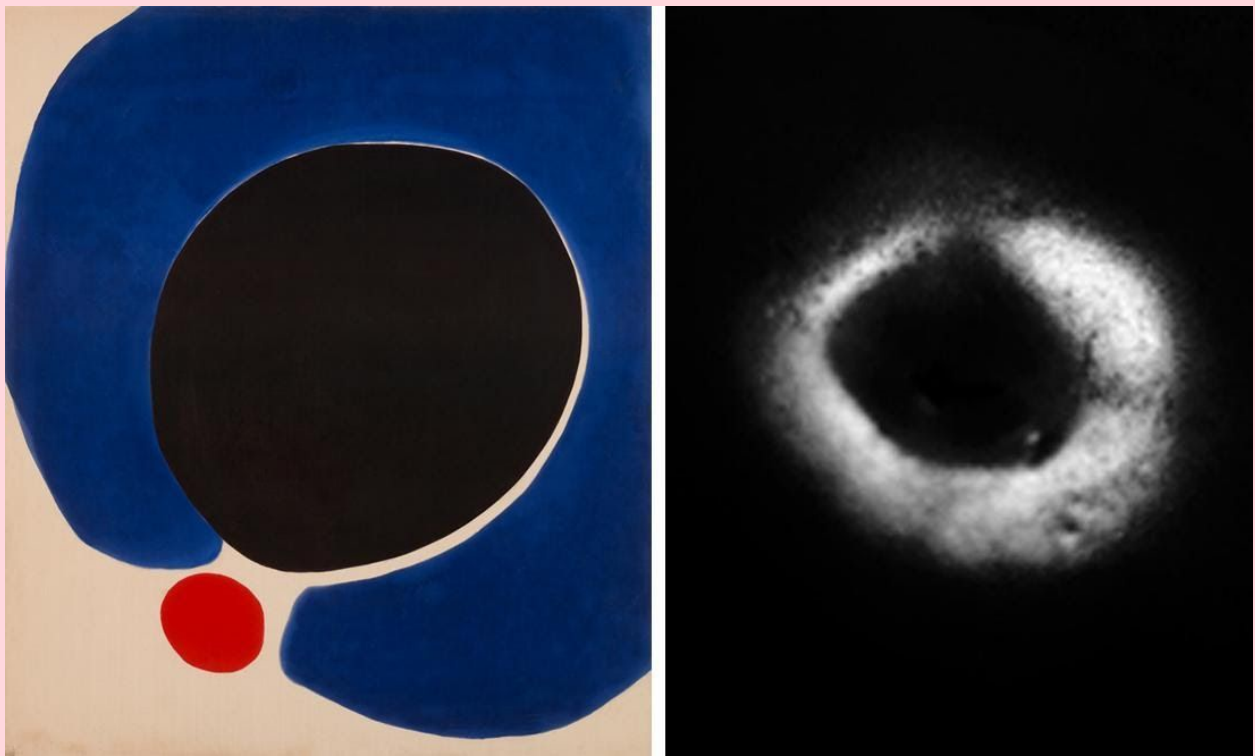
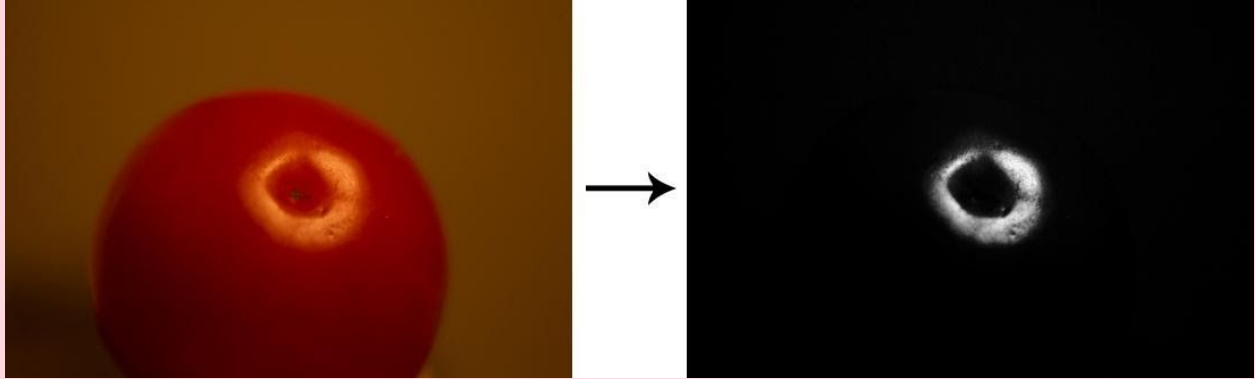
still life sense, but rather, they are a congregation of specular highlights.

In photography, it is easy to lose detail in the specular highlights. To expose your image to cater for

the majority of the shot often means that these highlights become whited-out. If you were to run a 'colour picker' over these overexposed white areas, they would all register as the same white, the *whitest white*. Forming a shape so solid you could draw a line around it. This is why it is so fitting that Olitski uses the bluest blues and the reddest reds (seen in *Cleopatra Flesh*) to form his 'solid' shapes.

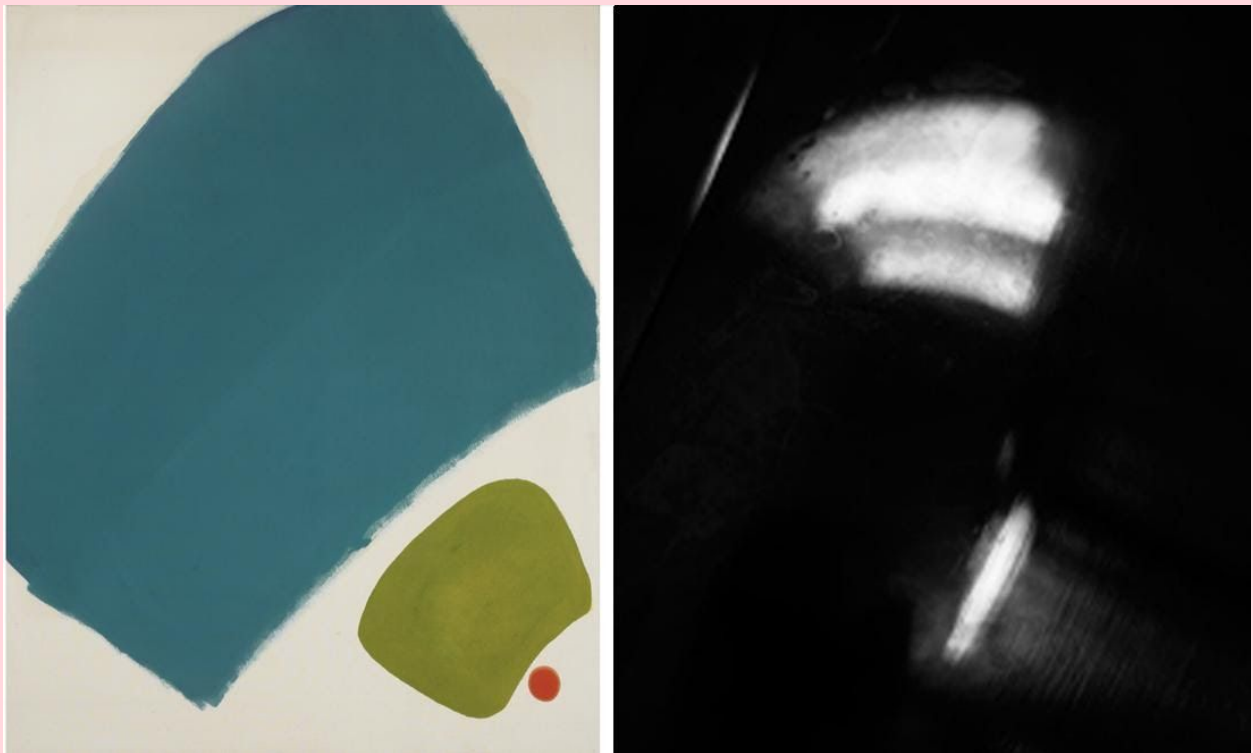
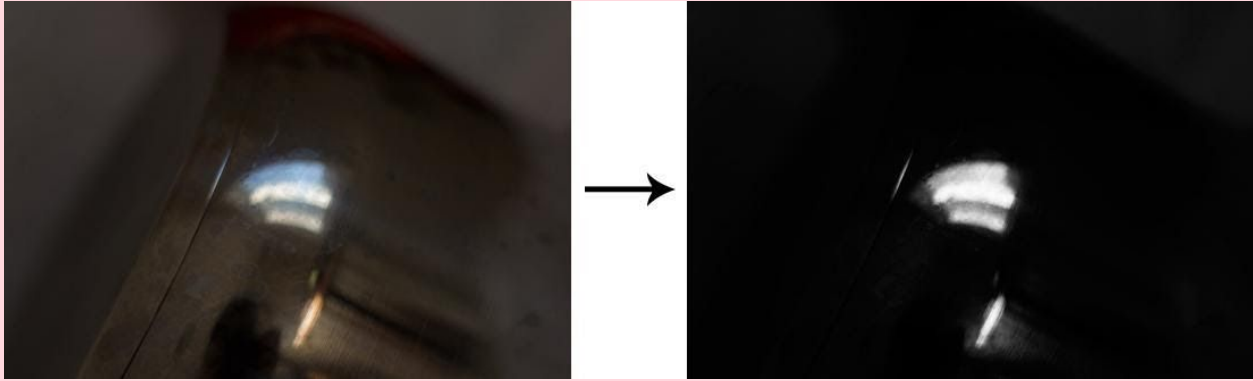
To expose a photograph in favour of these bright highlights would mean that the rest of the image disappears into darkness - only floating light forms remain. This act of separation and selection is what I imagine Olitski's eyes were doing in preparation to paint.

Using items found in my kitchen, I will now photographically demonstrate this separation to visually explain what I believe Olitski was painting in works like *Cleopatra Flesh, 1962* and *Prince Patutsky Triumph Over Kaiser Hymie, 1964*.



Jules Olitski, *Cleopatra Flesh*, 1962

Olitski manages to detach light play from its fleeting, vantage point-dependant playground and give it a new habitat - an eternal playground. He performs an unsticking, as if to peel a solid plastic sticker off a surface. The highlight is freed from the object that holds it, freed from form, to become its own floating form. Allowed to float away and rendezvous with the canvas.



Jules Olitski *Prince Patutsky Triumph Over Kaiser Hymie*, 1964

Just as I separated the lights from the darks in the images above, extenuating their differences, Olitski extenuates contrasts, making each element, each colour, more potent than if it stood alone. Olitski's repeated choice to pair two colours from opposite sides of the colour wheel is what I see as his version of chiaroscuro. Magically, he makes the bluest blue even bluer by having it hug the reddest red. As if one cannot exist to fulfillment without meeting the other. In a codependent relationship, counterparts give power to one another. Connected, but unmistakably different.

Infatuation as Lens

Olitski's cloud containers serve as lenses, they alter our perception. Lenses are frequencies we tune into - trained perspectives. The frame depicts what the lens sees, what the lens chooses. This repeated performance of selection becomes collection. We sift through, we mine the everyday. Our lenses are our infatuations, our path is plotted in 'eureka!' moments. The light is Olitski's 'gold.' His corpus may just be an extravagant sticker collection. Mirroring their initial escape from reference, they escape again, from the canvas. They float across the room and stick themselves on our eyes. They become our lenses. The window extends, the frame repeats upon our eyes. We look away from the image, and yet we still see it.

Through my readings of Jules Olitski's paintings, this essay serves as a lens itself, as an access point, a window through which to see. Even if just for a moment, wherever you are sitting right now, you may look around and find numerous 'Olitskis'. You might have an Olitski on your very nose, an Olitski puddled at your feet everyday in the hall. That is how my writing will escape the edges of its page.

