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Benham, Brooke E., "Criticism Through Interpretation: Jules Olitski" (2020). *Undergraduate Research Symposium*. 19.

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Criticism Through Interpretation: Jules Olitski

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ARTH 350W: Art Criticism

Dr. Vittorio F. Colaizzi

Feb. 8th, 2020

Modernist art critics tend to focus solely on the formal elements. In insisting that he only reacts to what is “in [the work],” not any additional information, the art critic Jerry Saltz fails to utilize relevant insights (Saltz, 2003, p. 21). Author and critic Susan Sontag attempts to justify this medium specific approach by arguing that the merit of a work of art is independent of any interpretation (Sontag, 1966). However, critical interpretation based on historical and cultural connections can produce more insight about the form and processes themselves. An analysis of Jules Olitski’s 1976 painting *Kristina Type 3*, will refute an exclusively formal critical method without disregarding the importance of form. This paper will show how Olitski’s history allows the viewer to better understand the political and spiritual implications in his unorthodox pictorial construction.

Olitski was born in Ukraine in 1922, months after his father, a commissar, was executed by the Communist Party. He immigrated to New York in 1926 and had a successful career as a painter. The artist stayed with his 3rd wife, Kristina, until he died in 2007 (Wecker & Carmean Jr., 2017). In the early 1960s he stained canvases with dyes and thinned paints, in 1965 he used a spray gun to paint with, and in the 1970s he began to create thicker textured paintings. Clement Greenberg favored Olitski’s early stained paintings, as they fit his description of openness and clarity (Greenberg, 1995, p. 195). He also credited Olitski’s sprayed paintings as creating an illusion of depth, without violating flatness (Greenberg, 1995). Lucy Lippard instead disparaged Olitski’s painting as “visual Muzak” (Dawson, 2006). She claims Olitski’s paintings to be predictable, arguing against Michael Fried’s argument that Olitski’s paintings are “almost certainly the first paintings to acknowledge the existence of deductive structure as an achievement...” (Fried, 2011). Fried defined deductive structure using the example of Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella claiming their work, “appear[ed] to have been compelled or dictated

rather than to have been described by a cursive, freehand gesture.” (Fried, 2011, p. 249). For Fried, who was a protégé of Greenberg, deductive structure was a function of self-definition, and Greenberg had written that “‘Purity’ meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.” (Greenberg, 1995).

Greenberg developed his theories in relation to the abstract expressionist paintings of Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, and others. A contemporaneous critic, Harold Rosenberg, saw things differently. In his 1952 essay, “The American Action Painters,” Rosenberg argued that these paintings were products of material engagements and did not originate in the artist’s mind (Houston, 2012, p. 260). However, each material and each technique were themselves products of the artists’ cognition and experiences.

Hanging in the Chrysler Museum, *Kristina Type 3* appears so large that it feels as if you are in the painting when standing in front of it. The scale and transparent colors seem to resonate in a spiritual rather than physical realm. Around the edges of the vertical canvas are thin dark gray strokes of paint, which enclose an area of translucent beige paint. When the light hits it, it glows, highlighting its texture and revealing that the paint is not applied in a consistent direction. A thin vertical brush stroke runs down the center, changing from blue at the top to pink half-way down.

Olitski’s earliest inspiration came from the paintings of Rembrandt and El Greco who depicted the victories of God. Regarding El Greco’s *The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception* (1608-1613), Olitski stated, “I was possessed,” (Olitski, L., 2014, p. 5), adding, “It just took me – I ascended with the Virgin (Olitski, L., 2014, p. 7). As an artist, he aimed to convey this amount of feeling through his work, using feeling as his sole subject (Rose, 2014, p. 13).

Olitski states that throughout his career, “the look changes perhaps, but the work always comes from the same source” (Grimley, 2014, p. 9). Unlike Saltz's off-the-cuff critical method and despite its sometimes-compelling results, gathering knowledge about an artist's past can help find the meaning inherent in the formal decisions that went into their work. During the dedication of his sculpture *Elyon* (heavenly) (1990), of the Star of David, Olitski asked a reporter, “Why was nothing said or done about the Holocaust? This terrible silence has haunted me all my life.” (Wecker & Carmean Jr., 2017). Olitski called the sculpture ‘heavenly’ to evoke “all the lights that God created,” and said the project represented the first time “I could speak through my art as a Jew” telling the reporter, “I hope my work is imbued with this light. As an artist, I feel for a work of art to be any good it must be alive. It must be a work that lifts the spirits.” (Wecker & Carmean Jr., 2017).

The thick iridescent swirls of paint on the surface of the star are seen among many of his paintings. One example is *Flight Scriber* (1990) and another painting that he chose to title *Shekinah Light* (1990). This term refers to God’s manifestation among men (Jewish Encyclopedia, 2020). The allusion to light using thick paint is also apparent in *Kristina Type 3*. The soft color of the transparent paint seems inviting and the canvas size is powerful. The thin dark brushstrokes at the perimeters, however, do not align with Olitski’s depiction of light. This area could thus represent the opposite in response to the dark world that killed his father and his people. The scale and format tell a narrative of triumph regarding the overwhelming freeing presence of the light versus the dark lines that retreat along the sides of the canvas.

Lucy R. Lippard points out that Greenberg’s acquaintances with artists must have affected his theories (Lippard, 1971, p.305). In discussing Olitski, Greenberg states “what makes Olitski’s paint surface a factor in the creation of major art- is the way in which one of the

profoundest pictorial imaginations of this time speaks through it” (Greenberg, 1995, p. 230). He alludes to the idea that the artist is, in fact, speaking through his work, and credits this as a factor of Olitski’s artistic success. Olitski writes of his encounters with Greenberg. Discussing his approach to criticism he asked, “Is that what you do, get at the mechanism? Is that it?”.

Greenberg responded, “Yeah, the mechanism. And don’t ask me to explain”. Olitski stated that he knew what he meant by mechanism. He wrote “It’s what makes the heart pound and sound throughout the work” (Olitski, 1994, p. 128). He also noted that he didn’t believe Greenberg would admit to this out loud. However, the description suggests that Greenberg’s personal ties to and knowledge of the artists gave artwork more meaning to him. To add to this assumption, Fried acknowledges Olitski as a painter of feeling and states, “what I take to be their preeminence among their contemporaries chiefly resides not in the formal intelligence of their work... but in the depth and sweep of feeling which this intelligence makes possible.” (Fried, 2011, p. 251).

The feelings Olitski is able to portray through his work reflect his experience of the Holocaust and his spirituality. He states his goal in portraying feeling is to make the art “alive” (Rose, 2014, p. 17). Alex Grimley alluded to this metaphor in his article “Things Seen” writing that Olitski’s paintings, “seemed to pulse with an internal light” (Grimley, 2014, p. 9). In an interview, Olitski states, “I believe that when the artist is totally absorbed in the work, something else takes over” (Rose, 2014, p. 17). His wife recalls him saying that he would pray before his work, explaining that, “when I’m working, I’ll get out of [my own] way.” (Wecker & Carmean Jr., 2017). The format of *Kristina Type 3* invites the viewer to experience this feeling of freedom he has found in his spirituality: a freedom that the Holocaust could not take away from him.

In her classic 1964 essay “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag claims that, “... the function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is..., rather than to show what it means” (Sontag, 1966, p. 14). She exhorts us to “recover our senses,” saying “We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.” (Sontag, 1966, p. 14). A formal analysis of *Kristina Type 3* supplemented by the artist’s history in relation to the world helps the viewer to do just that as its elegiac content is revealed.

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