

Julies Olitski

Ukrainian b.1922 – d. 2007

Drafted into the army during World War II, Olitski married Gladys Katz. After his discharge the couple travelled to Asheville, NC and Mexico, settling in New York. Their daughter Eve was born in 1948. Soon after Olitski went to Paris on the G.I. Bill where he studied at the Ossip Zadkine School and the Academia de la Grande Chaumiere, both in Paris. There he saw the work of the European modern masters and engaged in a severe self-analysis, which involved painting while blindfolded to remove himself from his academic training as a portrait painter. He had his first one-person show at Galerie Huit, Paris in 1951. His work at that time was full of highly colorful imagery.

Olitski returned to New York in May, 1951. He divorced later that year. In 1952 he received his B.A. from New York University, followed in 1954 by an M.A in Art Education, also from New York University. He married Andrea Pearce in 1956 and joined the faculty of C. W. Post College on Long Island. In 1957 his second daughter, Lauren was born. The marriage ended in divorce in 1975. In 1958 Olitski had his first one-person show in New York, at the Zodiac Room of the Alexander Iolas Gallery.

In 1960 Olitski moved away from the thick, impassioned surfaces he had been working with, and began to stain the canvas with large areas of thin, brightly colored dyes. These were shown at a second French & Company exhibit, in April, 1961. He was asked to join the Poindexter Gallery, where he had several exhibitions. He gravitated to the new acrylic paints being developed in the early 1960s, creating large-scale paintings consisting of graphic shapes of bold color stained on to raw, unprimed canvas. He continued exhibiting in numerous galleries across the country, Canada and Europe, including the Lawrence Rubin Gallery and the Andre Emmerich Gallery, both in New York, the Kasmin Gallery in London, and the David Mirvish Gallery in Toronto. He won a prize at the Carnegie International in 1961 and began to be collected by museums.

Olitski taught at Bennington College from 1963 to 1967. In the fall of 1964 Olitski led a group of students on a field-trip to the studio of friend and neighbor, Kenneth Noland, in nearby South Shaftsbury, VT. The British sculptor, Anthony Caro was also present. The three artists discussed directions they were taking in their work. Olitski explained a desire to create "color that would hang in the air". The next day he rented an industrial spray gun and over the course of the next few weeks and months he evolved a radically innovative technique of layering atmospheric blankets of thin color sprayed on to the canvas. In the 1970s Olitski returned to the thick surfaces which characterized his work in the late 1950s but incorporated newly devised techniques such as using large squeegees, mops and brooms, taking advantage of the newly improved acrylic polymer and gel mediums. In 1994 Olitski was elected into the National Academy of Design. He became a member of the Academy of Arts and Letters in 2006 and was awarded the Skowhegan Award for Painting in 2007, just weeks before his death.

The late works from 2000 through January, 2007 are characterized by intensely colored orbs reminiscent of the stain paintings of the early 1960s, but with the added textures and various techniques included that he had developed over the decades. For the last thirty years of his life Olitski lived and worked in studios in New Hampshire and Florida and exhibited regularly until his death from cancer in 2007 at the age of 84.