



He's the master of the 'painting-event'

Richard Jackson and his 'Big Ideals' move beyond the limits of canvas

By Hunter Drohojowska

It's hard to put it together. Here's Richard Jackson, 45, tall, dark, and handsome, a laconic, fifth-generation Californian, all ready to go deer hunting on the 5,000-acre ranch north of Sacramento that he just inherited. The same Richard Jackson is squatting on the floor of the Rosamund Felsen Gallery drinking coffee and talking to a reporter about his installation — which looks like a paint factory after an explosion. "I just like to be excessive and extreme," says Jackson with a wry grin.

The gallery has been altered to measure 19 feet square and 16 feet high; the ceiling is slathered with hot and fast color in the heavy handed brushstroke of the abstract-expressionists. The walls are completely covered with 35 canvases surveying sundry abstract-expressionist styles — from de Kooning to Pollock — and hanging in the midst of all this energetic paint are a couple of huge four-pointed stars reaching out to the middles and the corners of the walls. The piece is titled "Big Ideals." Reinforcing his position as a man of contradictions, Jackson says, "I don't think I'm interested in painting at all. I see this more like an event. People see it and take what they want with them. Then it all comes down and it lives on in their memory."

Jackson spent more than a month and \$10,000 completing this installation, yet by Sept. 15, the gallery will look as though nothing had happened. "It will go to the dump, I guess," shrugs Jackson, his voice shaded with bitterness and indifference. "Nobody will pay to store it. It's like a gift to the art community and they're real happy to accept it. And not contribute anything."

Jackson intends his installations as statements against painting, especially against painting as a commodity. In the past he has nailed freshly painted canvases with their faces to the wall, and filled entire galleries with his abstract paintings stacked horizontally, one atop the other, so the paint oozed from their sides like frosting from an enormous acrylic cake. He wants his painting-events to remain etched in the viewer's memory, a feat he certainly achieved in 1981 when he stretched and painted 1,000 canvases, then stacked them in the shape of a huge ball in the marble-columned atrium of the L.A. County Museum of Art. That piece was titled "Big Ideas."

Jackson explains, "Some of my concerns at the beginning were to make painting more of a total kind of experience, so you can't look at it like a square on a wall. I'm interested in keeping them so they don't appeal so much to a materialist world. I like to



Conceptual artist Richard Jackson wants to "upset the painters and give them something think about. They haven't thought of anything new for 50 years."

the wall. That's aimed to upset the painters, and give them something think about. They haven't thought of anything new for 50 years."

Jackson's radical attitudes didn't come from school (he studied art at Sacramento State College and never got a degree) but from some of his friends in the area, artists of such stature as Bruce Nauman, Wayne Thiebaud and William Wyley. While they are not conceptual artists, all are concerned with content and ideas more than formal issues in art. "You have to entertain yourself in the studio, and when you deal with art on a conceptual level, you can. I'm lucky if I do 10 drawings a year because I try to keep them about ideas. If the ideas aren't strong enough, I don't want to make them. I don't want to knock out work. There's plenty of people doing that already."

Since Jackson rarely sells his art — though exhibiting consistently both here and abroad — he supports himself with his small construction business. "I work eight hours a day and that finances the artwork. When I first got interested in art, in 1959, there was no money in it. I thought maybe de Kooning made a living. Then it went to the other extreme where there was a lot of money for a few. It's gotten to be too much of that orientation. I'd like to bring it back where we could establish some tradition of not doing things for money, or at least not having it be a motivation in art."

Jackson also believes this leaves his art more accessible to the public. "You don't have to have \$100,000 to appreciate my work. You go to the gallery and you're treated the same as people with \$100,000. It appeals to the public in a larger sense."

But if that's so, why is the door to the installation barred and locked? "I really like to be able to control the viewer and originally thought of locking everybody out. Then I decided I would just lock the gate to certain people who I wouldn't want to be here."

"I thought about locking out all the art consultants, but Rosamund said that some of them are nice so I weakened on that point. But I don't approve of what they do. Their gallery travels in a briefcase. It makes art more exclusive and puts art in a place that's public but not in a way that I want it to. Nobody in those big offices gives a damn about art."

With that, Jackson got up and stretched his lanky frame, his thoughts already focused on the trip north where he would be alone in the desert with his thoughts, his independence.

make them unavailable to people... to keep them in an area where I feel I'm pushing boundaries. Experimenting. It's kind of like the difference in medicine between doing research and just practicing. I think there's plenty of people working on the illness." Jackson laughs heartily, a willing gadfly in what he sees as an overly commercial and materialistic art world. Although he occasionally sells his elegant working drawings, collecting Jackson's painting requires commitment to a permanent installation. In L.A., only collectors Stanley and Elyse Grinstein and Daniel Melnick own Jackson's paintings.

"People could own this stuff," says Jackson, "but they have to change the way they think about art. That's an

artist's job. I try and make work that doesn't just cater to what people think artwork is, but try to challenge those things. If they want to own something, they have to find a place for it, maybe stop hanging a lot of little paintings in one room and hang one big one."

Jackson is a conceptual artist who likes to poke holes in the heroic legend that surrounds the abstract expressionist movement of the 1950s. By colliding the different styles of ab-ex against one another, he challenges those artists' claims to a unique vision. "I hadn't painted for 15 years and I made 36 canvases in less than 36 days. They're not so bad and that's enough of a commentary. If you look closely, I just nailed through the front of them, to

Leo Jarzomb/Herald photographer

Where	Rosamund Felsen Gallery 669 N. La Cienega Blvd.
When	Through Sept. 15
How much	Free
Info	652-9172