

## n u l l Account by James Oscar Lee

Ashley Cook

June 22, 2020

James Oscar Lee's *n u l l Account* opened on February 15th at 1201 Bagley Street in Detroit, a location which was formerly the Engine Company No. 8, built in 1908 and functioned as a firehouse until 1982. Initially, it could be interesting to consider the relevance of choosing this location, which was in relatively raw condition, to host a contemporary painting show, but, throughout the history of Lee's practice, he has commonly chosen to exhibit his work between off site "found" spaces throughout the city and proper gallery spaces. Playground Detroit, who Lee is represented by, also engages in the practice of utilizing the unique vacant spots around, creating an alternative viewing experience to the traditional white cube type setting, which they also utilize, regularly hosting various exhibitions at their gallery space on Gratiot Avenue.

This most recent body of Lee's work consisted of various abstract paintings that were completed within the past year. As included with the information provided, "the title of the show refers to the lack of memory while producing the series", possibly hinting to a thought that some of the paintings may have been completed, then re-approached, as if each canvas features two different paintings layered on top of one another, with the sweeping strokes and large cloud like forms setting a background for the smaller lines of colors to dance in front of.

The raw canvas exposed feels like air, causing the paint on the canvas to seem almost sculptural, or like foliage in a wild garden. Some of the paintings also have the artists signature painted into them, largely at the top, as mimicked by the promotional and informational material found online and at the show; other paintings included vague messages painted

into them like "Damon, I"... or "on against my"... Lee seems to consistently dabble in and out of elusiveness with the minimal offering of literature or conversation surrounding the reasoning for the decision making in his work. Despite the limited one to two sentences usually provided for a series, the writing does allow for the pieces to be read with direction but not dictation.



*Cloud Jaw* © Photo by Ashley Cook

Artistic liberty and experimentation also occasionally inspire the installation of his exhibitions, particularly within the realm of the off-site/found spaces. Looking back at his show *Power, Corruption & Lies* presented in a vacant space Downtown Detroit in 2018, Lee used ratchet straps to hang a portion of the show, with plastic wrapped around the paint-

ings as they hovered above the ground and casted shadows onto the surrounding architecture. These works were accompanied by live plants and neon accent lighting placed seemingly randomly throughout the space, and during the opening, a covert musical performance by MGUN. For the opening of *n u l l Account*, Lee continued this tradition with obscure spot lighting and a live set by Booty Dart. The paintings were presented almost like they were just another visitor at a dark party, visually altered by the transforming shadows of the guests, holding space as an aspect of the night, however not being the total reason why we were all there. These non-traditional approaches to the installation of his paintings could be acting as an avenue to express conceptual viewpoints, as he explores different ways that such an archaic and traditional medium could be presented.



*Crushed Ice Joys* © Photo by Ashley Cook

In addition, there was the price list component of the shows information, which boldly and candidly revealed how much each painting costs. I can't help but wonder how the prices being readily available to review, before even entering the show, has an impact on how we see the paintings in front of us; like, how a painting looks and makes us feel vs. how the painting looks and makes us feel through the lens of a dollar sign. Either way, this could be considered a part of the work as well, just as much as the name of the show, the titles or the writing, if presented publicly to interpret. These details were most likely included simply to ease the process of the financial exchange, however it could be interesting to use

this idea as part of a conceptual or political position, like in a funny attempt to create a kind of commentary on the overarching financial market that is so present in art production today, especially as the act of publicly presenting this information relates to the slightly avant-garde approach to other aspects of the opening.



*3 plus, parkway* © Photo by Ashley Cook

As the show continued past opening night, gallery hours took place during the day, and the works were lit with natural sunlight in addition to the lighting from the opening. This created an entirely different way to view the paintings; as the imperfections of the old architecture became visible, the variations of textures surrounding the works complimented the abstract compositions, further animating them as contemporary art existing literally within the timeline of the history of Detroit.

*runner*