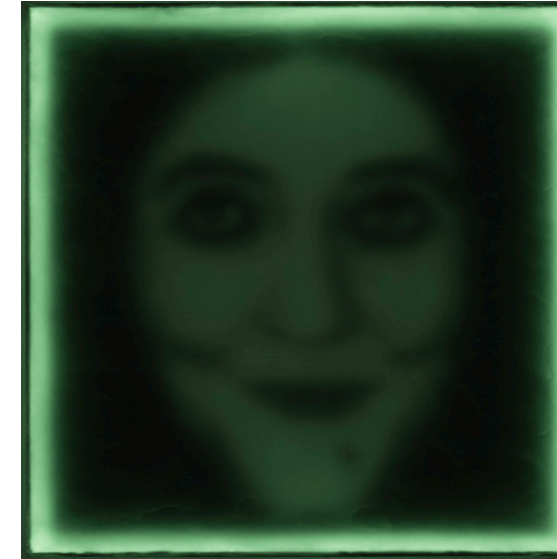


Legacies
—
McKay Otto

Essay by Susie Kalil



Betty Mobley (in light), 24"x 24", mixed media



Betty Mobley (in dark)

McKay Otto is an artist who constantly tests his own limits by stretching beyond familiar territories. His art offers allusive, layered references to our complex personal histories and deep entwining of the spirit. Consistent throughout is a sense of humanity as a narrative still in progress, with past and future equally alive in the present. Blending aspects of painting and sculpture, Otto's multidimensional works aim to reveal to us anew the extraordinary properties - physical, symbolic, psychic - of light, one of the commonplaces of our lives.

Delicately applied and invisibly blended, colors seem at times to radiate deep within or about to vaporize and at other times like crinkled skin. Moving back and forth between abstract thought and sensuous physicality, Otto confounds the translation between perception and cognition, seeing and knowing. "Light reflects unity like the sky," says Otto. "I paint with light - it's beyond the material world. I explore the way non-physical reflections of light can be transformed into immersive experiences. I'm always fascinated by the uncertainty of human perception and the duplicitous nature of vision, which can be both revealing and deceitful. I create paintings that delve into this duality." Thus, image and paint mirror each other in layers of dark, light and reverie. Otto's works breathe life - our own fugitive lives- as well as a physical awareness of ourselves within a broader realm of cultural associations and personal desires. We feel the presence of light inhabiting the paintings much as we experience light in a lucid dream. We sense the color generated inside us that connects to the light within.



Missi Thomas (in light),
24"x 24", mixed media



Missi Thomas (in dark),

"Otto asks us to trust,
let go and give
ourselves to the dark."

These processes have rarely been stated as elaborately, intensely or joyously as in Otto's recent series, Legacies, in which the faces or "essences" of deceased, iconic men and women of South Texas push through the veil between life and death. Each is fully present to the sacred space within which the mystery unfolds. The bottomless black paintings, framed by glowing green light, constitute the charged grounds on which their fragile precariousness is played out. For Otto, darkness and light are interchangeable. The black passages may embody the soul locked in a state of purgation. But the darkness also longs to be absorbed in the light, like seeds of germination in the dark soil. Light can symbolize a spiritual presence, the timelessness of nature. It has the power to transform both mood and meaning through the emotive and transcendental. In any case, the source of Otto's light is never certain, but suggests the mutational process, the passage through fear and death to rebirth.

Poised at the edge of a vastness that lies beyond our limited power to comprehend, we may feel vulnerable, anxious and just a little afraid. Yet Otto asks us to trust, let go and give ourselves to the dark. The spectral presences emanate from these ethereal environments, hovering before our eyes, unanchored by visual formulations of scale, distance and direction. They come and go into the light and darkness. Their faces are suspended in layers of transparent acrylic, disappearing and reappearing in space as we approach the paintings. The overall effect is of souls passing between dimensions, gradually fading into the ether.



Estelle Stair (in light), 35"x 35", mixed media



Estelle Stair (in dark)



Ann O'Connor Harithas (in light), 43.5"x 43.5", mixed media (pictured on cover)



Ann O'Connor Harithas (in dark)



Jeanie Wyatt (in dark)

As the boundary between inner and outer worlds vanishes and the nature of reality becomes perplexingly uncertain, we confront a dilemma comparable to that of the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu who, upon awakening from a dream, did not know whether he was a man dreaming that he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming that he was a man. We have entered a mysterious space-time existing in a state of suspension between two physical settings. Because this spatio-temporal dimension is illusive, it invites a relinquishing of both past and future, and a surrender to what immediately exists. It knows neither birth nor death; it exists in an everlasting now - it just is.

The portraits in Legacies - artists Madeline O'Connor, Ann O'Connor Harithas, Betty Mobley and Jesus Bautista Moroles; rancher Robert Hewitt; politician and women's rights leader Francis "Sissy" Farenthold; philanthropist Jeanie Wyatt, among other distinguished individuals from Victoria, Refugio, Corpus Christi and Rockport - are about time and memory, and they move to a rhythm that suggests something pulsing under their calm surfaces. According to Otto, the series began in early 2023 when he intuited that his late daughter, Chel. McKay, somehow wanted him to create an art work of her. Through a process of reflecting the ethereal, Otto endeavored to bring her from afar, from "nothingness" into something floating between dimensions, her memory somehow channeling between the material and immaterial worlds.



Jeanie Wyatt (in light), 43.5"x 43.5", mixed media

"We feel the presence of light inhabiting the paintings much as we experience light in a lucid dream..."

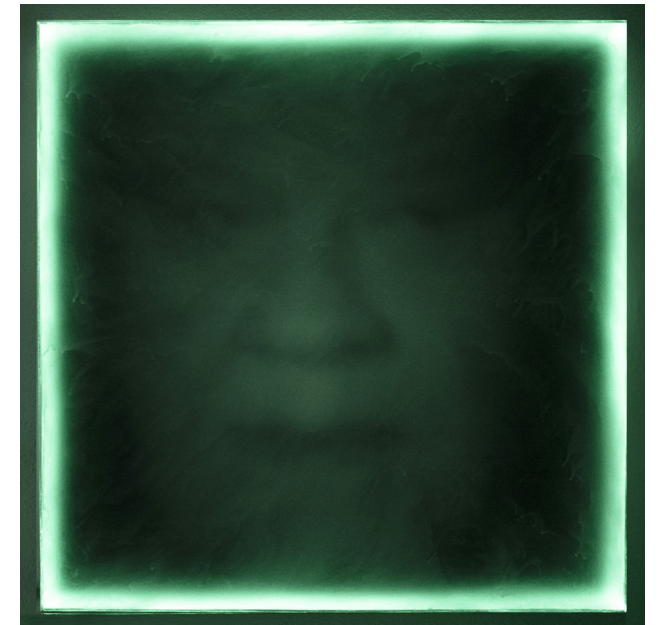
"Legacy," from the Latin verb legare is "to bequeath." It also infers a more extended use for anything valuable handed down by a predecessor or figure from the past. Toward that end, Otto aims to commemorate and capture the spiritual energy of the dynamic individuals who helped shape the South Texas region. Significantly, Otto's portraits force us to look to our own souls without any spiritual props or lenses. By doing so, we learn that faith comes not only from the spiritual life and high revelation, it also comes as an emanation from the depths, an utterly impersonal reality from the most personal place.

There is intimacy. Feelings of compassion, yearning, separation and reconciliation reverberate from the faces in the square constructions. For a moment, it seems that if we could decipher the stories behind their eyes, smiles and silencing gestures, we would grasp a significance that touches upon the very secrets of life, death and regeneration. In this context, the portraits are a kind of inoculation against the fading of memory, one of the most terrifying symptoms of our mortality. The likeness of a face is a form of gesture - a relation of sizes, angles, values - in other words, knowing how to measure the eyes to illuminate the light within. Otto evokes their essences and something of their personalities, while continuing to experiment with the possibilities of the painted surface. Combining photographic images, as well as gestural veils and tufts of acrylic washes, the paintings convey a spellbinding strangeness. Some faces fill the smaller works as if peering through windows or portals; others appear larger than life, relating as body-to-body. The dramatic portraits of these courageous risk takers are illuminated presences - they are less on the wall than they are in the room with us.

Bobby Hewitt (in light),
35"x 35", mixed media



Bobby Hewitt (in dark)





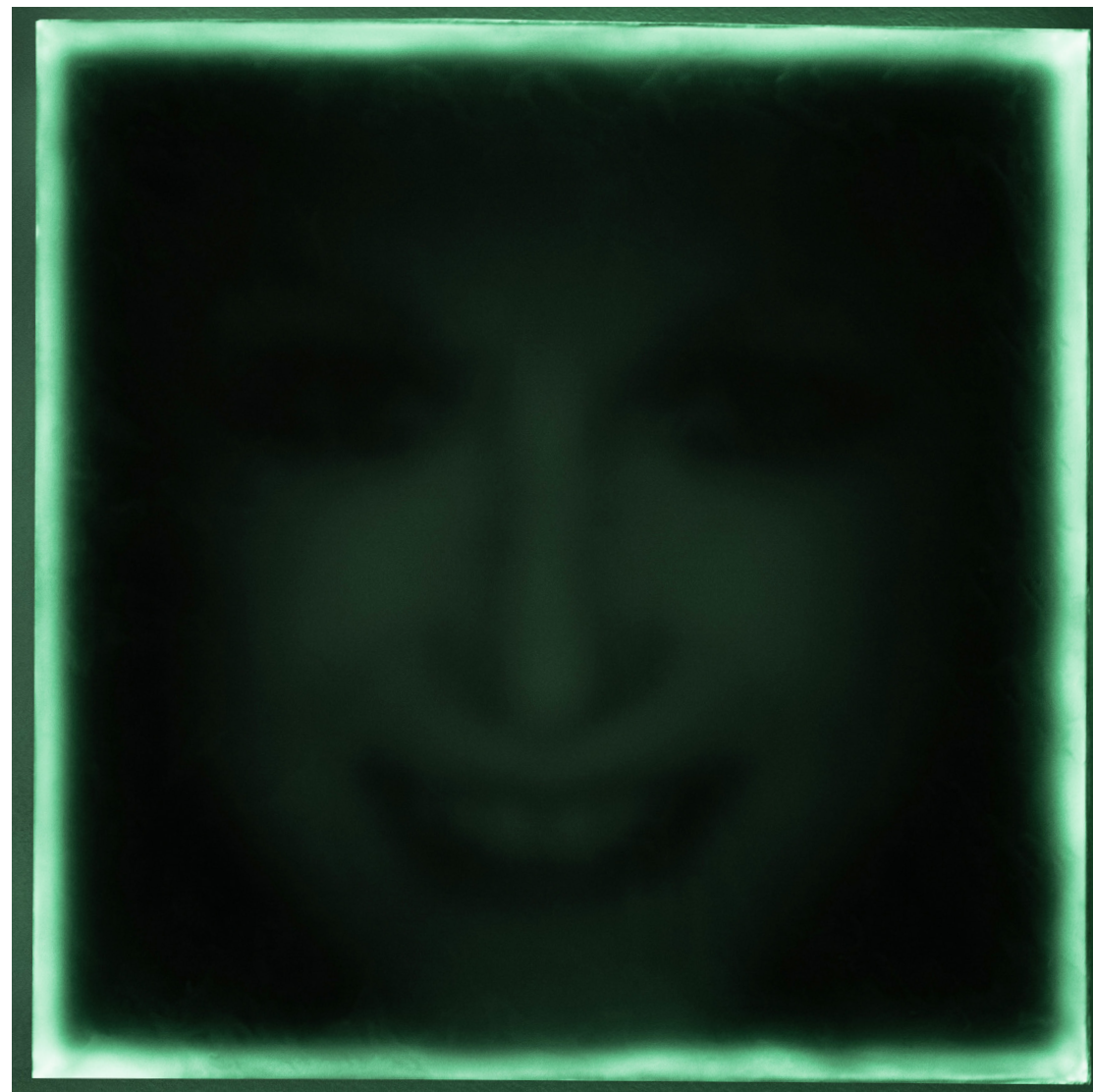
Jesus Moroles (in light), 43.5"x 43.5", mixed media



Jesus Moroles (in dark)



Madeline O'Connor (in light), 35"x 35", mixed media



Madeline O'Connor (in dark)

Each portrait represents a journey, both physical and conceptual, through a process of continuous reassessment and perceptual space around us. Seemingly weightless, they make us acutely aware of our own presence - the pull of gravity down our spines, the grace or awkwardness of our movements. We become active participants in a rite of passage, progressing by faith from darkness toward the mysterious luminosity that joins us to a larger story. We do not merely “see” these faces; we experience them through our bodies.

Otto invites us to enter a mystical, reconciling experience. It’s up to us to find our way. What gives us substance, permanence, the larger ground upon which we have our being? Throughout Legacies, we are reminded that the body is the first and last dwelling place of the human spirit. Otto, however, embraces the notion of transcendence and metamorphosis that refuses to see in death the material end of the soul. Behind Otto’s shape-shifting installation lies a poetic intelligence, an understanding of art as a source and object of hope.

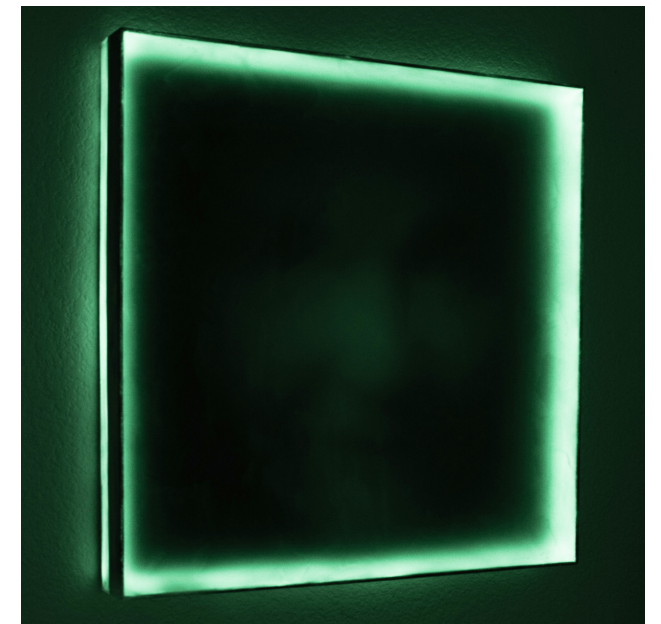
Essay by Susie Kalil

“We are reminded that the body is
the first and last dwelling place of
the human spirit.”

Sissy Farenthold (in light),
24”x 24”, mixed media



Sissy Farenthold (in dark)



"You know you are in the presence of something wonderful, wonderfully magical and mysterious. It's about the power of light. Light that seems to bend, that seems to appear from nowhere, illuminating the perfection in the legacies and in the world, heavenly and spiritually, as only McKay can do."

-Lester Marks

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Rockport Center for the Arts
204 South Austin Street
Rockport, Texas



