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## Meme: Abstract Los Angeles

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Abstract art is surging in the City of Angels, although there is nothing characteristically L.A. about the works. "The city as a place doesn't influence my work much," says the Los Angeles-based painter Alex Olson. "It's influential in what it provides: space and time to work and a strong community of artists." That would include fellow Angeleno abstractionist Lisa Williamson, who has exhibited with Olson in Chicago and works in a neighboring studio, as well as Sarah Cain, Rebecca Morris, and Tomory Dodge. For painter Jon Pestoni, the city's benefit is less the artistic community than the isolation it affords. "Total immersion has been crucial to my work," he says. "I can go months without seeing anyone I know and still maintain a normal social relationship with the city." Multimedia artist Nathan Hylden shares Olson's appreciation for L.A.'s abundance of good cheap studio space and the time the southern California lifestyle allows him to spend in it.

These artists have certainly used the freedom L.A. offers to good effect. This fall Olson is slated for an international debut at the Laura Bartlett Gallery, in London. Hylden, meanwhile, is currently working on new pieces for his second solo exhibition at the Richard Telles Gallery, in downtown L.A., in the fall.

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If the city's artistic role is now more that of enabler than muse, it's because of an increase in creative self-sufficiency. A previous age of L.A. abstractionists drew inspiration from their surroundings — James Turrell's atmospheric light installations, the surfboard-sized planks of John McCracken. This younger generation is less eager to root its work in a particular place. Hylden's process-oriented oeuvre corresponds mostly to itself, an effect he achieves by working on numerous pieces simultaneously and often using one as a tool in the production of another. Olson and Pestoni share Hylden's insistence on process, although they take it in different directions. Olson scrapes and scratches away at the surfaces of her paintings, while Pestoni's technique is strictly additive. For Olson the textured ground becomes a site to deposit familiar marks that evolve into a language of private symbols. Pestoni's paintings focus on the figure-ground relationship, reversing and destabilizing it with blocks and bands of color.

How might this continue? Perhaps outside L.A. Both Hylden and Pestoni can imagine themselves in any number of places, such as Berlin or New York. None of these artists, however, has looked into hiring a moving van. Before they do, an astute curator might to well do gather this new guard into a comprehensive group show — a look at abstract Los Angeles's future.

*"Meme: Abstract Los Angeles" originally appeared in the May 2011 issue of Modern Painters. For a complete list of articles from this issue available on ARTINFO, see Modern Painters' [May 2011 Table of Contents](#).*