

CHEIM & READ

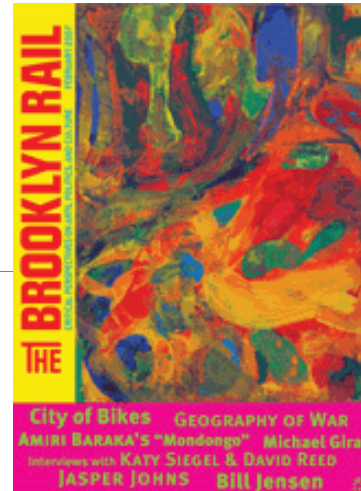
Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics and Culture
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Art

INCONVERSATION

Bill Jensen with Chris Martin

by Chris Martin



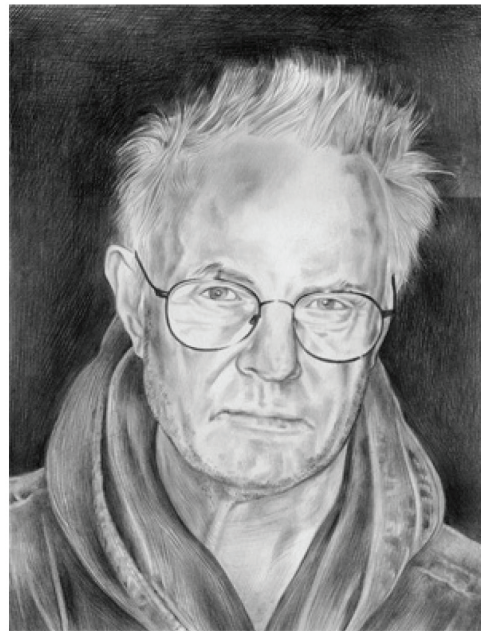
The Brooklyn Rail's Chris Martin went to visit Bill Jensen in the Williamsburg studio complex he shares with the painter Margrit Lewczuk, their son Russell, and their dog Lucy. Two old manufacturing buildings are joined in a small courtyard with a big fig tree. The place feels like an old Italian villa in the middle of Brooklyn. Jensen has a major show of new paintings opening at Cheim & Read Gallery on February 15th.

Chris Martin (Rail): Bill, how did you become a painter?

Bill Jensen: I was always drawing. My stepfather worked at a steel pre-fabricating company. He would bring home shoeboxes full of blank paper pads that were about 7 × 9 inches. When I was five I got a hold of these pads and I filled up shoebox after shoebox. I always drew. I would draw still life, landscapes, anything. When I was in Jr. high, I would draw Frankenstein over and over.

Rail: Do you have any of these drawings? I'd love to see a Bill Jensen Frankenstein. *(Laughs)*

Jensen: No, they're all lost. I had a car magazine with monsters in the hot rods. So I started my own little business in ninth grade. I bought some sweatshirts and I would draw monsters in cars on them. I got an airbrush and I started doing airbrushing. Then I'd go to car shows in Minneapolis and I'd have a little stand.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Rail: I remember monster hot rods. I made plastic models of monster hot rods and painted them.

Jensen: There would be a Fifty-Seven Chevy with a Frankenstein monster in it. Later I started doing pin striping and flames on cars. I had this business card with a red palette with blood dripping off of it. It read "Tiny Studios, Bill Jensen, County Road I, Turtle Lake, MN"

Rail: So there're some rare Bill Jensen T-shirts out there.

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Jensen: Yeah, maybe. The only thing my parents noticed was that I could sell something. They were in their own world. Drawing for me was a shield against my dysfunctional family. Outside it looked fairly normal, but inside she was an alcoholic and he was a severe manic-depressive.

Rail: So your drawings saved you?

Jensen: My drawings saved me.

Rail: When did you first go to a museum?

Jensen: I was in Edgewood Jr. High. We took a trip, probably in ninth grade, to the Minneapolis Art Institute. I kind of wandered off through the corridors. I came upstairs and there was this one room that completely floored me. I mean my heart started pounding. I had no idea what was going on in this room.

Rail: What were you looking at?

Jensen: There was Soutine's *Hanging Beef*, a medium size Clifford Still, and a beautiful Max Beckmann triptych.

Rail: Wow! What an initiation into painting.

Jensen: I didn't even know what painting or art was, but there was something that mystified me about how these feelings were floating in the air. They weren't attached to the canvas. Years later, Ronnie (Ronald) Bladen asked me, "What introduced you to the modern world?" I immediately thought of this room, that there was something in this room that introduced me the modern world.

Rail: You studied art in college?

Jensen: Yes, at the University of Minnesota where I took an intermediary drawing class. I remember the building was called Northrop Hall. It had one big room that had wood floors, a beautiful huge skylight with old wood wainscot paneling. It had these benches you'd straddle with your legs and draw on the newsprint in front of you...The teacher, Peter Busa, had very intense eyes and very intense gestures. He would walk around and point at things. He was a real artist—a great colorist. He was a friend of Pollock's and de Kooning's. This must have been in 1964. He stood in back of me, and of course I got cold shivers with him standing there. And he tapped me on the shoulder and said "Can I see you after class." I was terrified, and he didn't say anything else to me that day. I went up to him after class and he said, "Listen, you're very gifted. You can take all of my courses."

Rail: Wonderful! So you found a mentor!

Jensen: Yes, he saved me. He completely took me under his wing, so from that day forward I would draw and paint in all of his classes.

Rail: When did you make your first abstraction?

Jensen: That was in Peter's class. And I remember I was painting this painting, and it was very thinly washed. I didn't know what I was doing. Peter came and said, "Stop, it's fantastic." The funny thing is that the only time I showed my stepfather and my mother my work, I had those paintings and I was very proud of them. They walked around the room, and there were three or four of these paintings up, and my stepfather came up to me and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "My son, my son, at least you're not going to harm anyone."

Rail: *(Laughter)* Sorry to laugh. That must have been kind of painful.

Jensen: Well, I had a great deal of trouble talking then. I stuttered until I was about nineteen or twenty maybe. I couldn't talk. And I was severely dyslexic, so I had reading problems.

Rail: I'm quite dyslexic myself; I wonder if that's some common denominator for visual artists.

Jensen: Yes, I think it's because we have a very strong visual sense, and the cognitive process doesn't shut our visual sense down. That's why we have trouble reading. I had trouble talking. I was an only child. I had no one to talk to. My friend growing up in Turtle Lake Minnesota was my Flexible Flyer sled. I dragged that around winter, summer, fall, and that was my buddy. Our son's middle name is Sled.

Rail: When did you start thinking about New York?

Jensen: In college, Peter Busa had a wonderful visiting artist program—Tony Smith came there, Jack Tworkov, Michael Goldberg, Herman Cherry, Ed Dougmore—and these people I could talk to. I couldn't talk to people in Minnesota, but these people I could easily talk to. I wanted to go to New York but Peter said, "No, no, get your graduate degree, stay with me." He always said, "Just get through your academics." So I completed graduate school. After that I took all my work and threw it off a bridge in Minneapolis.

Rail: The earliest paintings of yours that I know are the large thick spiral paintings. How did those come about?

Jensen: I built bridges from the time I was 16 years old, and at 20 I was a master carpenter. When you build concrete forms for bridges you use plywood, and I used to be mystified by these knots in the plywood. I'd see these spiral knots and see that they'd be very flat, and the next instant they have tremendous space. After graduate school I stayed in Minneapolis for nine months. I painted only on paper. Somehow these spirals kept coming out. I brought only ten oil-on-paper spiral drawings to New York. I went down to Pearl Paint and got a big canvas and I rolled it out on the floor and I knew there



Bill Jensen, "Guy in the Dunes" (1979). Oil on linen, 36" x 24". Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

was a pigment store on West Canal street where you could buy bags of pigment, and I got some varnish and I started mixing pigment and oil and put it on the canvas.

Rail: Those were the paintings that made you sick right?

Jensen: Yes. I was on a carpentry job where they were sanding the floor, and I heard them talking about this great new varnish, and this guy said it was “the strongest thing in the world.” That’s all I had to hear. The next day I was at the paint store buying a gallon of polyurethane.

Rail: Dangerous stuff

Jensen: Yes, I lived in my studio. They think it was the polyurethane that started to be toxic for me, and the doctors asked me to stop painting for a few months. I had kind of a complete break down. They didn’t know what was wrong, but they told me I had to stop painting. I said, “I cannot stop painting,” so they said, “You can draw.” So basically I was back working on paper for six months.

Rail: Is that when you made the shift to small paintings?

Jensen: Yes, one night I was on the street in Soho and I saw these three empty wooden 19th century restorer stretchers. I saw an image in every one of them. Normally I arrive at images by dredging them up from my psyche through working. But in those three I immediately saw images.

Rail: Beautiful.

Jensen: So I took them home, stretched them up. Carl Plansky told me to try Old Holland paint because it had the different textures I was used to with hand ground pigments. So I had the paint. And I was back in business

Rail: The first painting of yours that I saw was “Joy.” I went to see you in Williamsburg—which seemed like a dangerous place. I remember that huge space with all your small paintings: “Ryder’s Eye,” “Guy in the Dunes,” “Crown of Thorns,” and “The Black Madonna.” It was shocking to me that they were such serious paintings on a very small size. The inner scale of those paintings was vast—they had incredible compression and energy. I remember we talked about Ryder and early American masters. When did you discover Ryder?

Jensen: While I was doing the heavy spiral paintings, I was teaching at the Brooklyn Museum. I turned the corner one day and there were five Albert Pinkham Ryders and I was floored. My heart started to palpitate... I’d never seen anything like that. I started looking up Ryder and then discovered Hartley and Dove at the Washburn Gallery and other galleries. Later Joan Washburn became my dealer.

Rail: When did you meet Ronnie Bladen?

Jensen: I discovered his work in Minneapolis in a big minimal art show where I saw “Cathedral

Evening.”

Rail: That’s a great piece.

Jensen: Scared the hell out of me—I never saw anything like that in my life. We met soon after I came to New York, when I worked as his assistant building the piece “Boomerang” at Fischbach Gallery. We became very close friends.

Rail: You were one of the artist pioneers of Williamsburg. When did you first come to Brooklyn?

Jensen: Well, I was building lofts and I knew that artists couldn’t afford to live in Soho anymore. I loved Bob Grosvenor’s work, we became friends, and he said “there’s a building on south 3rd street in Williamsburg I use for a studio, come look at it.” I went out with Bob, I think it was 1975 or 76. The top floors were empty. I said, “Bob, this is the most beautiful space that I’ve ever seen in my life. So I moved in, and Bob was working there, Jim Clark came in later, it was a great building...

Rail: But a scary neighborhood...

Jensen: Yes—the neighborhood was very rough. When Margrit and I lived in that studio for three months, I’d go in to shop and they would actually spit at me. They would say, “You dress like a bum, but we know you’re a cop.” I’d say, “I’m not a cop.” They would chop holes in the roof to break in. Luckily, they would never touch my paintings.

Rail: I was living on Houston Street, and asked where I could find a studio and you told me to take the L train. I remember asking you, “Where’s the L train?” I had never heard of the L train. So that’s how isolated and unknown the neighborhood was then.

Jensen: Well, it’s beautiful light out here, the buildings are low. I always wanted to keep on that slope facing Manhattan because the energy of Manhattan flows up the slope.

Rail: So you like being near the water?

Jensen: Well, I grew up on Turtle Lake. The light that comes off of water seems to go through things.

Rail: Now I know that you didn’t ever leave the city for a long time.



Bill Jensen, “Images of a Floating World (Diox Violet)” (2003–2005). Oil on linen, 26” x 20”. Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

Jensen: Margrit and I didn't leave New York for over ten years. The country terrifies me because of my childhood. I had a terrible childhood. So any time I go West of the Hudson, to me it's the mid-west. And it's too hard for me. I have too many unresolved issues, which I guess I've sort of resolved because I can go out there now a little bit. Looking back, I think that the early paintings were about what happens between people. They are very urban in feeling.

Rail: Those paintings came out of a process of working and re-working?

Jensen: I just sort of start working, and through layer after layer, scraping, the image arrives. Around the early '80s I got very serious about etchings. There would be etchings going, drawings going, paintings going, all for one image. And if the painting would change, I would change the etching, and vice-versa.

Rail: I remember seeing the "The Black Madonna" for the first time, and it seemed unusual because it was such a thinly painted painting, and it's such a haunting image. You told me that was a rare instance where you started a painting and stepped back and stopped.

Jensen: "The Black Madonna" was a painting that had a tremendous amount of work underneath it, and yet that image was not a part of that work. I sanded down the painting and reprimed it with white lead. I believe a lot of work is done in your chair. I sit there and watch, and at a certain point when I've reached this point of absolute boredom, I will feel that the space between me and the painting disappear. That is an important moment. With the "The Black Madonna" painting, I had this tremendous urgency to get out of my chair, grab a can of black paint and paint this image. The image was probably painted in 30 seconds, and I sat down, I looked at the image, and in the middle there is this black shape.

Rail: Yes.

Jensen: And in the bottom of the black shape, I saw the paint run down, and it coalesced into an exact portrait of me looking at the painting, like a mirror, and that scared the shit out of me.

Rail: No doubt it's a scary painting.

Jensen: So I ran out of the studio. I would not come back to the studio for a few days. I had to bring Bob Grosvenor back with me...

Rail: That painting is such a profound painting for me personally. What are we talking about here? Capturing some kind of inner reality?

Jensen: An inner reality seems too personal. I think it's bigger than that. I think it's a thing that's out there, this phenomenon that exists around us all.

Rail: A consciousness?

Jensen: A consciousness sounds too human to me. I mean, yes it has a consciousness, probably has a consciousness much greater than humans. People are part of it, and nature's part of it, but there is this thing. Somehow artists are able to see it and make objects which are a kind of remnant of this. And then other people can see it, and they'll connect with that thing. They may not connect in the same way, but they will start to feel that psychic opening.

Rail: Well, there's a recognition.

Jensen: There's an acknowledgement of a force that exists, an emotional force, a content that exists there. You know, Braque said something like, "When painting, a hallucination might appear in the painting, and if I can paint in service to that hallucination, the painting will finish itself."

Rail: Beautiful.

Jensen: That's a paraphrase of what he said, but I remember him using that word "hallucination." So I'll be working, and this thing will start to grow, and I'll start to feel this electricity, and at a certain point, the seed is planted and if I can stay very sensitive to it and forget about myself and taste and everything else, it may finally come alive.

Rail: And then you're serving the painting, following its lead.

Jensen: Yes. You know, Myron Stout says it's like atomic painting: you've got to paint every single atom.

Rail: Well he actually did. Bill, I remember once we were looking at a painting, and you were talking about the painting giving off a sound. Is that part of this?

Jensen: Yes, it's a sound, it's not music, it's a singular sound. When I was first aware of this, I thought, I'm losing my mind, I'm hearing paintings make sounds. So, I never told anyone, and then years later Ronnie Bladen and I were standing in front of a big black and white Al Held painting, and Ronnie said, "Do you hear the sound that thing makes?" I said, "Yes, you do?" And he said yes, and I thought oh my God, someone else hears it. I think very strong emotional events affect all your senses: hearing, taste, heart, blood pressure, everything.

Rail: I agree. I once very clearly heard a Joseph Beuys sculpture make a sound. So Bill, when you finally left the city, did that lead to any changes in your work?

Jensen: In 1986, Margrit and I were invited to Skowhegan. The forest around Skowhegan is very primordial. It is deep, rich, almost like you'd see dinosaurs walking through these woods. I started to paint outside—started hanging paintings on trees. I made this huge sail out of corrugated white plastic that would diffuse the light, so I had this beautiful soft light on my paintings. I started feeling that I was an inchworm—I would crawl up the painting, and down the other side. And of course you have Lake Skowhegan, and I grew up on a lake. All these things were bringing back memories. Margrit was

pregnant with Russell. And the blue is on top of your head, it's like a stocking cap you have on. The blue is so intense. I did three paintings up there that summer: "Dead-head," "Moat," and "Sled." And then I came back to New York, got back to my studio here, and painted "Riddle."

Rail: That was an opening up of your paintings—you started using these intense greens and there were some overt landscape forms with patches of sky.

Jensen: When I got back to New York there was this real chasm between the paintings I was working on outside, and the paintings I had been working on back in the city. It was difficult, but then right after that, we went to the American Academy in Rome. So I had another experience working out of New York for four months.

Rail: In your early work, you were known for using a palette knife. When did you stop using knives so much?

Jensen: Because I was a mason, a palette knife, a trowel, was very natural to me. I wasn't using any medium, it was basically Old Holland paint, right out of the tube...There was a period, when I saw how well Margrit could paint with a brush, that I actually had to lock up my palette knives down in the basement. I had to force myself to use a brush again. I think the more tools that I can use, the better off I am. And seeing frescos in Italy I thought, I really like that dry color, so let me try to get the medium to be dry. They have this turpentine that has high distillates in it. A small jar will evaporate in an afternoon or so. It thins paint, but it holds color. So both Margrit and I started thinning out our paint at the American Academy in Rome.

Rail: What do you use now?

Jensen: With Carl Plansky's help, I've created a medium with a straight steam distilled turpentine, a little bit of soft wax to flatten it, a little bit of toluene, and a little bit of denatured alcohol, just to help the cutting property.

Rail: You've always done these serious investigations of craft.

Jensen: It's more alchemy than craft. I think that one of my responsibilities is to uncover the energies that material possesses. Some artists don't care about that. That part of knowledge is also part of feeling. People talk about loving the old masters? Well they hand ground their paint. If you hand-grind your paint, you know that every pigment, every color, is a different texture. And you could almost paint blindfolded. You could learn how to do this if you had a feeling for it. But not all artists have to have that...

Rail: When did you start going to Italy?

Jensen: I was on the Prix de Rome jury a few times, so in 1988 we took a residency at the American Academy in Rome. Russell was just born. We fell in love with Italy. The next summer we stayed at Al

Held's house, and then we found our own place outside Siena. I have a studio in an old stable, where there is no personal history around me. Here in New York, I have all my paintings, my history's around me. For two summers in Italy, I just did drawings. These drawings were going in different directions. And I thought, just let them go, let them go where they want. Those drawings have been very important for my work. So every time I go to Italy, I come back with drawings and paintings. It's very healthy to separate oneself from personal history.

Rail: One can grow, one can re-invent oneself. I remember a real change in your paintings in your first show with Mary Boone on West Broadway. Many of those paintings had this very spare feeling, with a horizon line. There was clearly a landscape reference but the paintings were simpler, even desolate. How did that shift come about?

Jensen: I used to have the feeling that when a painting takes off, it's going to be my last painting, and the whole world had to be in that painting—there was that kind of a pressure and demarcation. John Yau came over one night and said, 'Well, wait a minute, maybe something can be the whole thing,' and he left and I thought well, that's an interesting idea. Maybe it's all in the way you look at it. Maybe something could be everything, just looked at another way, and everything could be something. I thought that in a way, the pressure to put everything in a painting was desensitizing, so the paintings became simpler—and the smallest thing could make the painting.

Rail: In those more spare paintings then...

Jensen: Something would happen, and that would be enough. It was a change in the way I thought about something and everything. Basically I'm a psychic traveler, I travel in this space and I bring back these things. What abstract art can do is put people in touch with areas of their psyche they're not normally aware of. I think that it goes back to the shamans who helped the tribe to see this other world. The tribe would not function well without this journey.

Rail: Right.

Jensen: This other world is where prejudice and wars do not exist. The I, the Me, the You, do not exist there. If you can bring people in touch with that for just a second, then you have a different way of looking at the world.

Rail: Some of the most emotional and soulful paintings you've made are your new black paintings. Can you talk about how they came about?

Jensen: I ran out of Egyptian Violet. I couldn't find it, and I bought some Dioxin Violet at Kramer's. The pigment looks deep purple like Egyptian Violet, but when you mix it with oil, it looks black. It just goes everywhere, you can't stop it, it covers acres and acres. The other color I used was Spanish Earth which Carl Plansky makes—this beautiful, deep, sludge-like color. Those are the two main mixing colors. But emotionally a lot of things had happened. We had the fire on 14th street.

Rail: What year did that happen? That was terrible.

Jensen: That was 1999. It was a fire that destroyed our loft, that destroyed 26 years of Margrit's paintings, destroyed our entire art collection. I spent a week up in the fire trying to salvage anything, and it was like a bomb went off, it was hell.

Rail: You had this terrible loss and grief.

Jensen: Terrible loss, and then you had 9/11, and wars. Then you had close friends dying, then you had cancer and surgeries and things. A lot of things were going on. I didn't start out to make black paintings. I would be working on a painting with lots of color and all of a sudden it would start to close down on itself into this deep violet. The Dioxin becomes almost iridescent. It has a very deep light. The last time we were in Italy, I made a few that are actually black; in fact, they have about 12 different blacks.

Rail: And now it seems as if you are more prolific. Within the last few years you seem to be both painting faster and on more paintings. Is that true?

Jensen: I don't know. It comes back to a kind of material thing. I really got this medium worked out so the physical aspect of painting is almost effortless. I can work on them all day, and wash it down at the end. You don't see all that under-painting or the struggle.

Rail: Along with the black paintings you have been making some of the brightest intensely colored paintings of your career. How has this color emerged?

Jensen: After the fire, Margrit began using bright fluorescent paint. She would come into the studio and say, "The light in your work is so dark and dingy. Can't you do something about it?" *(laughter)* So I brought out my pure cadmiums and cobalts. And also my new mediums allow the color to be stronger, purer.

Rail: In some of these new paintings in the show at Cheim & Read, I'm seeing figures or faces. Are you conscious of capturing images like this?

Jensen: No. I also don't paint out faces as they come in. I just never see them.

Rail: You don't see them?

Jensen: I don't think I see them. I try to look at the painting only for content. I'm talking about emotional content.

Rail: Can you talk about the process? At what point do you start to sense that this content is present in the painting?

Jensen: It becomes like living tissue. It becomes a real thing in front of you, and before that it's not, it's just paint. It somehow transforms, this emotional content enters the paint, enters the form, enters the

color.

Rail: So how do you know when is it finished?

Jensen: Usually it will tell me when it's finished. It's hard—I've built barricades around paintings to not touch them, and I'll go over the barricade and paint it. Sometimes it's more like the idea of seepage—that you work, you dredge something up, and then you let it seep down again. I'll put it up, against other paintings. If it doesn't hold up amongst them, then it's not there. It takes two, three weeks, maybe a month. Depends, you know. I recently finished two paintings I've worked on for 16 years.

Rail: Wow—that's a great feeling.

Jensen: One is called "Relic"—where the image was born very quickly, but the clarity of the content wasn't there, so I spent the next 16 years just clarifying the content.

Rail: I've stayed with paintings for a long time, and it can be a very frustrating experience.

Jensen: You often forget the urgency that made you start the painting. You have to be like an actor, you have to go back in your psyche to remember that urgency. That's what I've found.

Rail: Is there a general psychic state that you're talking about, which is about 'not knowing', about suspending judgment?

Jensen: When the seed is planted, when the hallucination starts, the exchange is made, something's gone through you. It has an existence outside of you, and you must realize and accept it on its own terms. You must not judge it with fashion, style, or anything like that. It may be ugly, it may be beautiful, it may be brutal, but you have to accept it on its own terms.

Rail: Yes. We've talked before about the idea that the artist should be 'stateless.'

Jensen: I believe that I need to exist in this stateless state. I may love art history, love paintings of the past, but I also have to be insolent to them. I may love exploration and experimentation, but I, like the rest of us, can never really destroy the past. The key is vulnerability. I see these two camps: in each one of those camps you feel secure, because you have your parameters. The place where you are vulnerable is in between. As a 'stateless' artist you're constantly in a state of anxiety, because you have no foundations, no boundaries around you.

Rail: You're thrown back on yourself. Or something bigger than yourself.

Jensen: Right. See I always want to take the self out of it. I really don't think it has anything to do with you. I think it comes through you. You are the receiver.
