CHEIM & READ

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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BILL JENSEN *Transgressions*

by Hearne Pardee

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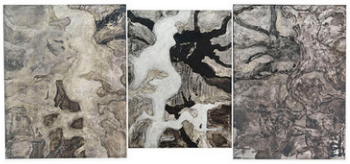
Willem de Kooning once dismissively described the Oriental idea of beauty as "it isn't here." De Kooning preferred objects "in relation to man," with "no souls of their own." Bill Jensen, while long involved with Chinese painting and poetry, also cites de Kooning's 1985 triptych, along with the icons of Andrei Rublev and the Rothko Chapel, as influences on the multi-panel works that have assumed importance in his work since 2010. The four ambitious triptychs that anchor his current show at Cheim & Read extend his range of references—particularly to the work of Jasper Johns—while maintaining his roots in the mixture of craftsmanship and spirituality (*pace* de Kooning) that has sustained his development for over four decades.



Bill Jensen, "DOUBLE SORROW +1 (GREY SCALE)" (2014 – 15). Triptych, oil on linen, 58 × 129". Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

Also relevant to the current work is Jensen's experience with printmaking, from the excavation of shapes discovered while scraping down copper plates to their transfer, digital manipulation, and replication. "Transgressions" (2011 – 14), the exhibition's title piece, is accompanied by a series of studies, some with colored backgrounds that suggest the process of printing. Successively editing what seem to be tumbling figures from Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" (1536 – 41), Jensen fuses the complex silhouettes into gnarly, overall configurations, in the way Chinese calligraphy often combines fragments of several characters to convey complex meanings. The figures are partly abstracted yet also assertive and grotesque in their nudity. They recall the awkward organic forms that emerge from landscapes in Jensen's earlier works, but also de Kooning's late gestural images and the poured black enamel paintings of Jackson Pollock, freighted with bodily implications; they attest to the sometimes lumpy process of assimilation by which Jensen's paintings have come to insinuate the fluid, ethereal spaces of Chinese landscape into the psychoanalytic field of Abstract Expressionism.

Often identified with the American visionary tradition—which also took inspiration from the East—Jensen claims to accept whatever forms his process suggests, however grotesque, in the context of a larger return to origins. "Transgressions" alludes to this uneasy mix of styles and religious traditions with its unconventional arrangement of panels: abstracted figures slide down on the left and struggle upward on the right, flanking a slightly smaller panel, displaced downwards, which centers on a red-orange, Turneresque sun/eye/orifice, that conflates physical and spiritual realms. The eccentric arrangement of Jensen's triptychs, with smaller elements in the center, may have originated in the chance arrangement of three panels that inspired his first such work, but it also may reflect a Buddhist resistance to the dominance of any central figure.

Jensen's use of gray and white reinforces his return to fundamentals. His inventive cultivation of materials and the range of their application demand an enlarged critical vocabulary, or perhaps the sort of analysis proposed by art historian Meyer Schapiro in his 1966 study of the material basis of the "image-sign," its "image substance," and its prepared surface support. Jensen makes grounds of blended oils and pigments to control absorption and viscosity, and applies them like a Renaissance workman preparing a fresco. Veiled surfaces like "Stillness" (2012 –

14) and “Double Stillness” (2014 – 15) seem hushed, allowing the silence of the ground to speak through, as it does in the mysterious glyph of “Message” (2011 – 14). At the other extreme, the “Dark Dragon Pool” (2014 – 15) series indulges in blackness, with lurking gestures of purple; as their title suggests, these works could be sublime images of depth or merely lush, reflective surfaces.

Between these extremes of silence and darkness unfold dramas of bold colors and sharply outlined forms. In other triptychs, Jensen employs juxtapositions of evocative shapes—including the “Trinity image” he derived from Rublev, that play on symmetry and repetition—with brilliant color in “Loom of Origins” (2014 – 15), a title that suggests weaving as well as incipient apocalypse, and with lush grays in “Double Sorrow + 1 (Grey Scale)” (2014 – 15). In that work, which alludes to ancient Chinese poetry, the right panel largely repeats the left, with variations in tone, while both the left and right panels are mirror reflections of the central rectangle. Here, the puzzle-like interlocking of tentacle shapes and the use of grisaille to integrate figure and ground is especially reminiscent of Jasper Johns. The interplay along borders recalls Johns’s “Scent” (1975 – 76), another tripartite painting, while the outlined shapes recall Johns’s appropriations from Grünewald and Holbein.

Bill Jensen, “TRANSGRESSIONS” (2011 – 14). Triptych, oil on linen, 551/2 × 105″. Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

Elsewhere, Jensen indulges his love of color, in “Book of Ch’u” (2011 – 12) another chiasmic composition, and “Angelico, Angelico” (2012 – 15), a complementary pair of panels alluding to the brilliant colors of Fra Angelico, marked by mirrored handprints along their inner boundaries. This visceral connection to lived experience recalls poet/critic John Yau’s characterization of Jensen and his works, like Johns, as “things among things.” Jensen extends Pollock’s immersion in materials through his conflation of Eastern and Western traditions; if he doesn’t completely bridge the divide, he leaves us in an expanded realm of active contemplation.