

CHEIM & READ

Art in America

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Bill Jensen: *Luohan X*, 2005, oil on linen, 28 by 23 inches; at Cheim & Read.

Bill Jensen at Cheim & Read

Four blackish paintings of recent vintage headlined this show of work by veteran New York painter Bill Jensen, occupying the space opposite the gallery's entrance. Like the other 21 paintings shown, they are oil on linen, vertical and smallish—most under 40 inches tall. These four, containing glossy rivulets of true black as well as passages of iridescent browns and near-blacks the color of dried prunes, convey a sense of cavernous space, simultaneously expansive and contained. Their murky accretions suggest the oddly disjunctive space in the contrast of absorbed and reflected light. Drooping clusters of brushy ovoids are barely discernible through the gloom. The viewer might be spelunking by candlelight.

In the gallery's larger space, chroma was amped way up, the painterly touch turgid and jittery.

Swirling, layered mark-making was simultaneously evident and veiled—vigorous and vigorously qualified. Jensen works with a formulation of paint medium that gives him a matte, dry-looking surface; his hothouse palette and the absence of oil's familiar, disembodying sheen make these pictures feel claustrophobically dense. Too many, like *Bacchus* and *Bog* (both 2004-06), rely on a scraping technique by virtue of which the residue of the most recent paint application merges optically and inevitably with the brushstrokes underneath. This trick complicates space by flattening it. Others, like *Luohan X* (2005) and *Luohan VII* (2003-04), are two-color paintings buoyed by calligraphic or horticultural references. As superficially attractive as these canvases are, they hedge the artist's bets—on compositional irresolution or coloristic bluntness—by sticking to a small, manageable, forgiving format.

Jensen was born in 1945, the year that Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner married and moved to Springs, on Long Island. In the Ab-Ex tradition, Jensen embraces the intuitive, rejects the ironic and constructs paintings from a meditative response to sensory experience filtered through the subconscious. Ryder and Dove are among his touchstones. Despite their wildly divergent palette, space and facture, these paintings convey an almost rabbinical authority and seriousness of purpose. The most exciting are those that seem willfully indifferent to taste. The least turbulent painting in the show, *Relic's Relic* (2003-06), is a vertical rectangle divided into halves the colors of mud

and tar; *Heaven's Hole* (2003-2004), a shadowy, inchoate entanglement of curlicues, almost looks abandoned. Splitting the difference between these somber works and the eager chroma elsewhere is *Luohan Landscape* (2003-06). The squeegeed, putty-colored scrim that conceals the bottom half of the painting seems formed by an act of will rather than habit, and the radiant hues of the upper section are sullied by the glaring presence of pure white. Even on repeated visits, the best part of viewing the show was taking one last look at those black paintings, which simmer rather than boil.

—Stephen Maine

547 WEST 25 STREET NEW YORK NY 10001 TEL 212 242 7727

FAX 212 242 7737 GALLERY@CHEIMREAD.COM