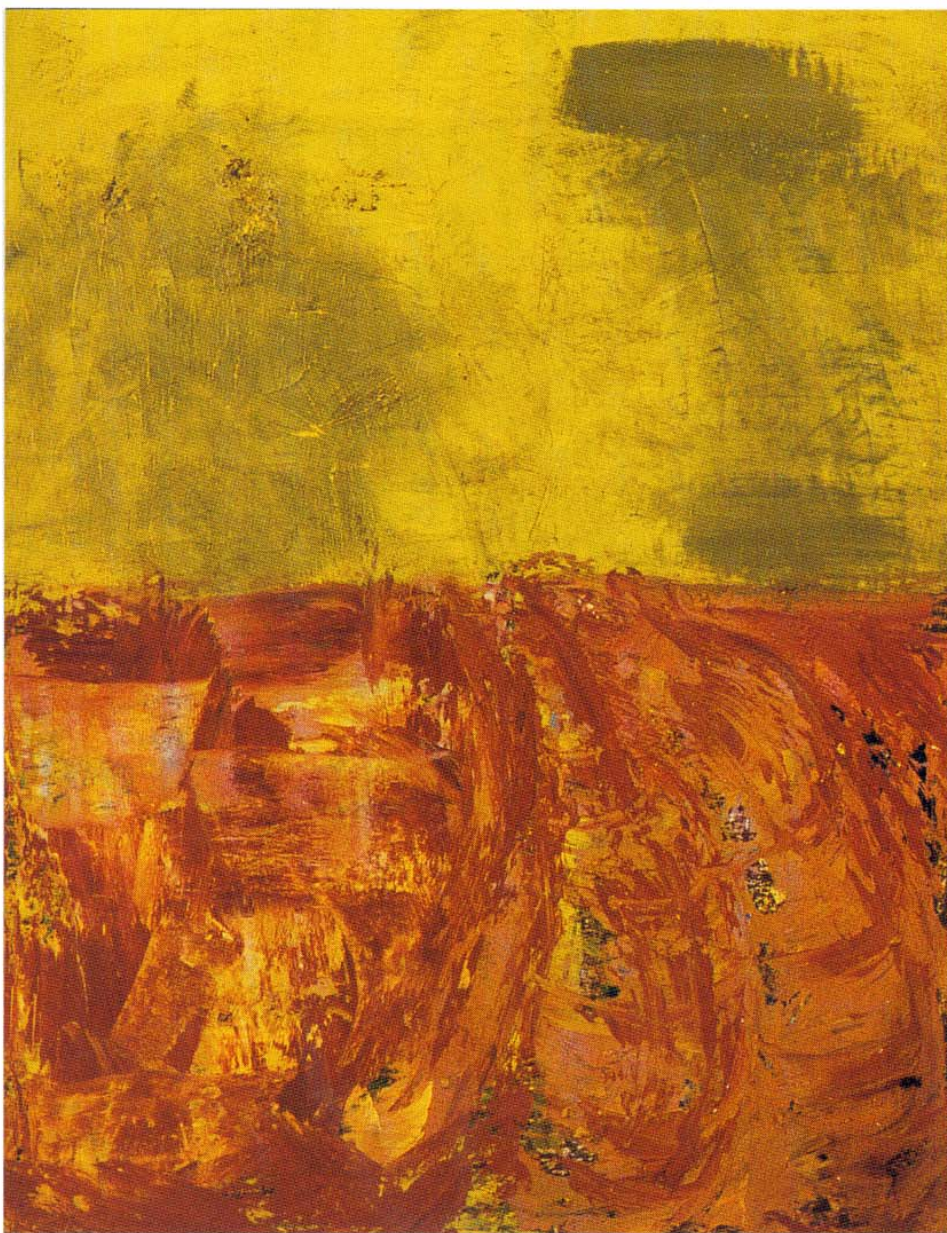


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Stalker, 39" x 30", oil on linen, 1993-95

Bill Jensen

portfolio

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B I L L J E N S E N



Crown of Thorns, 23" x 16", Oil on linen, 1979

Epiphany and Surrender: The Recent Paintings of Bill Jensen

John Yau

Few contemporary artists can put together a composition quite as convincingly as Bill Jensen, or make a painting embody both the

incoherence of life and the majestic orders which paint alone is capable of articulating. Even fewer come to their paintings with as much belief in paint's imaginal powers, its ability to be both paint and image and yet more than the combination of the two. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Jensen has eschewed seriality and design in favor of metaphor, a decision which at the very least makes him somewhat of a loner in the art world. How many other artists are capable

of galvanizing the mystery that threatens to pull paint and image apart, and of making them seamlessly inhabit each other's domain with both humility and confidence? (One thinks of Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston, Norman Bluhm, Jasper Johns, Ed Moses, Sigmar Polke, and Chuck Close as other masters of this mystery.)

For these reasons, Jensen remains largely misrepresented by advocates and adversaries alike, and is seen by many as an iconoclast grappling with nostalgia rather than as a radical artist who believes in paint's powers to articulate something unique, accessible, and mysterious. It is a problem Jensen has had to face throughout his career, because critics and curators feel possessive toward his work, valuing one period or phase over another. (In this respect, Jensen is also comparable to Pollock, Johns, Moses, and the others I mentioned).

He keeps changing, transforming, and shifting his work when we don't want him to, when we in effect want more of what he has already given us, because we so firmly believe that it won't be familiar, that it will still surprise us. For some of his fans, Jensen is a magician who can never do the same trick too many times. But for all his belief in the magic of paint and painting, Jensen is no magician, and what he does isn't a trick. If anything, his paintings are just the opposite: self-conscious, genuine acts of will.

Bill Jensen first gained attention in 1980 for a group of small, intense, labor-intensive paintings in which ellipses, spirals, and pod-like shapes were squeezed together with a palette knife. The combination of impacted, dense surfaces, their airless space, and the tight, tense coil of the ellipses and spirals added up to a time bomb waiting to explode in the viewer's face. At a moment when literalism seemed to have run its course one more time, Jensen's abstract paintings with their hypnotic evocation of states of fear and tenderness, and their simultaneously inward-gazing contemplativeness and aggressive emotional directness, was just what the moribund art world desperately needed. Here was an artist who made no earth-shaking pronouncements or grand, sweeping statements, but rather was totally committed to discovering and celebrating paint's everyday mira-



Denial, 40" x 31", oil on linen, 1983-86

cle. That Jensen gave his miracles titles such as *Crown of Thorns* (1979), *Seed of the Madonna* (1978-1979), and *Ryder's Eye* (1978-1979), made clear some of his intentions. He believed in the possibilities of achieving spiritual content through compelling, aggressive metaphors, and he was establishing himself as an American artist who was connected to earlier American artists working in a mystical, visionary vein: Albert Pinkham Ryder, Arthur Dove, and Marsden Hartley. While many of his contemporaries trumpeted bombast, cynicism, and the end of painting, Jensen, like his forbears, patiently labored over his paintings until they achieved an intense, emotionally hypnotic pitch.

In 1987, the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., exhibited twenty-three of Jensen's paintings and six works on paper from 1976 to 1986. Although the exhibition was by no means a retrospective, it did contain strong examples of the artist's work that helped bring the viewer up to date. Hindsight suggests that the show should have been larger and more attentive to the changes that had transpired in Jensen's

work during that decade, and that a more comprehensive view of his work is now required. Since the exhibition at the Phillips, Jensen's work has undergone a number of shifts, some of which were hinted at in his earlier work. He had, for instance, chosen to change right at the moment his work was first gaining attention and praise from the art world; he put away his palette knife in 1980 and began solely using brushes for three years. Around that same time, the split between figure and ground became more ambiguous, as Jensen introduced a more complex spatial dimension into his work. The range of color shifted from dark and light to a bolder, richer palette. By the mid-1980s, Jensen had moved away from the compressed, almost airless space of his early compositions to one that shifted between compressed areas and open ones, and between thin, scraped-down passages and thick, lava-like rivulets of paint, suggesting a landscape that was seen simultaneously through microscope and telescope.

In the late 1980s, Jensen pushed his work in a number of different directions, causing some critics to become uncomfortable and even downright nasty. For all the art world's claim to believe in change and rupture, what it actually prefers is the stable and constant production of artists like Robert Motherwell, Richard Diebenkorn, and Andy Warhol. Not only did Jensen continue to explore the possibilities of landscapes inhabited by forms poised between

the human and the inhuman, but he also depicted animated abstract forms within an abstract space. In both groups of work, Jensen jettisoned his use of the painting's edges to push against the forms, to hold them in place. He let go of the anchors he had used to hold his earlier paintings together, but he did not start mindlessly drifting, as some critics seemed to think. He certainly didn't forget how to put together a painting.

If Jensen's ability to coil a linear form or spiral within a tightly compressed space helped create the tension between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality arrived at in his early work (1976-1980), in the late 1980s he started to use curving bands to demarcate a form's rounded surface, giving it an oddly dualistic identity. The sinuous bands invited viewers' attention while holding them at arm's length. Entwined around each other, Jensen's forms inhabited a realm that was both remote and immediate; they were embedded in the painting's surface even as they popped out at us. And, perhaps more disturbing, the tubular forms, encased within their bright colors, struck the viewer as both emotionally aloof and quietly seething. They were poised between withdrawing further and exploding in fury.

Jensen had somehow managed to shift the tension between inwardness and outwardness that was a characteristic of his earlier, impacted work into an airier though not necessarily more hospitable dimension. Other than the vibrancy of their own private, inescapable drama, nothing seemed to be holding these forms in place. Certainly nothing stood between them and us, giving both forms and viewers a kind of vulnerability. At a time when airborne viruses are one of our greatest fears, paintings such as *Lie-Light* (1989-1990) and *Bright Moments* (1990) suggest that the world is even more deceptive and less predictable than any of us care to realize. Jensen's "bright moments" may be the cold heat of spiritual realization or the feverish chill of physical breakdown or both. And running through all of his paintings right from the beginning is an unearthly, glowing light which shifts from gloomy introspection to serene contemplation.



Bright Moments, 50" x 50", oil on linen, 1992



Colossus, 37" x 32", oil on linen, 1993-94

Jensen's recent paintings further underscore our failure to grasp the emotional complexity and breadth of his subject matter or to recognize the radicality of the shifts he has deliberately engendered within his work during the past two decades. Perhaps too many of us still long for the shock caused by his early paintings, long for the moment when his work caused us to rethink our whole attitude toward painting and what we had come to expect of it. This is the albatross Jensen has had to carry. We want to return to that moment when the stuff of raw, vulnerable emotions in his early work confronted our jaded eyes, but what we all too easily and quickly forget is that for the rest of the 1980s most of us turned our attention elsewhere and were more than content to see Jensen as an isolated iconoclast rather than as a painter of urgency and necessity. Because the art world has been unable to infantilize Jensen as they have so many other artists, to make him into a kind of huffy-puffy clown like Julian Schnabel, they are tempted to think of him as a latter-day Paolo Farinati or Gregorio Schiavone, figures who found a way to continue the innovations of others. And yet exactly the opposite is true. Schnabel is our modern Gregorio Schiavone and Jensen is our original.

The art world didn't exactly kill the messenger; it simply and rather quickly deferred addressing the message, pushing it off to the side and choosing instead to revel in the various productions of elegance, pomposity, irony, and sarcasm deemed historically necessary.

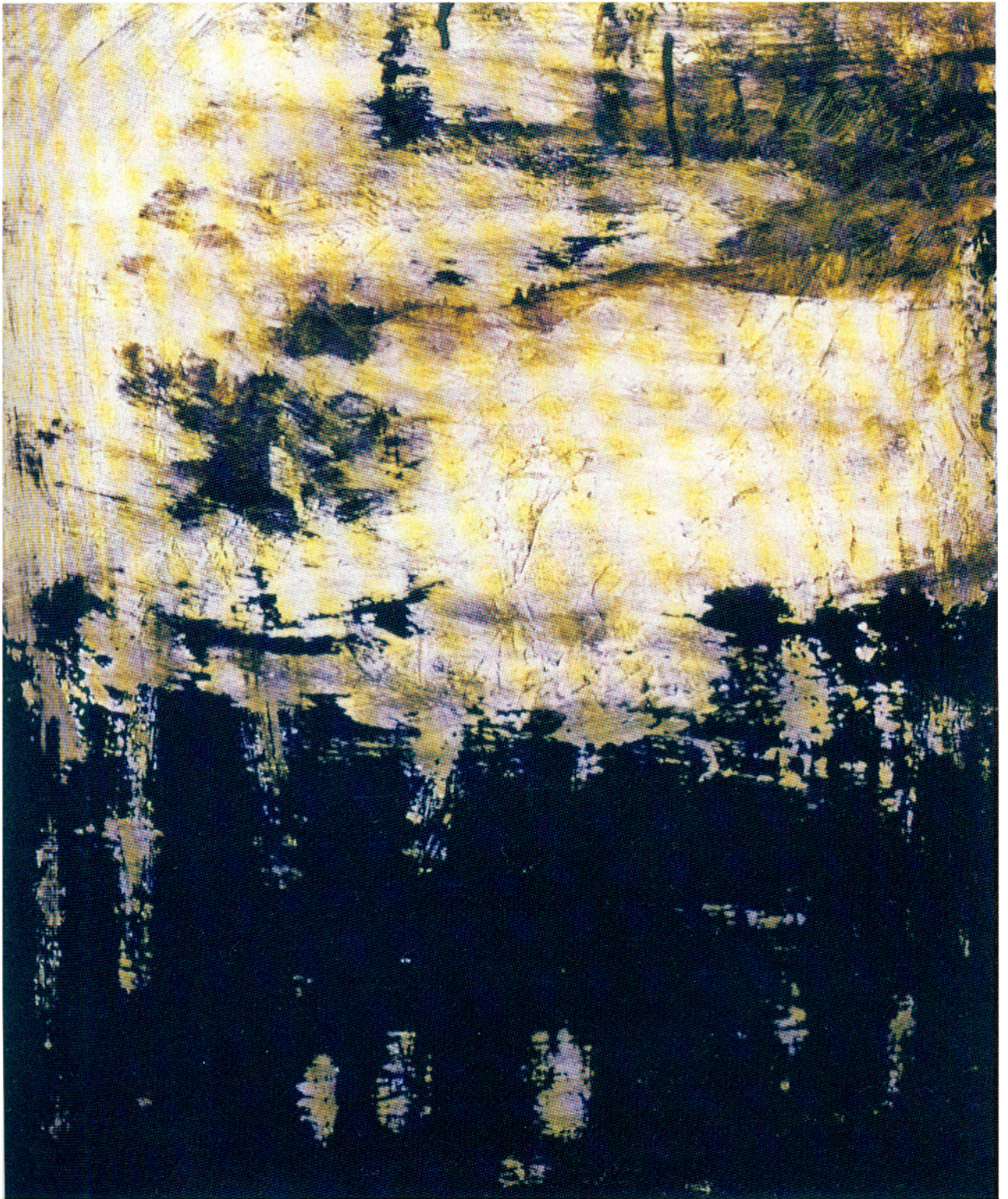
It is this marginalizing of Jensen that we now have an opportunity to reconsider and even correct. But, to make matters more complicated, Jensen has shifted his work once again, away from the complex compositions we have come to associate with him, and away from the animated forms and the mysterious dramas they are acting out, into a landscape that seems at first glance empty and barren but that after prolonged viewing may be full of promise and hope.

I suspect that one of the inspirations for Jensen's most recent work was the 1994 exhibi-

tion of Willem de Kooning at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The wild, unpredictable shifts between impacted and much simpler compositions that occur again and again during the course of de Kooning's career may have proven useful to Jensen. As an artist who has used a palette knife to build up and scrape down his paintings, Jensen now seems to have scraped away much of what he knows. This is not something that was supposed to happen in Jensen's work. It is something that he made happen, and in so doing he further annealed the inherent logic of his desire to consider all the paths open to him and to decisively set down one of them without knowing what lay ahead.

The titles of the recent paintings are for the most part derived from movies made by either Ingmar Bergman or Andrei Tarkovsky, filmmakers whose ability to link the subtle shifts in a cold, northern light to the human tragedy slowly unfolding upon a vast, ghost-haunted stage is particularly apt for an artist who grew up in Minnesota. Most of the paintings are divided horizontally into two distinct rectangular zones, which we read as sky and earth. The palette veers from bright, post-apocalyptic tropical, in *Stalker* (1993-1994), to shifting shades and harsh contrasts in *Winter's Light* (1994). Jensen seems to concur with Shakespeare's famous metaphor of the world as a stage, but with a twist. For him, the bare canvas is also a stage on which the painter makes something happen, and what happens is a world teeming with potentiality. The paintings' titles clarify a connection between Jensen, whose paintings have been sculptural in their physicality, and Tarkovsky, who, in his book *Sculpting in Time* (translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair, University of Texas Press, 1986), says of classical Japanese haiku: "Haiku cultivates its images in such a way that they mean nothing beyond themselves and at the same time express so much that it is not possible to catch their final meaning." Jensen, Tarkovsky, and Bergman are not artists who make everything fit into a story but visionary authors for whom narrative is a way of discovering the limits of what can be revealed while approaching what cannot be made visible. As an artist concerned

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Winters' Light, 39" x 30", oil on linen, 1994