

## Jed Perl on Art Theorists and Appreciators (Excerpt)

The success of Bill Jensen's new paintings, fourteen of which were shown at the Mary Boone Gallery in February, has to do with the extent to which Jensen manages to locate their relatively simple and pared-down imagery in a broader context. In this show Jensen seemed to be thinking up a visual world (theorizing about it) and then living in it (appreciating it). Working with paint that has been thinned to the consistency of Japanese ink, Jensen unfurls jagged, looping calligraphic strokes over surfaces that have the luxuriant patinas of faded gold leaf and weather-worn bronze and centuries-old vellum. There is something sleek and

easy on the eyes about these paintings, but that is just their Gilded Age come-on. In most of the compositions, broad strokes of paint create a sort of floating foreground suspended before an equally ambiguous background, but the weight of the color and the differences in surface treatments give these juxtapositions a specificity, a focus.

Jensen's paintings have a fascinating double life, grabbing a gallerygoer on first glance while also working slowly, almost covertly. He lets us know what kinds of things he is thinking about. An interest in classical Japanese ink painting is evident. So is his fascination with a pre-modern idea of the artist as a craftsman. And one can see many allusions to de Kooning and to Abstract Expressionism in general. This is by no means an especially unfamiliar range of influences, and the reason for Jensen's success is that they operate both immediately (for the appreciator) and suggestively (for the theorist).

Jensen's effects are very exact, but also broad in their impact. In *Ashes to Ashes* some drips of red paint at the bottom of the canvas have a clarity of shape that I don't think I have ever seen in dripped paint before. Dripped painting generally evokes Abstract Expressionism and the automatist experiments of the Surrealists, but in *Ashes to Ashes* one's thoughts about such precedents are grounded in the specifics of those spots of color. While there might be a suggestion that this is the red of blood, the suggestion is not sentimental, because the weight of each of the drops is so warily observed. Jensen's painterly moves have metaphorical payoffs.

LEFT JENSEN'S show feeling that he has his own thoughts about Abstract Expressionism and about Japan, which is as it should be. Like most contemporary artists who manage to draw us into their work, Jensen both constructs and inhabits his own theoretical universe. But there is a paradox here: to the extent that an artist makes us feel at home in such a universe, we may also find ourselves frustrated by the very limits of that universe. Theories suggest expanding perspectives. We begin to hope that the particularity of one artist's work can somehow be related to the work of other artists; but this does not happen very often now.

For as long as the best contemporary artists are all living in their own homemade theoretical universes, the art world as a whole is going to feel confused, adrift. It is disturbing that nobody seems able to come up with a theory that can account for anything but his or her own work, that there is nothing to do but go from oasis to

oasis. How do Jensen's themes connect with anybody else's themes? And what is theory if there is no commonality of ideas? The effort to explain what we have seen with our eyes is always a move into the realm of ideas; and if those who have seen the most with their eyes are most afraid of ideas, then it is no wonder that a kind of aridity can surround even the really exciting achievements.

In his essay on the Vienna School, Christopher S. Wood observes that "in *Strukturanalyse*, the dynamism of the interpretative procedure and the fictional integrity of the work are on a collision course." Perhaps all interpretation brings with it such a danger. In the past several decades, certainly, theorists and appreciators have been on a collision course. Appreciators are so concerned with the fictional integrity of the work of art that they sometimes just assume that it means nothing, rather than risk taking the work apart in order to find out. And theorists have forgotten that there is anything to put together again. The result has been an art-world disconnection of monumental proportions—a sense that nothing fits with anything else. Gallerygoers have experiences, but they cannot locate those experiences in a larger context.

Appreciators are eager to tell us that theory can have a numbing effect, and this is frequently true. But when theory has vanished—when good and bad or old and new have no theoretical basis—there is no way of evaluating our experiences. Only when artists and gallerygoers take a gamble, and once again are moving easily between immediate experience and theoretical speculation, can art really begin to feel complete. ■