

# CHEIM & READ

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### LEISURE/WEEKEND DESK ART GUIDE

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Bill Jensen has been making compelling, deceptively modest Modernist paintings for a long time. His resonant new works, compact, richly layered compendiums of painterly procedures, may be his best yet. On vertical canvases, easel size or smaller, he brushes, trowels and pours on the paint and scrapes, squeegees, scumbles or sands it. There is a searching spontaneity, as if he were feeling his way along without knowing his destination; it looks as if the paintings evolved slowly, maybe even over years of thoughtful trial and error, coming to fruition sometimes with lightninglike suddenness.

Multiple tensions animate the spaces compressed within these boxy rectangles. Calligraphic slashes of pure color stand out against smeary brown or gray backgrounds in many cases, creating tension between the immediate surface and the illusory distance. In "Devotee I," vivid orange swaths vibrate against an almost equally intense blue field, creating a taut frontality. Bits and pieces of unidentifiable matter float through the incandescent orange haze in "Fragrance"; by contrast to that picture's ethereal light, "Kuroscuro II," with its deep, reddish brown lower half and scraped-raw upper half, gives off an earthbound melancholia.

The paintings evoke Rothko's cosmic space, de Kooning's elegant gesturalism, Marsden Hartley's sensuous materialism, Albert Pinkham Ryder's haunted dreamscape. There is Asian calligraphy and landscape painting in there, too. And with their seemingly aged and weathered surfaces, even the brightest colors slightly shadowed, the paintings exude a moody, world-weary lyricism; they might be mourning the slow death of painting in an age of mechanical reproduction. KEN JOHNSON