

CHEIM & READ

WEEKEND Arts FINE ARTS LEISURE

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The New York Times

Bill Jensen

*Cheim & Read
547 West 25th Street, Chelsea
Through March 24*

Bill Jensen has never settled down with one style, although he's probably best known for paintings that feature eerie biomorphic shapes hovering in caverns of deep space: strange, seductive canvases that are the visual equivalents of weird progressive rock songs, and were inspired by American artists like Arthur Dove and Albert Pinkham Ryder, who fall mostly outside the reigning postwar painting dialogues.

Like a politician moving from the margins toward the center, however, Mr. Jensen has been distancing himself recently from earlier allegiances. In the last half-decade he's ditched his old friends on the fringe and taken up with Jackson Pollock and Jasper Johns.

A few paintings here resist that pull, including four dark canvases sequestered in a room off the main gallery, painted with black, brown and streaks of purple to look almost like slabs of oxidized steel. But the bulk of the show takes Abstract Expressionism — specifically the gestural maneuverings of Pollock and Franz Kline — as a starting point and combines it with the waxy surface of Mr. Johns's encaustic paintings. (Mr. Jensen paints in oil but makes his own paint, allowing him to regulate its viscosity.)

Rather than expanding the scale of his paintings to accommodate his newfound, florid gesturing, Mr. Jensen maintains a controlled, compressed format. The paintings are all in the neighborhood of 3½ by 2½ feet. Additionally, where you expect to see signs of the artist's touch — the tacitility central to Ab Ex and spoofed with sophisticated irony by Mr. Johns — Mr. Jensen wipes away nearly all traces of brushstroke to achieve a smooth, and in places diaphanous, finish.

With his translucent, merged layers of paint and itinerant approach to color, Mr. Jensen extends abstract painting's conversation to include other mediums: handmade paper, batik prints, glazed ceramics. You could even say he's taken Pollock to new places. It's unlikely you'll run into oddballs like Mr. Dove and Mr. Ryder there.

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