

BROOKLYN RAIL

Bill Jensen: *Wandering Boundless & Free*

by Raphael Rubinstein
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Bill Jensen, *TRANSGRESSIONS TRANSGRESSED*, 2019-2020. Oil on linen, two panels, 39 1/4 x 63 inches overall. © Bill Jensen; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery. Photo: Brian Buckley

In the course of a 2007 *Brooklyn Rail* interview with Bill Jensen, his friend and fellow painter Chris Martin remarked that he had seen figures and faces in Jensen's recent, ostensibly abstract, paintings, and asked the artist if he consciously painted these figurative images. Jensen replied that any such imagery wasn't intentional, it was just that if things like faces appeared, he didn't erase them. In any case, Jensen added, the only thing that mattered to him, the only thing he looked for, was "emotional content." As a longtime viewer of Jensen's work, I am familiar with how his paintings can, and often do, subtly evoke figures and landscapes. Indeed, this ability to conjure the feel and memory of places and the pose and weight of bodies without getting bogged down in resemblance is one of Jensen's many strengths as a painter. But as I walked into his current show at Vito Schnabel and found myself standing in front of the diptych *TRANSGRESSIONS TRANSGRESSED* (2019-20), which was hung by itself in a hallway outside the main space, I was confronted with an unexpected and uncharacteristically explicit figurative motif: an erect penis sprouting from a swollen testicular base.

The possessor of this organ is unmistakable as a nude male figure, rendered on the right panel in pale whites, pinks, and greens. Seated in a manspreading pose, hands clasped at face level as if praying (or perhaps crying in despair), the aroused figure is flanked by a smaller residually figurative shape in vivid pinks and yellows. Reminiscent of mid-1940s de Kooning in form and palette, this truncated, bulgy body reads as female largely by contrast with the emphatically male figure next to it. Dangling from above are some sinuous red forms. All this takes place against pigment-rich zones of cadmium red and cerulean blue, as well as swatches of bright yellow. The shapes on the more somber left panel fit more easily into the genre of biomorphic abstraction, and exude a heaviness and density that suggests wood and stone when compared to the fleshier forms to their right.



Bill Jensen, *TRANSGRESSIONS*, 2011-2014. Oil on linen, three panels, 55 1/2 x 105 inches overall. © Bill Jensen. Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery. Photo: Brian Buckley

In the main gallery are six more paintings, including two imposing triptychs. One of these, *TRANSGRESSIONS* (2011-14) is clearly the predecessor of *TRANSGRESSIONS TRANSGRESSED*, as we see the same despairing male figure and the same dangling shapes. But there is a crucial difference: the intense chroma of the later painting is wholly absent. Instead, the figures are drawn with sepia lines against a smudgy off-white ground. But intense color isn't the only thing missing. In place of the balls and prominent cock of the more recent painting, Jensen has depicted something that looks more like a fig leaf than a sexual organ. Dominating the central panel, which is dropped down a few inches from the others and offers a more active ground, is a very rough oval of—I'm guessing—Mars red that creates a grotto-like aperture in the center of the panel (linen, like all the works in the show). Given the riot of protuberances and penetrations in the side panels, including a shape in the upper left that can only be a dick and a hairy scrotum, it's nearly impossible to avoid reading this red grotto, at the center of which is a curving seashell shape, as vaginal and clitoral.

This may seem a long way from Jensen the painter's painter, celebrated for near-alchemical devotion to his craft and intimate dramas of color and form in which the artist beautifully weaves together the legacies of symbolist American visionaries (Albert Pinkham Ryder, Arthur Dove, Forrest Bess), the economical touch of Chinese poet-painters, and the chromatic innovations of Italian Renaissance altarpiece painters. Nota bene: this more familiar Jensen is also on extensive display in the show, with the paintings *BITTER CHANT XV* (2022), *WITCH'S BREW VI* (2022-23), *SPANNOCCHIA LUOHAN I (ALCHEMY)* (2017), and *PASSIONS ACCORDING TO ANDREI (RUBLEV/TARKOVSKY)* (2010-11), the last of which features a zone of green and violet, at once velvety and metallic, that the artist pushes to an extreme darkness.

It turns out that Italy provides the key to the proliferation of dicks and orifices in this show (most of them, I think, intentional): *TRANSGRESSIONS* and *TRANSGRESSIONS TRANSGRESSED* had their origins in drawings that Jensen made of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes, specifically the scenes of the *Last Judgment* on the altar wall in which hundreds of naked contrapposto figures alternately rise to Heaven or are dragged down toward Hell. Over the centuries, on the order of Vatican authorities, the genital areas of these figures have been obscured with loincloths, drapery and leafy jockstraps. Perhaps consulting Marcello Venusti's pre-censorship 1549 copy, as well as his own drawings, Jensen has restored, nay, amped-up the sexual charge of the original frescoes. But this is no mere art-historical exercise. The unfettered polymorphous sexuality of the "Transgressions" paintings, which is far closer to Hans Bellmer's eros-drenched drawings than to any of the artists usually associated with Jensen, feels like a joyful defiance of all imposed categories, whether they pertain to artistic styles or human sexuality.



Installation view: *Bill Jensen: Wandering Boundless & Free*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, New York, 2024. Artworks © Bill Jensen. Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery. Photo: Argenis Apolinario.

Jensen's paintings have never looked easy, but the imagery that arose unbidden from his Sistine Chapel drawings must surely have unnerved the artist. This, of course, is exactly the creative state that Jensen has always sought. As he confessed to poet-critic John Yau in a 2007 interview for *Bomb Magazine*:

There is tremendous psychic terror when the brush meets the painting. As an artist you need to have a high tolerance for anxiety and a high tolerance for embarrassment. A high tolerance for anxiety because you feel pulled by forces greater than you. It is as if something is going through you, and it is not about you. A high tolerance for embarrassment because some of the stuff is going to look pretty bad. It has an identity outside of yourself and must be accepted. You have to take the good and the bad, the ugly as well as the beautiful, and the pain as well as the joy to get yourself someplace.

In this show, Jensen has indeed gotten himself "someplace," and dares us to follow.