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Olav Christopher Jenssen at Tracy Williams Ltd.

By: Steven Vincent

Perhaps I read too many newspapers, but looking at Olav Christopher Jenssen's show of nine acrylic-on-canvas paintings reminded me of the European Union. Not that the artist's first solo New York show was ponderous, elitist or bland—it was not—but rather, just as the EU is attempting to fashion a super-rational state that transcends centuries of European history, Jenssen seems set on creating paintings unburdened by modernism's own history of "heroism," beauty and spirituality. The results are winsome abstractions that tickle the fancy with a frisson of eccentricity and adventure—not unlike, say, a pleasant weekend in Belgium.

In this latest show, the Norwegian-born, Berlin-based artist relied on a number of painterly affectations to infuse his works with a kind of sensible esthetic tension. As in previous works, Jenssen favors a "top-down" look: for example, in *Translation* (all works in the show date from 2004), a band of rich brownish purple fills the upper half the canvas, with white space comprising the lower half. In *Venation*, slightly smeared shapes of blacks and pinks mass in the upper left-hand corner before giving way to wavy black lines that hang down like loose wiring. Jenssen's placement of thin, spiderweblike shapes beneath heavier bodies of color gives these works a top-heavy feel, as if they risk collapsing beneath their own weight.

Jenssen's palette seems deliberately off-kilter—lots of black, brownish purple and bloody red. The last hue, juxtaposed with a kind of hospital-wall green, gives the clotted, vein- and cell-like shapes of *Yearning* the disquieting look of surgery gone awry—a strangely visceral painting in a decidedly nonvisceral show. In *L.M.W. Secret No. 16*, Jenssen includes his trademark rows of uppercase letters, which seem to contain portentous meaning but are in fact apparently nonsensical.

Like Albert Oehlen, a German artist with whom the 50-year-old Jenssen is often grouped, the Norwegian flouts traditional rules of form and color in painting while exhibiting a similarly mild rebarbative quality. Unlike Oehlen's work, however, Jenssen's paintings of blobs and swirls seem more gestural than psychological. The crosshatches, fingerprintlike loops and haphazard rectangles of *Endymion*, for example, seem divorced from the kind of Rorschach-like revelations one's office doodles betray—as if the artist engaged in automatic drawing without the murky inconveniences of the psyche. In the lucid buoyancy of Jenssen's abstractions, it seems, the unconscious is too heavy and ancient a burden to bear.

Olav Christopher Jenssen: *Venation*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 72 ½ by 76 ½ inches; at Tracy Williams.

