

# The Angel of Abstraction

By Peter Schjeldahl

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Olav Christopher Jenssen's paintings are perfect art about imperfection, as if an angel wrote a treatise on humanity. They condescend with utmost grace and at times something like grandeur to awkward, fugitive sensations. The most wayward and arbitrary-seeming techniques and motifs—"expressive" in a generic sort of way, neither quite personal nor quite impersonal, cumulatively reminiscent of so much other art that they can seem beholden to art in general—incur in Jenssen's radiant canvases a uniform compassion. The paintings' extraordinary inventiveness suggests "automatic" spontaneity, though without rhetorical pretenses to "unconscious" inspiration. (No critical jargon that is brought to bear on this intelligent art can elude quotation marks.) The paintings are like dreams dreamt wide awake in the light of day. Splendid in themselves, they excite as signs of something new and vigorous in the lately much troubled history of abstract painting. Jenssen's self-confident exfoliation of a vast pictorial repertoire—an encyclopedia of the painterly, a dictionary of symbols—gives heart to current hopes for a recovery of abstraction from the traumatic decline of modern art idealism in the 1960s and its toxic aftermath of "postmodern" irony.

The notion of a perfect art about imperfection reverses the signal quality of modern abstract painting, that long, heroic delirium of flawed people seeking to hit on absolute images, instantaneous eternities. The desperate hubris of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, Pollock, Rothko, Newman, and Reinhardt seems both magnificent and preposterous in retrospect. They were mere men out to wrestle some Demiurge or other onto the wall, and we love their works while perhaps not knowing any longer whether to laugh or cry at their folly. In our recent era of post-folly—and neo-resignation, neo-cynicism, neo-despair—it was often suggested that abstract painting died as major art with the failure of what amounted to displaced religious strivings. It could certainly seem that way. Abstract painting after the 1960s lived like a defrocked priest in shabby-genteel suburbs of contemporary art's neonlit metropolis. It was invited to tea sometimes to flavor polite conversation with its seasoned displays of "sensibility," but rarely to dinner and never to the latenight party. It was understood to be refined and attractive but prone to take itself entirely too seriously and to speak tediously, at each opportunity, of the good old days. A cultured bore.

The problem was loss of faith in abstraction's ability convincingly to signify anything besides its own accumulated gestures. (Gerhard Richter has been the great and rapturously discouraging prophet of this condition.) As usual in the dialectic of art, the solution is found in the disappearance of the problem as a problem. The loss of abstraction as a sublime language about essences—the above and beyond—becomes a gain of abstraction as a colloquial idiom about particularities—the here and now. I thought of this at Documenta 9 in the disagreeably clashing but, in terms of quality, superb room that Jenssen shared with Brice Marden and Johnathan Lasker. Marden's delicately gawky, courtly webs and Lasker's emphatic arrangements of "spontaneous" marks spoke to the new thing in painting, which Jenssen's startlingly various canvases positively sang of. (I thought, too, of a marvelous New York painter who died at the age of 34 this year: Moira Dryer.) The new thing is about embracing the very suspicion of arbitrariness—why this form, why this color, rather than another?—that eroded the priestly authority of modern-art abstraction. Jenssen makes of apparent arbitrariness a thrilling intimation of limitless possibilities, answering the ordinary

craving for experience of actual people whose eyes are connected to brains and hearts, to living bodies with desires and memories. The new thing--which is also an old thing, a sort of intimated Baroque in its explicit openness to viewers--is democratically sociable, declining to advertise transcendence. Rather, it treats sophistication of perception, thought, and feeling as a process with no goal, endless, enjoyable for its own sake, and not so much life-affirming as just life-recognizing. It is purely aestheticist-dandyish, even, in the Baudelairian way--but matter-of-factly, without aristocratic posturing or *maudit* hysteria.

Jenssen's paintings, never boring, are fit for any company while requiring none, as self-sufficient as the dandy whose eyes are always alertly amused and impossible to out-gaze. The presence of such a person in a room makes everyone present excitedly or uncomfortably aware of other rooms and places-- streets, palaces, dives--that constitute the unbroken domain of a citizen of the world. The dandy is ever utterly present in appearance and utterly absent in essence, telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth *of a mask*. He or she (there are female dandies in this fin de siecle, such as Cindy Sherman) "has style" not in the singular but in the plural, even the infinitely plural. He or she knows how to form from the mood of a moment an expression precisely suited to it, without regard for any other moment past or to come. The invisible consistency in Jenssen's astonishing stylistic variability is a constant ratio of generosity and reserve: giving everything, withholding all. A balance. A perfection.

A homeless kindness. I asked Jenssen what ideal worldly fate he would choose for his paintings when they leave his studio. He said, "I wish that one of them would be so expensive that I could afford to give all the rest to my friends." So he is a professional producer driven by love, making a peculiar sort of treasure for museums and private collections: gestures of love sidetracked and intercepted, ever in transit to a loved one never encountered. A telephone ringing in an empty room, and the ringing is the most beautiful music.

I visited Jenssen in Berlin, where he has lived since 1982. Before that, he spent two years on New York's Lower East Side during that neighborhood's glory days of NeoExpressionist and graffiti-related painting and legendary nightlife. I found it interesting that this healthy-looking Norwegian, an affectionate family man, should have been drawn to two such raucously cosmopolitan, smoky, differently dangerous places. On the Lower East Side the dirty secrets of society, its greeds and cruelties, nakedly parade. And until 1989 Berlin was the capital of danger, where the malicious Wall called to mind a world clock always one tick from midnight and universal destruction. I myself live on the Lower East Side and have loved Berlin, and come to think of it I am Norwegian-blooded (via three generations in North Dakota) and a family man, too. So it may be no surprise that I find Jenssen mightily attractive and understand him hardly at all.

Jenssen and I compared childhoods. Each of us had an entrepreneur father, whose schemes made the family situation unpredictable, and a relatively cultured mother (Jenssen's an amateur painter). A big difference was in our respective early-childhood landscapes (such being, in my view, primary foundations of human souls). Jenssen was happy in snowy mountains; I was melancholy on a prairie. I discovered that he had been a ski-jumper, and I teased him in Berlin that my whole interpretation of his work would be related to skijumping. The analogy would work, sort of. The idea of hurling oneself into lofty emptiness while staying perfectly under control, and making an elegant figure there against the sky, is scarcely inconsistent with the effect of Jenssen's paintings. But I rather suspect that skill in ski-jumping is a poor predictor, statistically, of artistic genius.

Together we mourned bygone West Berlin--not the passing of the Wall, of course, but the loss of a cohesion and an energy that turn out to have been inextricable from the old tension. Today Berlin is a vast, drowsy blank for future generations to fill in and enliven. Drinking coffee in Jenssen's loft and studying his powerfully tranquil canvases, I reflected that here was one artist who had made the most of the divided city. I decided that the profundity of Jenssen's sophistication is rooted in an unillusioned knowledge of the terribleness of the world. Knowing the worst, one may go mad (not the way of a Norwegian ski-jumper) or seek to realize life's best consolation under the circumstances, which will be a conditional and chastened,

even haunted happiness. Jossen's seraphically lyrical pictures are ballasted with a *gravitas* of history. They will speak to the future of a particular epoch. Already they speak to various pasts.

When I visited Berlin's Dahlem museum with Jossen, I was thunderstruck by the Rembrandt painting of Jacob wrestling with the angel. (Jacob fought to detain the angel, demanding that she bless him.) With a touch of sublime comedy, Rembrandt's angel, her countenance serene, pretends to resist the fiercely struggling man, while it is apparent to us that her strength is incalculably greater than his. She could break him in two. But she refrains from humiliating both his physical pride and his understanding of what he seeks. She shares with us the knowledge that by this pathetic act of violence with which he admits his human insufficiency, his need for the divine, Jacob has blessed himself. She cherishes him. Weak, vain comical humanity is cherished on high. The Rembrandt is perfect art about imperfection, and I felt an arc of brotherly electricity leap from it to the Jossens I viewed that morning.

All of Jossen's recent paintings measure 275 cm by 255 cm, vertical enough to obviate landscape and the mural but not so vertical as to suggest a figure or a panel. The proportion's slight lateral compression of what at first glance appears a perfect square exercises an anti-gravity effect, as of a gentle updraft, on forms within the pictorial field. (Ross Bleckner is another painter who has used similar formats to a comparable though more obviously dramatic, "Gothic" effect.) In this field that feels at once generously roomy and neatly contained, things stay wherever Jossen puts them, comfortably hovering.

The paintings are executed in oils and acrylics with brushes and other implements (spray bottles, scrapers, and whatnot). The canvases are painted both standing up on stretchers and, stretched over a floor-hugging table strong enough to walk on, lying flat. (Seeing Jossen standing on-or in--an unfinished painting, I observed that the 275-by-255 cm proportion is that of a small but habitable room, like a ship cabin.) Jossen keeps several canvases in progress at once. He does not make preparatory drawings. It never occurs to him, he told me, that one of his paintings will fail and have to be rejected. Ideally the picture comes fast, with minimal effort. "I used to paint about nine layers. Now I like to separate out the layers, one to a canvas." But often enough the mysterious criterion of sufficiency--in Jossen's case some exact pitch of easeful eloquence--is not satisfied at once, and what results is the palimpsest of a tender struggle that arrives casually, as if by lucky accident, at pleasures of chiaroscuro and complexity.

Jossen is a colorist of subtle moods: slight irritabilities, piquant irresolutions. He leans toward the secondaries--orange, green, purple--which are painting's minor chords, the palette of Expressionism, but in muted, nonviolent relations. Most of all he favors orange, the most impossible of all hues employed in its densest pigmentations, its maximum orangeness (deep chrome and deep cadmium oranges). "Orange has a strange beauty and ugliness," he says. It is anti-decorative (will not "go with" anything), as are his worrisome, vermouth-dry green ("sap green" from Rowney, a subliminal leitmotif in mixtures with white, ocher, and ultramarine) and hypersensitive pink (Rowney's "flesh tint"). His colors are what painters call "fat," with volumetric presence even in thin applications. Their refusal to resolve into harmonies contributes to the delicate restlessness, the endless quiet excruciation, of Jossen's pictures.

"Lack of Memory," in English, is Jossen's general title for his current series of paintings. It is an unusual, telling locution, hard not to misread as the common phrase "loss of memory" that denotes one of life's most terrifying jeopardies. Losing memory is for subjective being what losing blood is for the body. But to *lack* memory? The condition suggested is strangely neutral and even conceivably positive. Aren't our most wonderful moments, of sensual pleasure or mental abandonment, precisely passages of time in which memory (like its sister, anticipation) is *lacking*? At such moments, past and future telescope into the present, merging in presentness. (Moments that lacked memory become our lives' loveliest memories.) Jossen's title is philosophically exact when applied to the art of painting. A painting does not remember anything. A painting is. Jossen makes painting speak this truth about itself extravagantly, associating this aspect of its aesthetic nature to every manner of experience similarly construed. He activates the meaning of

“abstraction” as a physiological state--a state of which “lack of memory” is a good partial description. Abstraction is thus not just the genre but the subject / object, the quiddity of Jenssen’s art. No wonder this art seems so grandly poised, so significant and important a development of abstract painting, whose capacity to suspend time it gloriously amplifies.

From a rooftop in Berlin, Jenssen and I observed in the far distance an open-worked structure that evoked a diagram of a massive, eccentric church tower. It was odd and beautiful. Jenssen vaguely recalled having heard, though he could not be sure, that in fact it memorialized a destroyed church. What a lovely idea: to resurrect the contour of a lost building in a monumental drawing against the sky. I recalled for Jenssen that whenever I pass the site of a former apartment of mine on the Lower East Side, in a tenement long since burned down, I fancy a dotted outline in the air of those sixth-floor rooms. Driving around Berlin later, we made a detour to inspect the church-like structure. It turned out to be a banal framework supporting radio transmitters or something similar. It turned out to lack memory. And yet, after this disappointment, I decided that I liked the thing even better. It had made me dream wide awake in the light of day and in excellent company--a trifling but pure instance of the human struggle to find meaning in the world, a struggle which, seeking vainly to secure an angel’s blessing, blesses all of us.