

September 25, 2020

# A Painting Depicting the Precarity of a Single Figure, and of Us All

In this new work by Marcus Jansen, the subject must contend with two threats: rising walls and rising waters.



Marcus Jansen's "Behind Walls #1." (2019). Credit... Marcus Jansen, "Behind Walls #1," 2019, oil enamels, mixed-media collage and oil sticks on canvas. Expressive Culture LLC ©2020 Marcus Antonius Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**Name:** Marcus Jansen

**Age:** 52

**Based in:** South Bronx, N.Y., and Fort Myers, Fla.

**Originally From:** South Bronx, N.Y.

## **When and where did you make this work?**

I created this work in 2019 at my studio in Fort Myers. It was right around the time when Mexico and Puerto Rico were simultaneously in the news regarding, respectively, the border wall and the flooding after Hurricane Maria. It was the beginning of a series of three works.

## **Can you describe what's going on in the work?**

Although I've always thought of verbalizing a painting as impossible because of the multiplicity of interpretations — and I strive for multiple views in my work, starting with intuitive or instinctive responses that lead to their own questions about the topic — I will talk about what I personally see in "Behind Walls #1." In this case, as in many of my works, the painting shares a dialogue with me as much as I do with the act of painting itself. I love to work with paint because I can use it as flexible material to shape, bend and manipulate depending on what I decide. It can be used thick or thin, loosely or kept tight, as seen in this work. I think it is my job to pay attention to moments of that experimental manipulation in order to find something revealing that I don't already know.

Here, we have gestural imagery that suggests a fenced-off area in which the viewer is confronted with a scene depicting a cry for help from one person. They may be initially pulled in by the colors, or what could be a light or surveillance beam shining from the sky. A man or woman stands on a rooftop next to a tire that could be used as a rescue ring while a vague letter "S" suggests a cry of SOS that becomes the focal point of the work. My figures are not usually clearly identifiable but rather meant to represent humanity at large and the inherent suffering of life. There is a boundary in the back that isolates the incident in the foreground, and a black moon or sun that may indicate a change in time or era, or even a paradigm shift. Most important, this painting juxtaposes fictitious elements created by my imagination, such as the wall, tire and house the person is sitting on with a human being that is affected by them. It's a series of paradoxes that challenge the viewer to engage and compare the opposing structures and their interaction with this human being. Keeping the silhouette one color allows the viewer to identify with what's happening without insinuating any single person, group or experience.

It's a universal struggle, one in which the humanity of the entire scenario is questioned. On the bottom, we can see water that contrasts with the background wall, perhaps suggesting two separate events and alluding to multiple emerging threats — the rising of walls and the rising of waters — both created by our own actions.

## **What inspired you to make it?**

I was compelled to respond to the division of humanity, whether symbolic or physical, based on belief systems. In this case, a wall that I don't see as real, in the sense of not being able to suffer or bleed, is a manifestation of our imagination. It becomes a divider of the material world and thus part of a power structure. I was first introduced to walls like this while living in Germany during the 1990s, when I learned about what had been behind the East German wall that came down in 1989, the same year I joined the military. It wasn't clear to me until I became more acquainted with people, including my late wife, who grew up behind that wall. But a more recent influence may have been the rise of walls again, as well as the isolation of colonized islands and the irony of tearing down one wall to build a new one 20 years later.

## **ALMINE RECH**

### **What's the work of art in any medium that changed your life?**

Without a doubt, it was seeing the work of graffiti artists, whom we called “writers,” appear on trains in New York in the 1980s. I was a child the first time I saw scribble on walls in the South Bronx in the late '60s and early '70s. The other important influence may have been walking into a train station at the age of 16 while living in Germany and seeing my first Robert Rauschenberg catalog. The cover, which was gold with white block letters, drew me in. It featured the “Combines” for which he used street-found materials to create installation-like works. I had never seen anything like this considered as art before and immediately identified with the urban feel. I thought how brilliant it was for anyone to use materials that others had thrown away. Both these experiences were life-changing and had everything to do with what I do today.



**Does it feel prophetic to see your ongoing subjects emerge as the major issues we're grappling with today?**

Yes and no. Yes, in terms of how much my subjects are playing out in real time and no, because history simply repeats itself and we have not learned to make the necessary changes to avoid repeats, which in my opinion, lie more in the lack of human empathy rather than the use of power and or exploitation.

**How important is it to you, and your artistic mission, to be recognized by an institution such as the Cornell Fine Arts Museum?**

It is always a pleasant surprise to be recognized for what you have found in your work. Perhaps the highest honor for a painter is to be recognized by an art institution, and in this case, an academic institution, as well. It validates one's time and efforts, and although my paintings have always been undertaken for my own understanding, it is most rewarding to share them with others—which is the final step of any painting—when the viewer can respond to the findings of the painter.

Having said that, I am very thankful for this exhibition at this time in America and world history, in particular, coming from a state that was among the hardest hit by COVID-19.

**Were any works in the show painted specifically for this presentation, and what is their focus?**

All works in the show were selected last year in 2019 by Dr. Gisela Carbonell, curator of the museum, based on works from the last 15 years that fit the show's theme of various power structures. Because of this, we have older retrospective works, as well as works from as recent as last year. But none were solely or specifically painted for the exhibition.

**Is the subject of COVID-19 present in the work, and how did you present it based on your experience?**

I would say the aftermath or awareness of a COVID-19 world have been in my works for two decades. The now very obvious economic inequality that the virus has exposed, the failing structures of political power and their inability to act to save lives when needed—health services for ordinary Americans, education, environment, increasing militarization, etc. COVID-19 exposed it in one example to those that weren't as familiar with these issues. Economic, military and psychological tolls on humanity have always interested me, and I've expressed them through landscape painting.

**How have you activated the Marcus Jansen Foundation Fund in terms of current events, and do you plan to connect it with the show?**

We are still in the early stages of the foundation fund that we recently opened right before COVID-19. The financing is handled by the SW Florida Community Foundation, in Fort Myers. We are always inviting donors and patrons to join us, and we hope to activate where needed in the near future. The goal of the foundation fund is to assist veterans and low-income children with and in the arts.

*Marcus Jansen's exhibition at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum opens on September 18, 2020.*