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Resistance and Imaginative Reconstruction of the Past

Article by Shan Ye

April 11, 2023



Portrait of Marcus Jansen, 2021 / © 2021 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Marcus Jansen Studio

If Marcus Jansen's paintings are compared to a living creature, the history of human society, globalization, strife, domestication, and order are all part of the way they complete their self-formation.

Marcus Jansen was born in New York in 1968 with a father from Germany and a mother from Jamaica. Jansen spent his childhood in Bronx and Queens, New York, before moving to his father's hometown in Mönchengladbach, Germany. As an American growing up in a multi-ethnic background, there were always deep discussions about political and historical topics that continued within the family. His time spent in Europe, as well as his experience in the U.S. Army as an adult and his participation in the Gulf War, also made his paintings always unconsciously carry strong cultural and historical undertones.

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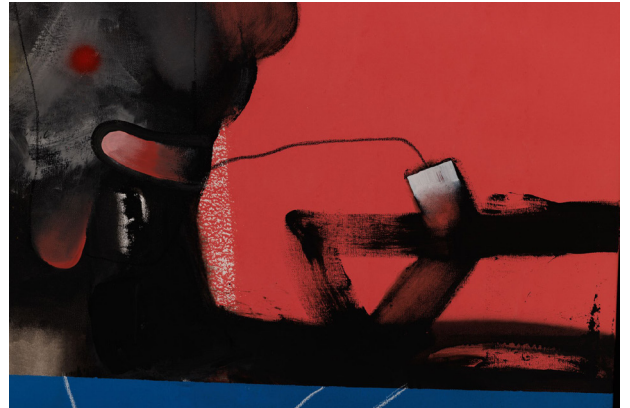
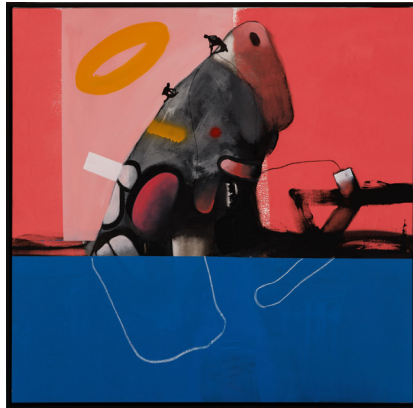


Installation views of *In the Land of Silhouettes*, March 17, 2023 - April 29, 2023, Almine Rech Shanghai / © 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

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This time, Marcus Jansen's first solo exhibition in China *In the Land of Silhouettes* presents a group of latest paintings from 2022, with works that blend the content of his past landscape paintings and portraits. At Almine Rech Shanghai, we can first see a group of highly emotional landscape paintings, such as a sinking ship transformed into a rock against a highly saturated pink and blue background, or a whale surfacing and wailing, and the silhouettes of two tiny figures climbing on top of the rock with traces of struggle (*The Sinking Rock*, 2022).



Marcus Jansen, *The Sinking Rock*, 2022 - Oil enamel, spray paint on canvas - 121.9 x 121.9 cm, 48 x 48 in /© 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Brian Tietz

In another work, *The Causeway* (2022), the struggle is even more intense, with a small figure in the center of the picture, as if seeking the help of someone on the causeway or having just been brutally pushed off. The outline of the picture is reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty, but upon closer inspection, the small figure appears more similar to maritime ruins.



Marcus Jansen, *The Causeway*, 2022 - Oil enamel, spray paint on paper - 45.7 x 61 cm, 18 x 24 in /© 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

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Marcus Jansen's work has a reconstructive aesthetic that may have been influenced by 20th century avant-garde art, such as abstract expressionism, neo-expressionism and post-modernism, among other art movements. His work often presents structural clashes and the use of colorful, chaotic brushstrokes that give a strong visual impact, for example, the large blocks of color and cascading debris in *Loot, I Shoot* (2022). He uses oil enamels (which Jansen was introduced to at Kunstgewerbeschule Berufskolleg in Mönchengladbach in 1985) and spray paint, a painting technique used to create a surrealist visual effect, more akin to that of American street graffiti. Indeed, the movement and "rebellious" spirit of the subway and wall graffiti he saw everywhere during his childhood was an important artistic inspiration for him to re-imagine the world.



Marcus Jansen, *Loot, I Shoot*, 2022 - Oil enamel, oil stick, spray paint on canvas - 127 x 188 cm, 50 x 74 in /© 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Brian Tietz

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Such kind of reconfiguration is also reflected in the motif of his works, where he subconsciously stacks elements with historical narratives, such as urban landscapes, military installations and ruins, and through the processing and deformation of these elements, he tries to express his dissatisfaction with social and political issues and even environmental problems.

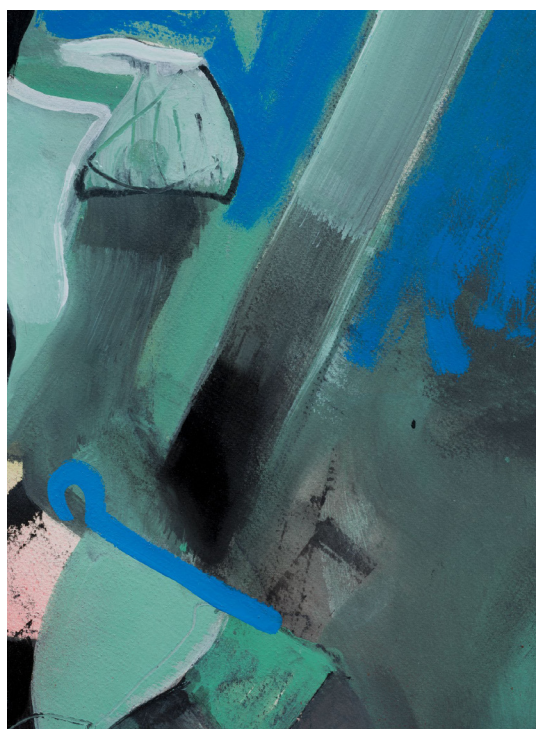
In addition, a seemingly abrupt part appears in many of his works - an inescapable yet unusually coordinated patch of long rectangular black shadows, which may be part of the remains of a building or more like a profile of a gun. This kind of rectangular shadow appears naturally in various landscapes and on classic portraits of presidents as their noses (*His-Story #1*, 2022), like Pinocchio, or the sharp sword in the *Colonialist Warrior with Mask* (2022). Often it is difficult to depict a spiritualized concept in a world dominated by experience, but Jansen actively introduces the subconscious into his work, and the paintings seem to grow on the canvas themselves, becoming a dynamic tendency to form multiple layers of context and detail beneath the ruins.



Marcus Jansen, *His-Story #1*, 2022 - Oil enamel, oil stick, spray paint on canvas - 152.4 x 121.9 cm, 60 x 48 in / © 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Brian Tietz

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Marcus Jansen, *Colonialist Warrior with Mask*, 2022 - Oil
enamel, pastels, spray paint on arches paper - 76.2
x 57.1 cm, 30 x 22 1/2 in /© 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/
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Michael Leja in *Reconstructing Abstract Expressionism* mentioned that “those primitive components have been obscured by civilization and especially by modernity... For this reason, the New York School artists sought to create a set of visual forms and interpretive mechanisms that would clearly and powerfully reveal the emerging, complex, contradictory, multifaceted, primitive subject of modern discourse.” Jansen paints us a visual language of his own, enjoying hip-hop and poetry, and perhaps also trying to intuit and perceive the possibilities beyond today’s constricted world situation from its origins, reconstructing what sociologist Charles Wright Mills calls “the current democratic social system that disempowers the majority. This traumatic landscape, which sweeps over the viewer with such intensity, directly occupies the viewers senses, presenting an ironic and critical effect that is more profound than any straightforward historical writing.



Marcus Jansen in the studio, 2022 /© 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Sabrina Jansen

“Art has always been a big reason for me to survive in the world - to make something that will exist longer. Something about imagination and disappearance, reorganization and discovery, a territory without borders or attachments.” As he says, we cannot deny that Jansen’s paintings are serious, but nowadays, in terms of texture, density and rhythm, the backstory beneath the creation is perhaps precisely what is secondary to Marcus Jansen’s paintings, and it is the gurgling subconsciousness, the unbridled brushstrokes accompanied by the implication of breaking free, the boldness as in graffiti, that gives the paintings a huge, historically powerful stage backdrop, and thus becomes a unique aesthetic.

It is also reminiscent of the two works placed together in the gallery: *Cloud Formation #1* (2022) and *Cloud Formation #5* (2022), in which there are two backs at the beginning and a red moon in the sky. But in the next instant, the dream begins to turn, the stars shift, the silhouettes are far away, and the moon dissipates. Abstract gestures, graffiti writing, surreal narratives, resistance, and imaginative reconstructions of the past as well as the future, this is perhaps Jansen’s land of silhouettes.

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Marcus Jansen, *Cloud Formation #1*, 2022 - Oil enamel, spray paint on canvas - 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 20 x 16 in /© 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Brian Tietz



Marcus Jansen, *Cloud Formation #5*, 2022 - Oil enamel, spray paint on canvas - 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 20 x 16 in /© 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Brian Tietz

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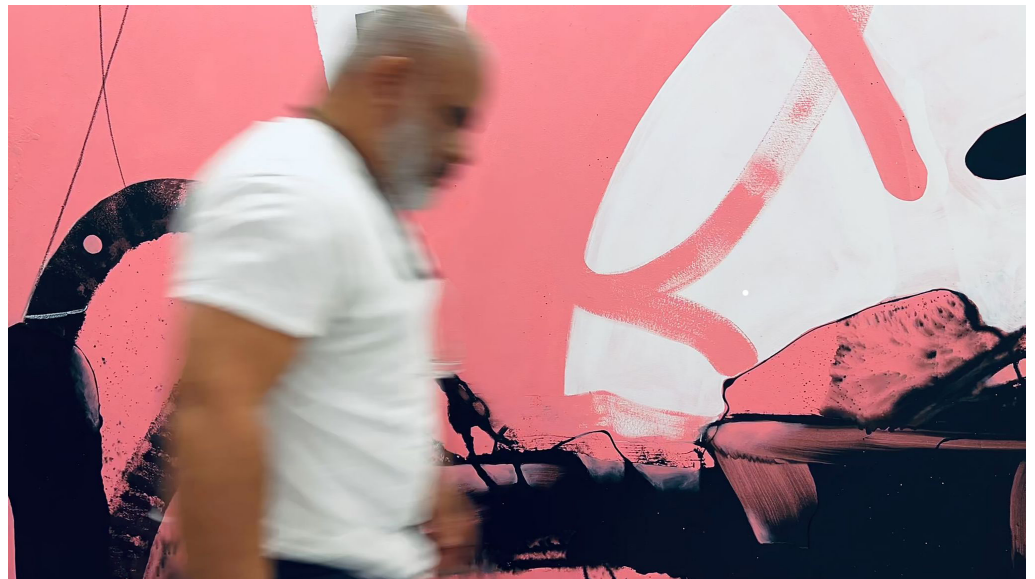
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Interview with Marcus Jansen

When did you start painting, and what was your artistic style like at the time?

I was in school in New York City during the 1970's, a time when the city seemed lawless and chaotic, but also very creative visually. I painted a lion in class that was hung at the Lever House, in Manhattan, at the age of 6. That may have been my introduction to painting and the concept of exhibiting art for others to see. My sense for color and movement developed during the days when graffiti writing peaked in the 1980's. I saw it as a rebellious form of expression, which is what attracted me, and how it transformed walls of the inner-city landscape into outdoor canvases. This was my first inspiration for a conscious artistic influence.

I went to an art school in Germany where we had projects that included painting, but also photography, technical drawing and design. I didn't start professionally painting or seeing myself as an artist until 1997, doing studies of geometric figures and lighting. I was always fascinated by the way light played a role in European impressionist painting in particular, but also curious about how light could be implemented in abstraction. I wanted to make emotional art that could be experienced on both an intellectual and realistic level.



Marcus Jansen in the studio, 2022 /© 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Sabrina Jansen

Has there been any major change in your painting style from the beginning until now?

There have been several changes stylistically, and also regarding materials I choose. My choice of commentary has changed, as well. It wasn't until 2008 that I started thinking in global terms and painting on a larger scale. After living on several continents, it just seemed natural for me to respond in those terms, so my paintings are rarely location-specific and speak universally about their subjects.

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Mostly, traditional painting on canvas or on linen has been my choice of surface, but I've experimented with different shapes of canvases and used mixed media with elements that become part of the work. I also have painted on tires, wood and tabletops, used three-dimensional objects and created sculptures as large as seven feet tall. I don't set limits to the materials or direction, although most of my works are socially charged paintings on canvas. I go where my impulses take me and allow them to take the lead. I tend to compete with my own works after each period or batch once certain ideas are exhausted, and then move on to whatever suggests itself next. That's when I know it's time to move on. I prefer the subject and direction to find me versus me looking for one.

Works showing in my Shanghai show are a mix of older and newer stylistic elements merging together, or perhaps clashing. Some of the newer landscapes are scaled-up images from scraps of paper first published in 2018 by my German catalog "Aftermath," with Hirmer Verlag, in Munich. The canvases in the show are inspired by these small paper works: for example, stripping the detail down to gestural brush strokes in which the monochromatic painting and landscapes merge. In many cases, I don't even use a brush, but instead a sponge or rags to move the paint around. I used the color pink in several works this time because pink is a nurturing, playful and nostalgic color that takes people back to their childhood. More intense pinks can also create a sense of urgency.



Marcus Jansen in the studio, 2022 /© 2022 Marcus A. Jansen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Sabrina Jansen

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Why did you choose the oil enamel, oil stick and spray as painting materials?

All three are symbolically connected to my history. Spray paint, my very first tool from the 1980's, can produce effects that are unexpected and uncalculated. It's my intuitive approach when painting. Oil enamels were introduced to me during my education as a house painter when I was 18. I was convinced that I could do more with them than paint homes, and when I started painting, I found myself drawn to them naturally. These paints are fluid, and allowed me to move freely with force and movement like the action painters, who also used enamels. I am able to use the paint as I wish to create illusions of space and dimension, depending on how thick or thin I choose to layer it.

Oil sticks are reminiscent of crayons to me and my own childlike behavior and add a certain innocence and playfulness to the work that goes back to me doodling on everything in our house, especially when I was on the landline phone; it became a habit that my mother hated. The oil sticks keep the work playful, although my subject matter usually is quite serious, but the combination of bright colors, oils sticks and the overlapping of tools in an urban setting tends to draw viewers in to further examine the scene, and at the same time transcends traditional painterly and historical norms.

How do you see your work in relation to art genres such as Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Expressionism and Post-Modernism?

My work has roots in all of those, but does not belong to any one specifically. Abstract Expressionism and graffiti writing are from New York, the city of my birth, and Neo-Expressionism started in Germany, so I guess my work is traditionally rooted in both places which are a part of my experience, but moving on from them, as well. All three could be categorized as "protest" genres emerging in times of conflict. I see my work as outside of what's expected; both painterly and socially critical.

In this exhibition, there are a number of your "Faceless" series, but the colour blocks and lines on the lower body of the subject are more graffiti-like than in the past, is there any particular meaning to this?

More distortions and disruptions have been recurring lately, so this could be a reaction to my current state of mind or reactions to things around me. Either way, they disrupt the norm that creates or interprets the tension with possibly more historic distortion in a work, painterly speaking.

There are also two works in the "Faceless" series, "Passionate" and "Mysterious," that are new in the sense that they mirror my own emotions, meaning they could be seen as self-portraits, because the emotion or feeling of the character relates directly to a mood rather than the deprecation of something external. My subconscious plays a role in all of my work. It is how I approach fears and questions through painting. There are other faceless works in the show that go back to either commentary or a mockery of academic painting in previous decades, perhaps a reconsidering of past images in this decade.

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You paint people very small and also individual portraits, is there any particular reason for this?

There is usually a lot of emphasis on the figure in art history, where the human being is usually depicted as large, up front and even powerful. We are quite obsessed with ourselves when you look at the record of Western painting. I don't see things that way. I see humans mostly as tiny in comparison to the dominant environment we have created. Our landscapes tell us a lot about our actions and inactions as a direct reflection of human beings inhabiting this planet, so depicting them in a more raw and sometimes urgent matter is important to me. In American art history, landscapes have often been used as a visual power tool to project outward strength and elitism, mostly by people of European descent, at least in the West, unless we go back to the AshCan School where painters railed against that. My landscapes are broken, deconstructed and not only project the power of painting, but via the critical lens through which they are painted, promote further analysis of our surroundings and ourselves.

It's not uncommon for me to pin up depictions of manmade situations and aftermath scenarios juxtaposed against real human concerns. In these landscapes, the focus is not power, but perhaps about applying labels and a concern for what is real.

How do you see the influence of personal experience and cultural background on an artist's work? Do you reflect your personal experience and cultural background in your creations?

My work is undoubtedly who I am, a product of my existence, my visions and impressions. In most cases, having a critical approach helps to understand myself and my surroundings better.

These paintings are mostly intuitive works sparked by feelings that manifest as visual protest in either portraits or landscapes, creating a stage on which I communicate emotions and the viewer can take his or her time to digest them in an era where fast-moving digital technology is usually the preferred stimulus.

There is a concept in art healing called "decentering", which means taking us away from the usual logical thinking that keeps us trapped in our problems. Do you feel a connection between your paintings and this?

Going against logic is the essence of painting for me. It's the same way abstraction challenges Realism or jazz challenges classical music or reality challenges fiction. These are all opposites where new vocabularies emerge from paradoxical approaches and thinking.

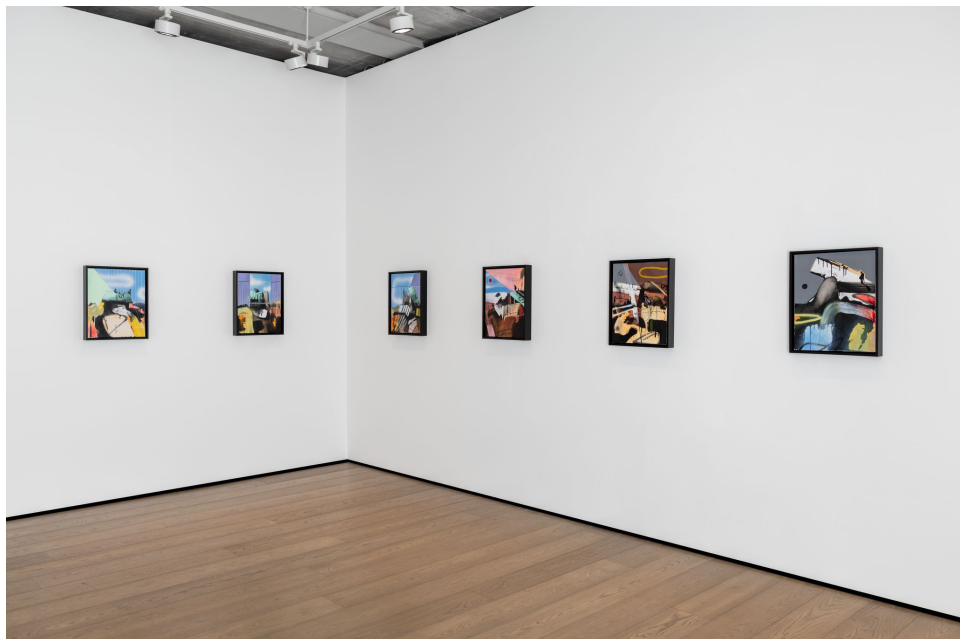
Do you follow the political, social and cultural events of today and do you incorporate them into your work?

It's hard to avoid or to not be moved or influenced by our surroundings. That includes politics, as well as social issues of the day, unless you're ignoring them. In the 21st century, our affairs need attention, so you will find me incorporating interest in these affairs; whether from threats of an economic nature, psychological, climate, environmental or military nature. All are fictitious, man-made elements that threaten human life.

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