

## The Tug of War

Through his paintings, an Army veteran in Fort Myers examines themes of conflict

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Photograph by Edward Linsmier

Avant-garde” has long described creatives who break aesthetic conventions. Yet its true origins lie in the battlefield. A French term meaning “the advanced guard,” these are the souls who brave the front lines, becoming firsthand witnesses to human devastation. In his life and work, Fort Myers artist Marcus Jansen occupies both senses of the phrase. An Army veteran who served in the Gulf War, he paints surreal landscapes and portraits that excavate conflict and conquest as well as their casualties and underlying power structures.

Though all-encompassing, his neo-expressionistic paintings “blur the lines between different experiences I’ve had,” the artist explains. These include memories of Operation Desert Storm as well as his childhood in 1960s and ’70s New York, when his borough of the Bronx was particularly crime-ridden. On the surface, the Big Apple dramatically differed from picturesque Mönchengladbach, Germany, where his family moved in 1976. But this, too, was a land still fractured by the Cold War. “I was always making contact with economic or political issues where landscapes were devastated,” he observes.

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Following Jansen's eight-year military service, painting helped him navigate these experiences after being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder in 1992 and undergoing art therapy. He developed a style all his own, launching a 30-year career pulling from German Expressionism and New York's Abstract Expressionism and Graffiti art. "All three were rebellious movements and reactions to times of war," he notes. Since 2003, he has maintained a residence in Fort Myers to be close to family and still operates a studio in the Bronx.

Deeply intuitive and experimental, with little pre-sketching for figurative works, Jansen's painting process feels "almost like a combative sport," he says. His airy studio is filled with oversize canvases where he can maneuver his signature robust brushwork. To create this movement, he uses fluid oil enamels, building and editing layers to construct the composition.

Off the canvas, Jansen offers another response to personal battles through the Marcus Jansen Foundation. Founded in 2019, his nonprofit supports organizations that assist low-income families as well as fellow artist veterans with PTSD. Beyond art aesthetics, "I'm concerned about what's real," he says, "and what's real to me is what suffers."



Fort Myers artist Marcus Jansen (left) paints abstract works grounded in themes of conflict. His landscapes intentionally obscure time and place, providing a broader meditation on social strife. "They are urban areas that literally could be anywhere in the world," Jansen says. "That's part of how I try to communicate universally."