

Marcus Jansen's Palimpsests of Protest

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By: Michael Pearce



Marcus Jansen, *Rural America*, 2018. Oil enamels, oil stick, paper, cloth and spray paint on canvas. 50 x 74 inches. From the collection of Corrado and Christina

The veteran's artworks deal with his experience of war and his desire to break down power structures.

Marcus Jansen's efficient support team has been quick to respond to the relaxation of the Covid-lockdown laws which gripped and strangled the American art world. Two Decades of Relevance opened at the Baker Museum, in Naples, Florida, on April 22, showing 18 of his powerful and apocalyptic canvases. He builds the paintings from the inside out, preserving forms from the random structures he puts down in the early layers under the new layers he puts over them, a technique that is inspired from when he met West Rubinstein who was a graffiti writer in New York. They are large, layered, and lively, pictures of the present overlaying the past. They seldom resolve into fully formed representation but suggest architecture and space as if the images were captured in the process of becoming. They are palimpsests of paint — a palimpsest is a parchment or vellum that was re-used by a scribe, who scraped away previous texts and replaced them with new writing. Although the old text was erased, readers could still make out words and letters beneath the new.



Marcus Jansen, *Monument Wars #2*, 2020. Oil enamels and spray paint on canvas.
48 x 48 in. Private collection

Jansen was predestined to a career shadowed by conflict. He was named for the Roman general Marcus Antonius, whose romance with the Egyptian queen Cleopatra led to the civil war that almost brought the empire to ruin. Born in New York to a Caribbean mother and a German father, Jansen was raised in Germany, then returned to the States where he soon joined the US Army. He did his basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri and was assigned to the Eighteenth Airborne Corps, Fort Bragg, one of the biggest military posts in the United States. He served as a soldier in the first wave that went to the Gulf War during Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm starting in 1990-91. He was one of the last to return and earned a strip of medals, including the Army Commendation Medal, awarded to any soldier who has 'distinguished himself by heroism, meritorious achievement, or meritorious service.'

He served as a combat engineer in a support capacity to the 82nd Airborne Division, and had first-hand experience of the violence of war. Jansen says, "I witnessed the explosion of the barracks at Dhahran being blown up by a scud missile, because I was on guard duty that night, and that was the first reality kick for me. There were three scuds coming in at the same time, or at least it appeared that way, and it seemed almost like two disappeared and one actually hit, and that injured over sixty reservists from Pennsylvania and killed quite a few people there. That was my introduction to the war as it began. I was shaking in my pants because it was so close by and I was sure that we would be next — we were logistics and supply, and as you know supply is usually the first target in any war."

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After the war he returned to the U.S. and became an artist and began thinking of himself as a combatant of the American avant-garde. The experiences of his eight years of military service had shaped him and he had left the army diagnosed with PTSD. Now he put aside his carbine and fought with art. “I’ve always seen my art as deconstructive in nature,” he explains. “Finding new ways of seeing is combative to me in terms of how I go about painting, and how I paint. None of my works are really in realist form, they’re combative in nature . . . I see the war playing a huge part in my psyche, in terms of how I interact with paint and the style of painting, whether in terms of brushstrokes, or breaking down the figure to something that’s more deconstructive in nature. I think it was more of a psychological thing . . . So, when I look at the work, I do see something that’s fractured and broken and there’s a sense of chaos, but in that chaos you still find a sort of order as well, and I would say my military service had everything to do with my current output as a painter.”

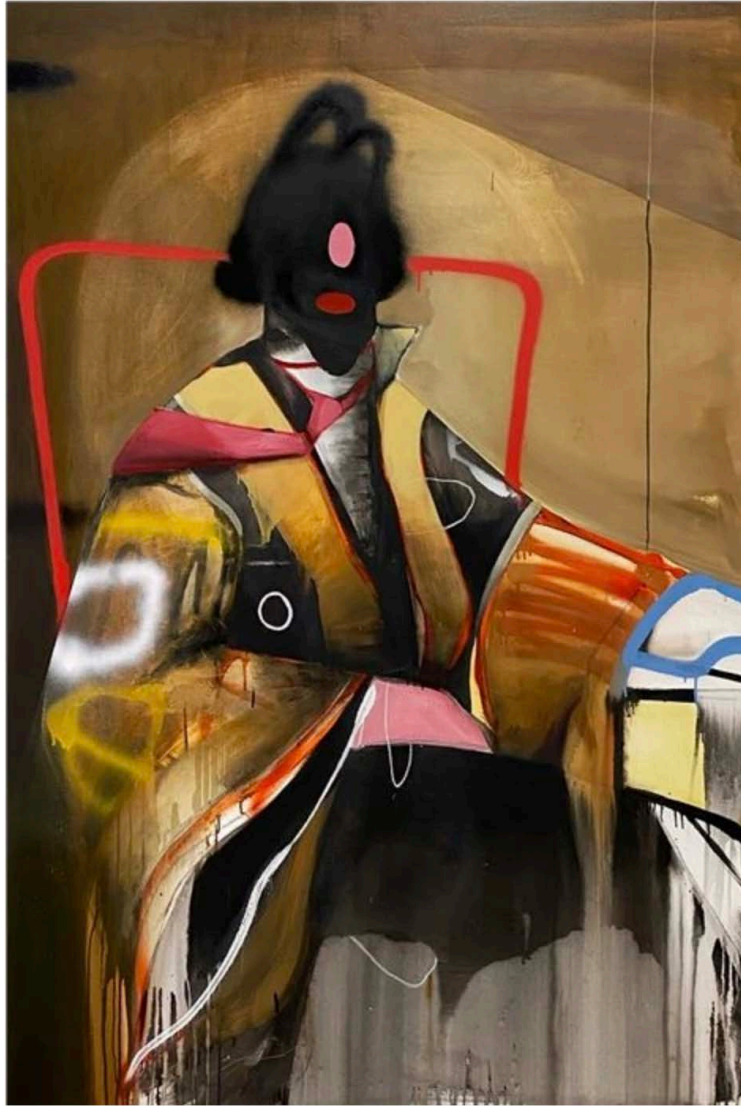
The effect war had upon his work wasn’t simply a matter of him making violent imagery, for the content of his imagery became sensitive to the issues he saw around him. Back at home he wondered if continual foreign wars were in the best interest of the American people — he saw power and injustice as his new enemy. “I became very critical of what we were doing there many years later as we continued to see these very aggressive wars overseas, international wars, as something that we somehow had to do, and became more critical in the work questioning power structures in general, whether they are economic power structures, psychological power structures, or military power structures and that’s the foundation of my work — human concerns and questioning some of these power structures.”

There are practical reasons for making a palimpsest — the old text may simply have been boring and uninteresting, and the scribe replaced it with new, and fresh material. But there are other, more violent reasons for creating one. The previous text or image can be destroyed because it goes against established doctrine. It may have been heretical, and the authority embodied in the scribe deleted it as a danger to order, overwriting it with the logos of the new order, in which case there are degrees of iconoclasm, censorship, violence, and oppression embodied in the act of erasure and over-writing. The new order expresses its dominion by overwriting the logos of the old. In Jansen’s paintings the palimpsest layers are intellectual as well as gestural, dealing with his consciousness of injustice.

A recurrent theme in the palimpsest of the history of art is that whenever the establishment becomes doctrinaire, and whenever power becomes too concentrated in the hands of the elite, there is a period of cultural change. During that period, new genres emerge which shock the establishment, which is subsumed by the destruction and creation of the palimpsest. So the palimpsest is a metaphor for tradition — the present built upon, and over the record of the past. Jansen fights injustice by painting images of the palimpsest of power.

“For me, of course, this is all intuitive and instinctive,” he says, “reacting to this current environment that we’re living in. I dig in history mainly to draw parallels, in order to become clear on what’s going on, and all these movements that are going on. We have to go back to different parts of history to draw parallels to fully understand what environment we’re living in today, so I try to do that by visually incorporating and also connecting certain elements from the past.”

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Marcus Jansen, *The Colonialist*, 2021. Oil enamels, spray paint and oil stick on canvas. 50 x 74 inches. Courtesy of Richard Beavers Gallery

The Colonialist has a black shadow for a head — it's a continuation of a series Jansen did, called Faceless. "I started in 2011," he recalls, "an investigation of anonymity, secrecy and power . . . what and who really decides a lot in this world in terms of power structures, and obviously business culture really dictates a lot, in terms of what happens politically or economically, and globally. I was talking about some of the inequalities which still exist here in the United States from the same colonialists who also founded the country, that we as Americans hail — but these were also elitists — and of very high stature. I'm trying to draw parallels between those elements and the current power structures that exist."

The heavy weight of social justice messaging lends a millenarian flair to Jansen's work. But a palimpsest is also a record of initiation, a demonstration of faith in the new text as the beginning of a better state of being. Jansen fights on the side of the angels.