

PressReviews

'A Painting Depicting the Precarity of a Single Figure, and of Us All', The New York Times Style Magazine, September 2020

THE ARTISTS

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). 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.

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In each installment of The Artists, T highlights a recent or little-known work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist putting the work in context. This week, we're looking at a piece by Marcus Jansen, a painter and mixed-media artist whose first solo museum show in the United States is [now on view](#) at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum in Winter Park, Fla.

THE T LIST: *A weekly roundup of what the editors of T Magazine are noticing and coveting right now.*

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.

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.