

Marcus Jansen's first solo museum exhibit in SWFL opens

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By Mary Wozniak



Marcus Jansen is an internationally-acclaimed artist based in Fort Myers.
COURTESY PHOTO

Marcus Jansen's provocative new exhibit at The Baker Museum at Artis – Naples shines an unflinching light on the world and its conflicts and explores how they impact the human condition.

"Marcus Jansen: Two Decades of Relevance" is the artist's first solo museum exhibit in Southwest Florida and his second solo museum exhibit ever in the United States. The exhibit continues through July 25.

The internationally-acclaimed artist is based in Fort Myers, where he has a large studio on the edge of downtown. He also has a newer studio in the South Bronx, where he spent his early childhood. When he's not splitting his time between the two, he is often traveling in Europe.

Jansen, 52, is known as the pioneer of modern urban-expressionism. His edgy urban landscapes were inspired by abstract expressionism; the influence of the graffiti artists in New York City in the latter part of the 20th century; and his discovery of the art of Robert Rauschenberg and his use of found objects, collages and mixed media.

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The exhibit in Naples was scheduled to take place several years ago, but it was delayed by the closure of The Baker Museum after damage to the building by Hurricane Irma in 2017, said Courtney McNeil, museum director and chief curator.

“In the intervening years, Marcus Jansen’s reputation has continued to grow, as his work has garnered both critical and popular support here in the United States and abroad,” McNeil said. “From his base here in Southwest Florida, he has shown the ability to tap into broad-ranging issues and concerns that face our society, creating works that resonate in a variety of contexts.”

The exhibition helps celebrate the 20th anniversary season of The Baker Museum.

Jansen speaks truth to power through his paintings. “I’m drawn to the questioning of power structures, whether they are of social, psychological, military or economic nature,” he said.



Above clockwise: Marcus Jansen in his studio; Richard Beavers with museum director Courtney McNeil and Marcus Jansen at The Baker Museum; Marcus Jansen at work in his studio; Elias Jansen with brother Dominic Jansen. COURTESY PHOTOS

Jansen has been in numerous group exhibits and solo exhibits in galleries and international art events across the U.S. and in Europe. Exhibits in 2021 will be in New York, Aspen, Colo., Paris, London and Art Basel Miami Beach.

Other solo museum exhibits abroad were Berlin, Munich and Milan, Italy. His work can be found in the permanent collections of the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, New Britain Museum of American Art, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts and the Smithsonian Institution.

It’s a long way from 1999, when he was selling his paintings for a few hundred dollars on the streets of Soho.

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The Baker Museum. COURTESY PHOTOS

Jansen's connection to Southwest Florida has also resulted in the founding of the Marcus Jansen Foundation Fund in Fort Myers at the end of 2019.

The fund seeks to support low-income community organizations and enhance the cultural awareness of economically-disadvantaged children through art and music. The fund also support organizations that help veterans diagnosed with PTSD seeking art as a way to express themselves.

Jansen himself is a veteran who spent eight years in the U.S. Army (1989-1997) and was diagnosed with PTSD after fighting in the first Iraq War during Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He underwent art therapy treatment at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland, which helped reawaken his interest in doing art.

"We opened right before COVID," Jansen said of the foundation. "But we are aggressively growing the foundation fund so we are able to address some of the issues I draw from in my paintings."

In the meantime, he continues to dive fearlessly into his art and come up with new revelations about ourselves and the world we live in.

"That's what painting is, diving into 'blind faith' and knowing you will find something we don't know or understand yet," he said.

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Florida Weekly connected with Jansen recently to find out more about his work as it continues to evolve and he looks forward to what the future may bring.

FW: The first book on your work, “Marcus A. Jansen: Modern Urban- Expressionism” was published in 2006. Would you still use that term to describe your art, or has it evolved over the years into something beyond modern urban-expressionism?

MJ: At that time, the term was coined by my good friend Jerome A. Donson, the art historian and former museum director who led the American Vanguard Action painters to Europe in 1961. (The group included Robert Rauschenberg, Willem deKooning, Jackson Pollock and others). I’d rather not characterize them at this stage, since they have evolved into their own identity without any set articulation or boundaries.

FW: Your work is seen as commentary on the issues and conflicts of the day, whether social, political, economic, humanitarian, environmental or military. In light of that, how have the following issues impacted your work, or do you see them surfacing in your work in the future:

The COVID-19 pandemic and the issues surrounding it.

The George Floyd murder and the groundswell of protest in response. (Now it appears the killing of Daunte Wright should be included.)

MJ: They have in the past and do so now.

My underlying subject has remained to be exploring human concerns, while navigating artificial and or fictitious belief systems we’ve created for ourselves that often keep us from making humane decisions. I’m drawn to the questioning of power structures, whether they are of social, psychological, military or economic nature.

COVID-19 has, if anything, helped to expose my paintings and their intention, but none of these issues are historically speaking new, and instead have only come alive again.

The George Floyd murder was obviously horrific to anyone that cares about a fellow human being. It has greatly affected me emotionally and painterly in particular, being a man of color myself. The global movement for justice that followed helped spark my latest work, including quite a few I have recently shown in my solo show with Almine Rech (Gallery) in Paris in January.

FW: Is the act of painting your way of trying to make sense of the world and the conflicts you see within it?

MJ: I think it’s much more than that. It’s tapping into a subconscious and being able to feel rather than just verbally articulating something. It allows myself and the viewer, as with most paintings, to dive into a world of deep psyche, the psyche of the painter.

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FW: A lot of artists start out working on a painting with a plan, preliminary sketches, etc. I've read that you really don't know how a painting will end up when you begin to paint. Is that true? If so, isn't that scary?

MJ: That's correct for my usual landscapes, which are constructed randomly. It should be somewhat scary — that's what painting is, diving into "blind faith" and knowing you will find something we don't know or understand yet.

FW: Do you look for the person viewing one of your paintings to first have an instinctive response and then an intellectual response? For example, you can have an initial, emotional impression when viewing one of your works, but the painting with all the colors, patterns and images can't be internalized without time and thought.

MJ: I wouldn't want to anticipate any particular sequence of responses, but the initial impact to me is important to draw the viewer in. I'd hope that most people are moved one way or another when seeing a painting and are then drawn to examine it aesthetically closer, which then also leads to the intellectual aspects of examining what the work means to you, the individual viewer.

The more intellectual knowledge a person brings to the painting, the more intellectual the painting will seem. The less a person brings to it is the more intuitive the painting may appear. But this allows the work to appeal to a broad audience regardless of all of that and encourages onlookers to come to their own conclusions, or just find questions.

FW: Despite focusing on the ills of society and issues of conflict, you seem down deep to be an optimist. Is that true?

MJ: Every day I am alive and painting is optimism, so yes, I am an optimist, but one that doesn't mind looking at realities that are uncomfortable. I don't see change as possible without looking at oneself.

FW: If this exhibit shows your evolution over the last 20 years, what is your trajectory for the future?

MJ: To continue my practices and allow art to take me where it may take me. !