

## Fort Myers artist Marcus Jansen, shown all over Europe, finally gets SWFL museum exhibit

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By Charles Runnells



Internationally renowned artist Marcus Jansen discusses his move to a new studio location in Dunbar.  
RICARDO ROLON / NEWS-PRESS.COM

Timing is everything.

For two decades, renowned Fort Myers artist Marcus Jansen has been obsessed with many of the same themes: Systemic racism. Social inequality. Urban decay. Government surveillance. The increased militarization of the police.

Then 2020 happened.

And 2021.

Suddenly, many of those topics were on everyone else's minds, too. And Jansen — already a rising star in the art world — became more popular than ever.

"I've been painting like this for a long time," Jansen says. "But a lot of the topics I've been painting over the last 20 years became more forefront. And that's changed everything."



Marcus Jansen's 2020 painting "Monument Wars #2." Oil enamels and spray paint on canvas. 48 x 48 inches.  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

Jansen's huge, graffiti-influenced paintings have been shown in major museums and art galleries in Europe. Now, finally, he's getting an exhibit much closer to home.

His first solo museum show in Southwest Florida — and only his second in the United States — opens Saturday at The Baker Museum in Naples.

### Marcus Jansen, ahead of the curve

The 18 paintings represent 20 years of Jansen's career, but many of them could have been painted yesterday in response to the country's ongoing issues with poverty, racism and inequality.

"He was ahead of the curve in thinking about so many issues that are now everyday items in conversation," says Courtney McNeil, The Baker Museum's director and chief curator. "I think the recent events of the pandemic and all of the social unrest that we saw coming out last year were the result of these long-simmering tensions just underneath the surface of our society."

Many people happily ignored those tensions, McNeil says.

But not Jansen.

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Marcus Jansen's 2018 painting "Rural America." Oil enamels, oil stick, paper, cloth and spray paint on canvas. 50 x 74 inches. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

Jansen, 52, is a pioneer in “urban expressionism,” an art style that combines graffiti imagery, post-apocalyptic landscapes, abstract shapes and chaotic colors.

The Baker Museum exhibit was originally scheduled for 2018, when it would’ve been Jansen’s first solo museum exhibit in the United States. But things didn’t work out that way.

Hurricane Irma tore through Southwest Florida in 2017 and severely damaged the museum building. All its exhibits got canceled or postponed, and the museum didn’t reopen again until November 2020 — just in time for its 20th anniversary season.

Now the Jansen exhibit, titled “Two Decades of Relevance,” brings the renowned artist back to the region he knows so well. The Manhattan native lives and works in Fort Myers (he also maintains a second studio in the South Bronx).

The Baker show caps a busy five years for Jansen. In 2016, he moved into his new Unit A art studio in Fort Myers' Dunbar community, and also launched his first tour of European art museums around the same time — including stops in Milan, Rome, Munich and Berlin. More shows followed in Europe.

“I was in Europe much more than the United States, in terms of shows,” Jansen says. “There was just a lot going on.”



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Then Jansen got picked up for a sold-out show in January at the renowned Almine Rech Gallery in Paris and also an upcoming show next year at the gallery chain's London location.

Oh, and top of all that: Jansen got married in December.

"It's been nonstop," he says.

He's happy to finally have an exhibit at home, though.

"It's great," he says. "It's just a real honor that this work is being recognized. And also that it has public display.

"A lot of works are in private collections ... but it's just great that a public institution is recognizing it and showing it."

### A closer look at Jansen's art

To truly understand Jansen's work, you really need to see it in person, McNeil says. And that's partly because of the sheer size: Some of the paintings stand as high as 11 feet tall.



Artist Marcus Jansen in 2017  
SPECIAL TO GRANDEUR

“His works are beautiful, and they’re beautifully painted,” McNeil says. “They’re monumental. They have a fantastic presence in person. And so they’re awe-inspiring, but they’re also incredibly thought-provoking.”

His painting “Rural America,” for example, shows a pair of silhouetted figures below a towering, makeshift shelter made of sheets and wood. The piece was inspired by the “economic segregation gap” in the United States, Jansen says, where many people live in poverty or on the streets, and life can be harder for people based on where they live.

It’s a situation made worse by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, he says.

“Those differences are stark in the United States, if you compare them to, let’s say, Europe and other places where I’ve lived,” Jansen says. “It’s bringing attention to those places and hopefully getting a dialogue going about what could be done.”

Another piece, “Monument Wars #2,” draws from the ongoing movement to take down public statues seen as celebrating racism and colonialism. The painting shows one such monument — a looming, graffiti-covered man on a horse — with a group of tiny people struggling to tear it down with ropes.

“Monument Wars #2” wasn’t based on any specific statue, Jansen says. It’s just a general statement about these controversial figures displayed in public places.

“It’s reexamining history,” he says, “and seeing where we are now and trying to understand why these figures might be offensive to some individuals here in this country.”

Then there’s one of his favorites in the show: “The Colonialist,” part of Jansen’s “Power Figures” series. The series depicts vaguely colonial figures that often resemble kings or U.S. founding fathers such as Thomas Jefferson or George Washington.

The paintings explore colonialism, he says, and how it helped create the current power structure in the United States — a power structure that he says continues to create inequality based on race, wealth and other factors.

“This has been an examination for me for a long time,” Jansen says. “It brings the historic discussion back to these power figures, these colonialist power figures.”

“The Colonialist” shows a robed man wearing a necktie and what appears to be a powdered wig, once popular in the 17th and 18th centuries. The man’s face is obscured by shadow.

“He’s distorted and he’s defaced, and there’s even a challenge in terms of who he is,” Jansen says. “Is he Black? Or is that just a shade?”

“You don’t really know who he is, but he’s obviously distorted. He’s also mixed with a contemporary sense. ... He’s got this business tie. Colonialism and business, obviously, were very closely related. So it’s really a criticism of these hierarchies.”

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"The Colonialist" is one of 18 Marcus Jansen paintings featured in a new exhibit at Naples' Baker Museum.  
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The paintings and their highly relevant themes are difficult to ignore, McNeil says. And that's not just because of their size.

Jansen's painting technique — a raw mix of collage, spray paint, oil enamels and other methods — is better appreciated up-close, too.

"The works, they force you to confront the issues that they're portraying, because of their massive size," McNeil says. "Seeing them in person impresses you with their massive scale — but also with the fantastic surface textures that he's able to achieve through his unique application of paint, his very gestural brush strokes and his application of collage techniques."

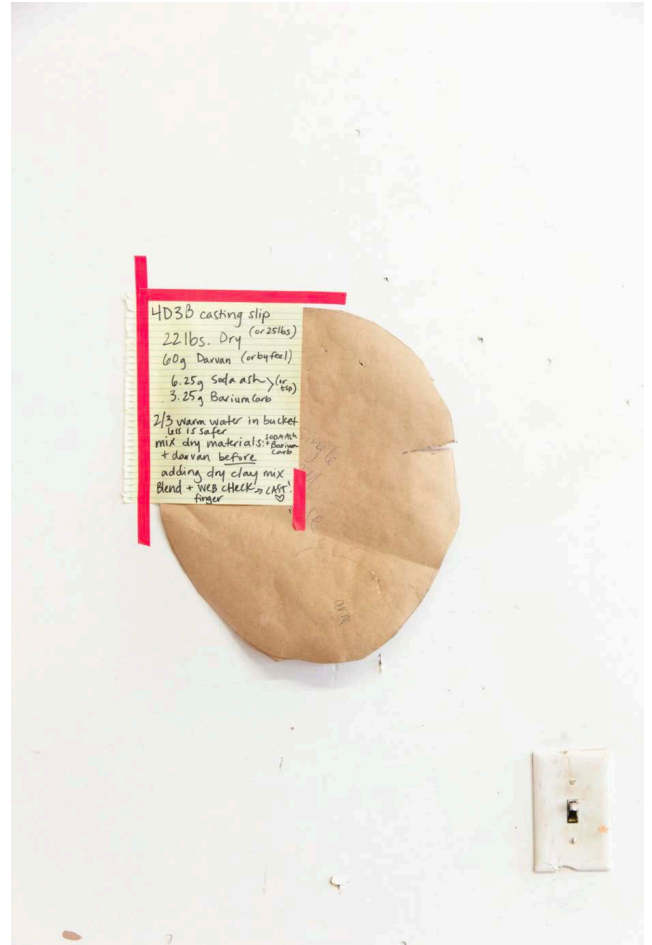
As for Jansen, he says he'll continue to do what he's been doing: Painting the things that inspire him.

What will he paint next? A lot of that depends on what happens in the United States and the world over the next two decades.

"You don't want to be stagnant," he says. "The work always evolves."



Though Shechet's work often creates the illusion of elements thrown loosely together or connected only tenuously, she spends long hours figuring out how to make each piece solid and transportable. Credit: Eva Deitch



A formula for slip casting on Shechet's studio wall. Credit: Eva Deitch

How do you know when you're done?

The piece tells me. It's a conversation. The thing and I decide together.

How many assistants do you have?

I have three part-time assistants.

Have you assisted other artists before? If so, whom?

No. My last semester of graduate school, they offered me a teaching job, so I went directly from school to teaching. In many ways, I probably would have benefited from being an assistant. I was just on a different trajectory. I was on the academic trajectory.

What music do you play when you're making art?

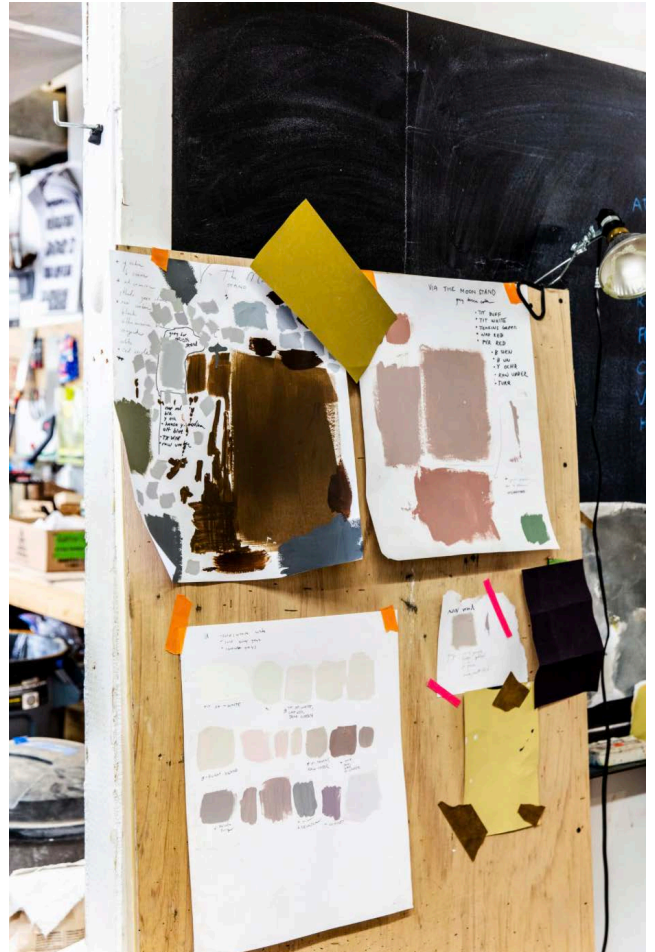
My son is a musician, so he fills my sound system with amazing music, including his own. Sometimes, when he's working on a show and I'm in the studio, he comes in and he'll play live and I'll give him feedback, and he'll give me feedback.



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Shechet is closely involved at every stage of her work, from the sourcing of raw materials to the the display of the finished product. "Another level of making will be installing," she said of her show at Pace Gallery. "Architecture is very much a part of these works." Credit: Eva Deitch



Taped to a plywood board in Shechet's studio are color swatches for her sculpture "Via the Moon" (2020).Credit...Eva Deitch

**When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?**

I think that's a tax-return question. I was always an artist.

**Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?**

Leftovers.

**Are you bingeing on any shows right now?**

I don't binge. Maybe it's part of my discipline. But I really like the Elena Ferrante show.

**What's the weirdest object in your studio?**

When I had more time, I used to go to flea markets. I went to school in Providence, which has a crazy amount of antique stores. I have a handblown glass breast pump from the turn of the century.



## **ALMINE RECH**

How often do you talk to other artists?

My assistants are artists. My son is an artist. But I don't have time for studio visits. As much as I'm working all the time, there's still not enough time. Once I have this show up, though, I'll be talking to artists a lot. People will be talking to me, and I'll want them to come see the show, and I want to have that conversation.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I garden.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

Our national politics and the hubris of climate change denial.

What do you usually wear when you work?

Many layers, because it's freezing in my studio. There are some pieces in here that used to be my kids'. A few years ago, I realized I was wearing all the clothes my kids grew out of that were still decent and that I was cloaking myself in my family skin. There's something sweet about it.

Do you exercise?

I stand 10 to 12 hours a day to make work. I'm also lifting things and hauling things around. There's a certain amount of exercise in that. I used to do a lot of yoga. When I'm upstate, I take walks, and when I'm in the city, I go up and down the subway stairs.

What are you reading?

I just began the Karl Ove Knausgaard book on Edvard Munch, and I am finishing "The Big Oyster," a history of New York couched in a history of oysters.

What is your favorite artwork by someone else?

I had the privilege of spending a lot of time at the Frick while I was preparing for a show there, before hours and after opening hours. That is a very special art-viewing experience. There is a small 16th-century bronze sculpture of a woman with cast silver nipples and little silver eyes. She's turning around and shouting, like she's running from something. It's so startling because the Frick is loaded with Fragonard — you know, romping women, pretty pictures — and this is decidedly not a pretty picture. I love things that are dark and dangerous and delightful.