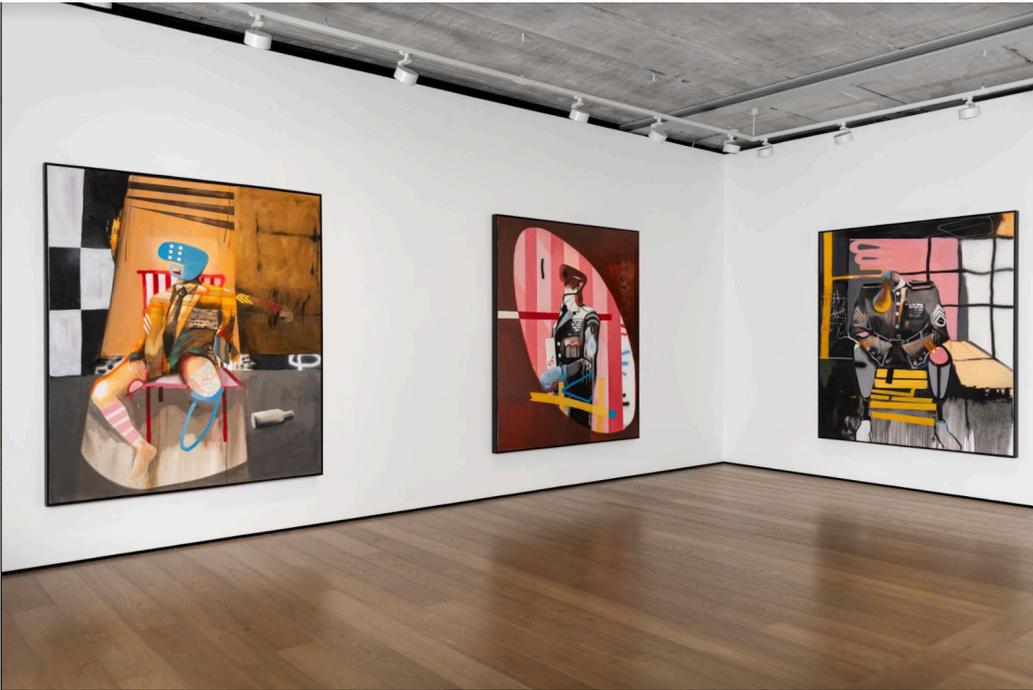


de la Haba

The Dichotomy of Art & Life: Marcus Jansen's Victims And Victors at Almine Rech, London

By Gregory de la Haba, January 30, 2022



Installation view at Almine Rech, London

From the Greek *Dichotomia*, the English variant takes its “dividing in two” meaning. A family separated by divorce. A demarcation between two countries. However, contemporary parlance builds more into the meaning, an addition of “contradictory” or “mutually exclusive” division. The dichotomy is the pitting of one against the other. The divide between classes, or religions, or between the vaxxed and unvaxxed, for example. Absent raging war, has civilized society ever seemed so divided? And herein lies the formative divisions on every battle over right and wrong, yours and mine, good and bad, between first (indigenous) and secondary (colonial). With dichotomy comes the tacit distinction between what is acceptable and what is not. And by the nature of this weighting of sides, the word compartmentalizes dissimilarities, flags them, walls them off, ostracizes them, and simplistically labels them as if everything can be painted with broad strokes of narrow judgment. History enlightens with proof that not all victims wilt, nor do all victors triumph. Think Maya Angelou and Lance Armstrong. Life is filled with a tremendous gray area quietly awaiting its moment to expose and reveal quiet truths often obscured by entrenched, or louder, opposed forces.

To this diametric conundrum we often subject art; art and artists with their ability to live and breathe gray-area, to convey non-binaries, to inch open hard-felt boundaries with truth through beauty, through nuance. At the point of dichotomous classifications, nuance is so frequently lost in the immediate moment of flaring passions or heated arguments. Nuance, like the subtle texturing and layering of paint on one of Marcus

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Jansen's canvases, requires time—and maybe some solitude—to discover. The media (decidedly rigid, problematically calcified) by contrast write nuance out of the equation entirely. They prosper by deploying dichotomy as a means to create conflict. And like a left or right-leaning arrogant politician, they use dichotomy to entrench and amplify discord which only further disunites the usual suspects: Republicans and Democrats, the rich and the poor, and most tragically—especially of late—blacks and whites.

Thankfully, artists, no matter how much they live on the extremities of life, thrive in the gray-scale zone where possibilities abound, where nothing is ever so cut-and-dried, and life's ambiguity unravels slowly, spiritually, mindfully. It is in this space where polarizing forces find common ground; honest and constructive debate can be had and compromise agreed upon and met. It is here where reason—that which separates us from all other creatures—must be introduced. The alternative is too costly. Because being irrational has no place on the road toward goodness—from unity to recovery, to love and peace.

In today's socially and politically charged environment, who better situated to tackle such a thought-provoking and timely theme of dichotomy than an artist whose ancestral history—his very existence—is a paradox in and of itself. But before delving into the work, we must step back to examine some history in context with the above aforementioned. The past matters to Mr. Jansen and figures prominently in his pictorial vernacular. So, too, does ethos (character). From the two, life's unpredictable and delicate nature, its sacred and profound purpose begin to manifest through multi-technical paintings replete with patterns and shapes draped in chiaroscuro, of lights and darks that carry the eye through a palette of subdued ochres and grays to further accentuate bold lines and notes of pure color that behold, in their classically traditional, 'big look' approach to picture-making, solemnity. Paintings replete with moral earnestness conveyed via a sensitive-eye-lens and tempered by past pain and loss experienced first hand. His subjects often imagined figures figuring out real things and without judgment.

“So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together let no man divide.” Matthew 19:6

Returning to Marcus Jansen's embodied paradoxicality, his mother is black and from Jamaica, the Caribbean island largely established on the sugar trade using forced labor, mostly African slaves first brought over by the Spanish not long after Columbus landed in 1494 and then later, starting in the early 17th century, by the British who also brought indentured Chinese and Irish Catholics along for the degrading, empire-building, colonial ride. Contrastingly, his father's ancestors just 25 years prior to the artist's birth, were on the verge of wiping out one particular race entirely. The Germanic Nazis deemed themselves superior to all others and didn't care that the Jews were white like them, privileged like them, German-speaking like them, educated or born with baby-blue eyes like them. Jews were of a different tribe. And thanks in large measure to people like Hitler's right-hand man, Joseph Goebbels, the virulent and rabid antisemite, their time on this planet almost ceased entirely. Coincidentally, Goebbels was from the same part of Germany, Mönchengladbach, as Marcus' dad. A narrow spotlight on the past but not insignificant. Not for a man who was a historian as Marcus's dad was. The devil is, as they say, in the details and the details reveal that evil resides right next door. As it always has. As it always will.

Born and raised in New York City, it is to the fatherland that Marcus returned to live as an adolescent. And with Germany's rich history of tribalism, it's little wonder an afro-looking and youthful Marcus got bullied at school. In fact, mixed-race children during Goebbel's lifetime were called “Rhineland Bastards,” a label first ascribed to

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the children born to German women and fathered by African-Colonial soldiers within the French Occupation forces stationed in Germany after the Great War. But it gets worse—hatred always does. When these kids reached puberty in the 1930s, a special Gestapo commissioned under the Third Reich was organized—with Hitler's blessings—to begin sterilizing these poor children whom the Führer viewed as a contamination of the white population “by negro blood on the Rhine.” More than five hundred young boys and girls who looked no different than Marcus Jansen were sterilized under this horrific regime.

There is no digression from the artist's work here. Stand in front of Questions of Birth, a portrayal of a saintly and matriarchal figure whose silhouette mimics that of paintings of the blessed-mother of Jesus, Mary, and think for a moment of those poor, young outcasts whose mothers were shamed—silenced (note the 'x' replacing a mouth)—and forced by these racist thugs to do as they demanded to their innocent babies and then question what you, whoever you are, would have done under such duress. This is a representation of motherhood, of no particular woman but of every woman, a figurehead of the feminine, holding tight her womb, her back clearly up against a wall, with but a single ear tuned to the scrawls on the blackboard-like surface behind her. Thin and frail linear markings running chaotically as backdrop, echoes of the countless and forgotten little ones whose cries beg to be remembered. Sadly, the wake of their existence is barely traceable upon history's tragic, distorted pages.

In the large painting War Against Propaganda, the central character is more marionette than human, controlled by something beyond the picture's frame—from behind the scenes—one who appears to be in a straightjacket of sorts, judging from the bold swaths of color painted horizontally across the knees and waist, and who appears to be either handing-out or tossing pamphlets. This may as well be a portrayal of Hitler's very own chief puppeteer and dear neighbor, Mr. Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda from 1933 until 1945. If ever history has showcased a more straightforward example of the dangers of one political party controlling all forms of media and communication to the masses, it is this. Goebbels not only favored book burnings and condemning 'degenerate' art, he packed his hate and ideology into every newspaper article, radio show, magazine, movie, and artwork produced in Germany at the time. His methods came to define 'propaganda machine.' So the next time a professor, politician, or anyone screams from the rafters to silence something, anything, no matter what, be weary. Be very, very weary. At present, we can derive balance from dichotomous views, which is perhaps why Jansen favors dissent.

The paintings at Almine Rech are the sum total and mature memesis of Marcus Jansen's life: an amalgamation of the social, critical, and political commentary he's explored since the late 1990s. But it was and is his very personal role—his subjective experiences—in the Gulf War, Desert Storm in particular, where an explosion rocked his camp and entire body, killing dozens and injuring more, that would reverberate through his entire oeuvre with lasting effect. This seminal moment, in fact, underpins his PTSD, fissuring his being—consuming it—like a dark crevice in many of his paintings. Fortunately, it was the time he spent in recovery at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington D.C., after being discharged from the Army in 1997, during art therapy sessions, that would both fortify his artistic practices and broaden his creative scope. Walter Reed is where the majority of U.S. military amputees and combatant casualties are cared for. Veterans in wheelchairs or those with prosthetics relearning all of life's taken-for-granted fundamentals like walking are a common sight. And one not easily let go of. Empathy runs deep for one's fellow human here.

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Mr. Jansen knows all too well that every soldier's real battle is only just beginning after returning home from war as they adjust back to civilian life without the same body and mind they had prior to combat.

Confined Without a Soul amounts to a painted vestige of valor, dignity, and honor of the men and women with whom Marcus served and is entirely familiar. The compositional pull of this painting is due to the centrally placed, seated soldier, his body-core forming a near-perfect square smack-dab in the middle of the painting's perimeters and framed by broad shoulders adorned with epaulets, while the subject's elbows rest steadily atop—and bringing the eye's attention to—prosthetic knees, one prosthetic leg angled askance. As if incarcerated, the enclosed space around the soldier renders an array of irregular squares—windows with no view—and rectangles, perhaps an examining table at Walter Reed. In concert, the shapes heighten the perception of just how boxed-in and confined a soldier must feel after returning home physically, corporally less than. During the Civil War, an estimated 60,000 limbs were amputated on the battlefields in makeshift hospital tents in order to protect a soldier's life from infection that would eventually kill them if the bullet already hadn't. Many soldiers feared the "Sawbones" (slang for military physicians who did the sawing-off of limbs and extremities) more than death itself because most enlisted men were poor farmers who could never again sow seed without arms or plough fields without legs. Amputations reduced warriors to invalids. Their *raison d'être* cut from their very soul all in the name of a new country's unification vis-à-vis emancipation, upheaval sewn by dichotomy.

In the small paintings *After Hurricane #1* through *#8*, and in earlier and larger works by Mr. Jansen (*Spotlight* exhibited last year at the Baker Museum or *Streets* exhibited at the Kemper Museum in 2008 come to mind) his toy-soldier-like figures are standing (or sitting) on a precipice, or a proscenium, and looking out over some forlorn landscape or into the abyss. Except in this series, soft hues of pink, purples, yellows, and blues prevail and dominate over the infrequent amoebic and myriad polygonal shapes with jagged edges, occasionally rising pyramidically yet torn asunder, leveled. In these works, brevity is matched only by augustness and breadth, and often in an aftermath scene of grave consequence. These paintings are representative of every heap of rubble left after every deadly storm, tornado or earthquake anywhere in the world. They are all too familiar. All too universal. We are all together in the same small boat, they remind us, but there are no life vests under the stern. Only vivid reminders of past calamities etched in our consciousness that continually mock our fragility and impermanence. If lucky, we might open our eyes to just how limited time truly is on this immensely vast ecosystem with a faltering thermostat. In all, we're confronted with a rueful and disquieting setting not much different than the empty lots or the fire-ravaged, abandoned buildings that littered the South Bronx in the '70s and '80s where Marcus once lived. Achtung, the soldier-artist cautions: History, like nature, repeats itself over and over again.

Marcus doesn't shy away from his service or the trauma he's experienced from it—he wears it all on his sleeve as the subjects in his paintings wear their rank on their sleeves. Rank, however, is less important to the painter than distinction. In *A Confident Wounded Warrior*, distinction comes in the form of a double amputee. Yet, the postured confidence turns questionable. Two empty bottles lie haphazardly on the floor. Perhaps the subject is tossing a bad habit once and for all. It is important to note how alcohol and drug abuse are leading causes of depression and major

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contributing factors of suicide in the U.S. military among its veterans. Since the start of the pandemic, the number of service members who've committed suicide is ten times greater than members who have fallen from COVID. Imagine a policy shift akin to the covid mobilization aimed at aiding mental health for all, particularly our vets; at least this is the type of thought engendered by Jansen's work, the martial subjects hunched despondently. We might dare to think veterans would never again feel helpless. Last year alone, over 500 service members in their prime took their own lives. Our soldiers are all too aware of the insanity in these numbers. And it pains each and every single one of them—as it should pain all of us. These are the faceless and nameless that Mr. Jansen paints and doesn't want the world to forget.

Such wounded warriors and the paintings Marcus Jansen creates in their honor embody the pathos of Käthe Kolowitz' bereaved mothers and fatherless children coupled with the compositional magnificence and angst of a Francis Bacon. These are works that do not solely and expressly serve social justice whims and current demands. They elevate humanity and art alike by showcasing greater purpose in conveying simple, universal truths that should bring people closer together and not punish or castigate them for refusing to see eye-to-eye. His paintings walk with those willing to get closer to the 'frontline' and to witness life's harsh and cruel realities up close, but they don't push anyone off a cliff for not wanting to. With equal clemency, the past is truly of consequence, Mr. Jansen informs us. Yet his thorough, thought-provoking, and positively delineated attention to it—his commemoration of affliction—contributes greatly to his, and to our, good fortune. History and the now is not a dichotomy. They, others, and us, we, are not either. Then is a part of now and they are a part of us. And so Jansen's work functions, too, on the level of catharsis, ever-evolving, for all mankind to experience and heed. —Gregory de la Haba