ALMINE RECH

Marcus Jansen
Victims and Victors

Jan 13 — Feb 19, 2022 | London

Almine Rech London is pleased to present its first solo exhibition of American artist Marcus Jansen, on view from January 13 until February 19, 2022. This will be Marcus Jansen's second solo exhibition with Almine Rech.

Each year, at 11 am on 11 November, the world falls silent to remember those who lost their lives in the battlefields of World War I. The so-called Great War was meant to be the war to end all wars, but since then, countless other conflicts have unleashed their horror and despair across the globe. Again and again, governments insist that the best way to resolve an argument is to kill. How to disrupt this terrible cycle of violence? Art is one way.

Unlike many of the artists whose work protests the cruelties of war, Marcus Jansen's searing paintings and sculptures evolved from his direct experience. After spending his formative years in the Bronx and Queens in New York, and then in Monchengladbach in Germany, he joined the United States Army. He was deployed in 1990 to the Gulf War, and then later to Korea and Germany, after eight years he returned home, diagnosed with PTSD. He told me, "I know people who did four, five, six tours and I don't know how you could do that and come back and function as a human being." Back in the United States, his rehabilitation included art therapy; painting gave him the language to explore what he had been through. "Art", he says, "saved my life. It's the ultimate celebration of my freedom."

Jansen talks about the 'hyper-alertness' that is required on the battlefield, and how, at times of great danger, he had 'never felt so alive.'. This commingling of fear, focus, and energy is very clear in his large-scale paintings. Without preliminary sketches, he builds tightly coiled worlds in hard, fast lines; perspective is skewed, bodies are dispensable and what constitutes the so-called 'real world' is up for grabs. After the rigidly controlled environment of the military, he rejoices in the chaos of the studio, shaping images from whatever floats into his consciousness: a memory, a conversation, a scene on TV, a news item.

For his latest exhibition, '*Victor and Victims*', Jansen has shone a light on the biases of traditional history – a tale written, in the main, by white men. To really understand it, we need to examine the past from myriad angles and perspectives. In warfare, the individuality of a soldier is negated: victory is predicated on uniformity and consensus. To counter this, Jansen often focuses on a single combatant, as if to reinstate their personhood and agency. (Painting," he has said, "is the most intimate act of war.")

Here, the damaged, the desolate, and the overlooked are given centre stage. In *A Confident Wounded Warrior* (all works 2021), a pale spotlight illuminates a headless, one-legged figure in a decorated military uniform. He looks cockily out at us – although he has no eyes. Two empty bottles are scattered on the floor, and – as if to reiterate that even the bravest person is made of flesh and bones – his remaining leg is rendered like an x-ray. The colours are bold, bright, and bluntly descriptive: a blue background that could be a wall or a sky; the earth stained red with pigment or blood; a graffitied white picket fence, the embodiment of the American Dream turned sour. Everything is flattened – apart from the delicate rendering of the damage that has been done to this poor monster, who was once a human being.

In *Confined Without a Soul*, a soldier with no hands and two prosthetic legs sits in a raucous, airless room. In the place of what should be a head is a strange, duck-billed creature; the senselessness of combat rendered darkly comedic. Similarly satirical, the protagonist of *When the House is on Fire* is a ghost-like soldier, dressed in a uniform from the deep past, holding a candle. The moral of the story: do not use what will kill you to illuminate your way.

In some paintings, the roles of art and combat combine forces. The figure in *Creative Genius* sits cross-legged on the floor in a blood-stained flak jacket. One arm has become a paintbrush, the head replaced with a grey, lumpy, tube-like sculpture: a crude yellow sun floats above it like a cartoon halo, a mockery of saintliness. A painter's palette leans against his legs, but the question hovers: how is he meant to use it, as injured as he is? In *Soldier with PTSD*, the head is rendered as what could be a palette or a crude blue keyboard. While still respectable in a tie, the soldier's body is a mess: he's has lost a leg and one, arm sticks out, as if frozen in time. Again, an empty bottle has been flung to the ground. Nature is absent: the soldier is trapped not only inside a building but inside the claustrophobia of his own head.

Jansen aim is to represent 'things that bleed' and to highlight the 'toll on human beings inflicted by the military industrial complex'. That said, he's also all too aware that most civilians deal with intellectual and emotional conflict, too, and some of his recent paintings are populated by figures rendered real by the nature of their ambiguity. To highlight our common humanity, he often strips his figures of an easily identified gender, race, nationality or religion. What remains is a beating heart and a will to stay alive. He says, "To be the best we can", he says, "we have to be able to critique ourselves."

If life is irrational and unreasonable, Jansen asks, why should art be any different? In this, the artistic lineage of his work is clear. From the furious laughter of the Dadaists – who, amid the horrors of World War 1, declared that 'this humiliating age has not succeeded in winning our respect' – to the slick howls of the German expressionists who battled militarism with paintbrushes, and the joyful subversion of graffiti art, Jansen has forged a new language of pain and protest – but it's one tempered by a sincere belief in humanity's ability to heal, and to hope.

— Jennifer Higgie, writer and art critic