ALMINE RECH

Marcus Jansen
In the Land of Silhouettes

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Marcus Antonius Jansen—named after the Roman general Marcus Antonius—was born in 1968 in New York City, the son of a German father and a Jamaican mother. Jansen grew up both in the Bronx and in Germany, which he first visited as a one-year-old. His businessman father—"a walking dictionary"—spoke incessantly about politics and history while his mother studied nursing. Jansen spent most of the 1970s in Queens, then moved to Monchengladbach, Germany (his father's home town) where, as the only child of color in town, he was beaten and bullied. When Jansen's father realized that these events were race-related, he sent his son back to New York to connect with his family during summers. There, Jansen's exposure to graffiti writing activated his artistic sensibility and offered him an example of art as a tool for communication.

The richness and complexity of Jansen's formative years have informed the language of his mature style. His experiences growing up as a multi ethnic American in both the United States and Europe, followed by extensive travel and military service, have provided Jansen with a broad and sometimes paradoxical reservoir of observations and experiences. Jansen's artistic influences, gleaned from Abstract Expressionism, from German Expressionism—both pre- and postwar—and from graffiti artists in New York, Paris, Amsterdam, and Brussels, overlap and complement each other in their commitment to impulsive and spontaneous expression. Committed to the idea that art can reflect and transmit direct reactions to oppressive political situations, he paints to create images that open up civilized and relevant discourses.

Jansen's *Silhouette* paintings, which feature semi-abstract imagery suggesting social and environment turmoil, are peopled by anonymous figures that engage with ominous situations.

Confidently painted and activated by formal contrasts, the *Silhouette* series will stimulate the imaginations of its viewers and illuminate universal human struggles. These struggles, which take place in the face of chaos and the aftermath of tumultuous events are meant to capture and stimulate viewers. As Janson explains, "The human silhouettes serve objectively and allow space to challenge emotions, intellect, and imagination of the inner self without filters." Looking at a few key works in this series offers clues as to how the paintings and their implied narratives might be best understood.

In *His Story*, a partial figure in an 18th century jacket strides through a darkly ambiguous painted hallway. The figure's head—a rough silhouette with a single oval blue eye—offers no particular clues to the man's identity. Set off by a bright yellow square, a broomstick nose and floating horizontal tie disrupt any sense of solemnity, adding hints of humor and irrationality. A band of deep red, disrupted only by a skirt-like form drawn in white, hides or perhaps completes the portrait from the waist down. Any attempt to detect a coherent theme in the portrait only raises more questions: is the figure's "story" being told by the black brushstroke seen under and through his arm? Ultimately, "His Story" offers only hints—of identity, history, and power—presenting an image that subverts and challenges rational assumptions.

Loot, I Shoot demonstrates Jansen's ability to create evocative settings with improvised brushwork and forms. Dominated by a flotilla of painted detritus, the composition presents a scene of ruination that alternates between vibrancy and darkness. Is this perhaps the aftermath of extreme weather and/or environmental catastrophe? Three tiny silhouetted figures peer, tug at a rope, and hang from above, activating and humanizing the situation. Framed by a horizontal flow of murky brown below and diagonals of yellow and pink on each side, the painting has a strange theatrical grandeur. Both the title and the word LOOT—which appears in red letters on a ragged white triangle—tell us that this scenario involves social collapse, but Janson has no interest in telling us when or where it might be happening. Jansen's paintings reflect images generated by his subconscious and should be seen as dreamscapes, not documentaries.

The works presented *In the Land of the Silhouettes* offer glimpses into the fluid and uncensored imagination of one of the most exciting artists at work today. Jansen's challenging and paradoxical silhouette paintings take us into worlds of power and possibility that transcend time and place and ask us to recognize aspects of our own experiences. His works are full of perceptions—not judgements—that offer opportunities to think freely and deeply about the forces that surround our lives and actions.

— John Seed, art writer and curator

John Seed is a California-based art writer and curator. He is also the author of *Disrupted Realism: Paintings for a Distracted World* and *More Disruption: Representational Art in Flux* which will be released in the fall of 2023.