

REGEN PROJECTS

Müller, Dominikus, "Sergej Jensen," *Artforum*, September 2009

ARTFORUM

Sergej Jensen

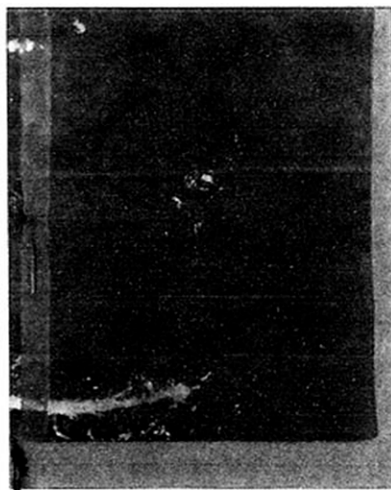
KW INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

The carpet was brown and cheap-looking, showing obvious signs of wear. Parts of the wall were still painted a smarmy pink hue left over from the last show. Nearly all of the temporary walls added for that previous exhibition, however, had been taken down—but the rough parts of the wall where the seams used to be remained unfinished. Above the gallery benches, soiled spots and greasy strips were still visible from where earlier visitors leaned their heads. And if you looked closely, you might have noticed out-of-place holes and awkwardly bent nails in the gaps between the pictures, the traces of failed hanging attempts. No other exhibition space looks like this fourth-floor gallery did—at least, no space in which a show is actually in progress.

Nor did the work being presented in these musty-smelling, somewhat squalid rooms resemble conventional painting. Sergej Jensen paints without painting in the usual sense: Only in the rarest cases are his pictures created using paint and brushes, and even if he does happen

to make a picture in this way, he's often likely to hang it facing the wall. For the most part, Jensen paints using weather and a washing machine, sunlight and bleach, or diamond dust. He covers his stretchers with found or weathered textiles, which might be either coarse burlap or the finest silk, then sews them up with needle and thread—apparently offhandedly—to create abstract compositions. And yet these pictures remain recognizable as paintings, although paintings of the second degree.

African Market, 2008, for example, features a rough fabric applied to its stretchers, its surface showing traces of spilled bleach. But this isn't at all what one might take it for at first glance; it appears an energetically executed, abstract-expressive painterly gesture. Nor does it embody the diametrical opposite that's become so common in the art world: that



Sergej Jensen,
African Market,
2008, sewn fabric,
10' 2" x 7' 10 1/2".

concentrated conceptual control and coolheaded reserve that is meant to critically undercut painting's status as the paradigmatic genre of authentic expression. Jensen's painting is somewhere in the middle. One might best describe it as a project of skillful *laissez-faire*, finding its expression in a sort of "*peinture automatique*": an intentional "letting be" of what is already there and a spontaneous "letting be" of randomness—combined with a "leaving out" of paint and primer that can be read as a critique of the medium, reducing painting to bare materiality. Sometimes, as in the appropriately titled *Untitled (Négligé)*, 2009, Jensen takes the process of reduction as far as the frame itself, showing through the thin fabric.

The logical consequence of this technique of letting be and leaving out—reaching through the paint to the canvas and through the canvas to the frame—is an exhibition space that itself has been let be, rendering everything in it a potential painterly gesture: the old carpeting, the stains on the wall, the superfluous nails. All of these things create a patina that joins the paintings with their presentation, a perfectly balanced exhibition of imperfection. In Jensen's work, one finds an incredible understanding of how to create an effect, a baffling precision in execution, and an infallible sense of placement. What at first seems to be a rigorously intellectual undertaking reveals itself to be

filled with sensual qualities, a comprehensive aesthetic document of the most radical stylistic intention. Every seam is right where it belongs: painting as a made-to-measure deconstructed suit.

—Dominikus Müller

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.