

# REGEN PROJECTS

Pasquariello, Lisa, "Pattern Recognition," *Artforum*, Summer 2006, p. 326-9

## ARTFORUM

IF "PAINTING" TODAY refers less to material or object than to practice and action, then Denmark-born, Berlin-based Sergej Jensen is a painter. His description of his medium as "painting without paint" suggests that we should forsake an emphasis on the surfaces on and with which he works—burlap, linen, jute, wool, silk, denim—and attend instead to what he does to these textiles: He spreads them over stretchers; sews or irons patches and other fabric remnants onto them; and bleaches, stains, and dyes them, usually with abstract geometric marks and almost always in subdued neutrals or the secondary and tertiary spokes of the color wheel. Minimally worked, his paintings affirm a radical thrift of gesture, frequently incorporating reaches of empty space and faint, aleatory markings such as stains or smudges of soot. (Jensen says that he spent a lot of time staring at the ceiling as a sickly child; one is tempted to believe that almost-blank architectural expanses were a primary influence.) Though formally sophisti-

cated and often quite beautiful, the works are typically unassuming in appearance and even seem, in German critic Diedrich Diederichsen's apt term, "shy"; indeed, the descriptor "homespun" regularly crops up in exhibition reviews.

Yet such estimations, particularly the latter one, fail to acknowledge how Jensen's work distills some of the thorniest matters of artistic production and reception of the past century—including questions of what happens to painting when it becomes decorative, encounters the strategies of the readymade, faces the incursions of popular culture, and gets tied to the machinations of capital and various modes of technology. Jensen knows that engaging these time-honored issues hazards a certain throwback feel—*haven't we moved on?*—and tacitly admits to the anachronism: Intermittent references to early computing technology are not so much nostalgic for the moment when such technology seemed to signal only optimism and the promise of progress as they are wistful for the memory of that moment as such.

The title of Jensen's first solo exhibition in New York last fall, "Paintings (I come from the computer)," was printed on sheets of paper that hung on a wall near the entrance to Anton Kern Gallery, sounding the double resonance of the

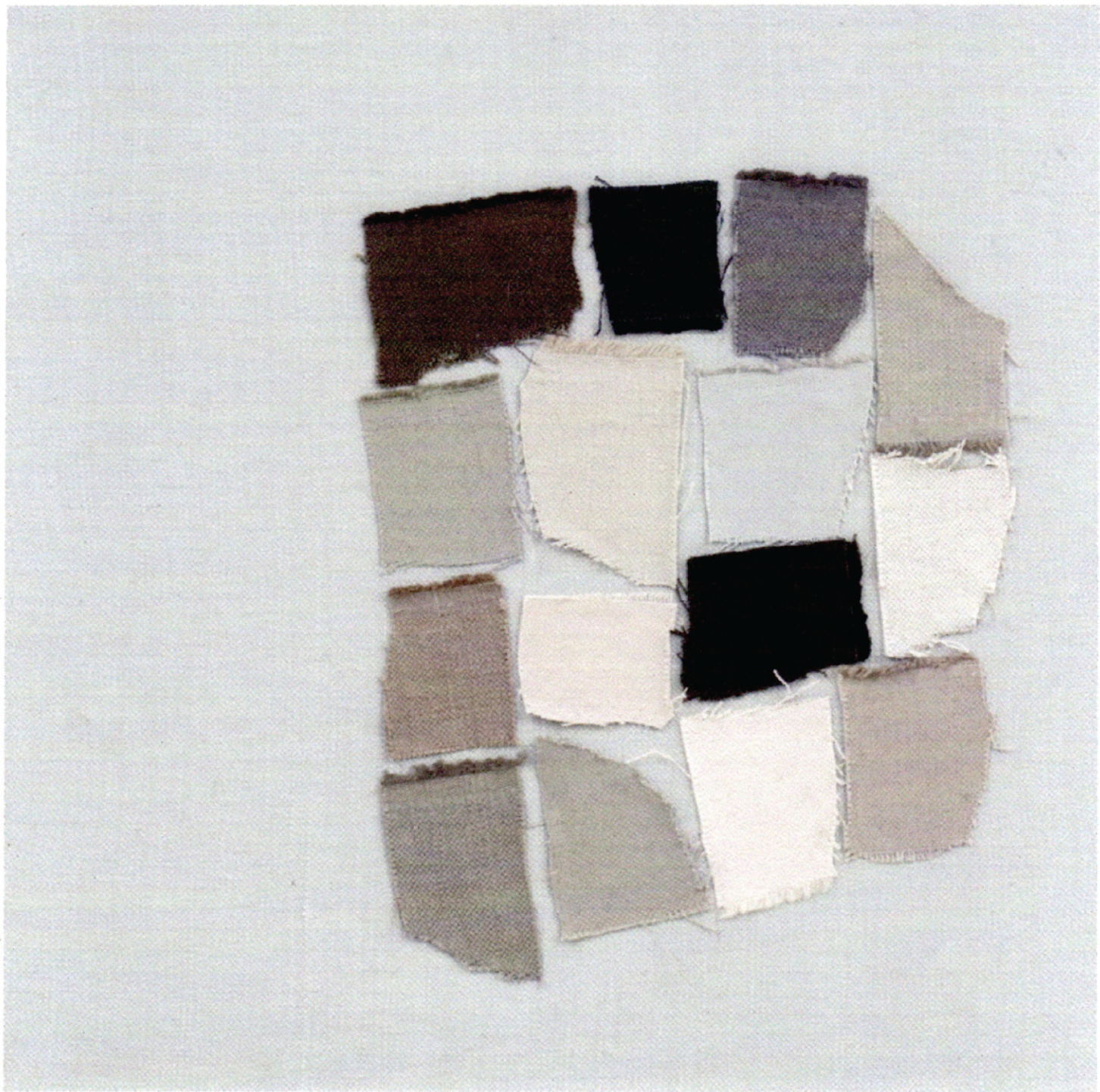
## Pattern Recognition

Lisa Pasquariello on the art of Sergej Jensen



This page: View of Sergej Jensen. "Arbeiten und ein Feuerwerk" (Works and a Firework), 2004. Galerie NEU, Berlin. Photo: Gunter Lepkowski. Opposite page: Sergej Jensen. *Palette Head*, 2005, canvas on canvas, 23 3/4 x 17 3/4".







phrase: *I* is Jensen himself—his mother was a computer programmer—as well as much of the work in that show, which borrowed from the imagery of prototypical electronic animation. *The First Mensch*, 2005, a skeletal rendering of a head and torso in blue acrylic on burlap, is based on an image of the first computer-generated human form, developed by programmer-designer William Fetter for Boeing in the 1960s, and the dashed, multicolored arcs in *XXXX Deco*, 2005, were sourced from a mid-century IBM logo. Jensen, born in 1973, played video games as a child, and while his allusions are occasionally more recent (the watery blotch in *Opera Scene from Star Wars*, 2005, for example, is meant to conjure a pivotal moment in the latest installment of George Lucas's epic), the look of Pong and Asteroids persists.

How to evaluate this transposition of computer-graphics iconography (albeit mostly obsolete) to the materials of distaff domesticity? Here it should be noted that in addition to invoking his mother in his show's title, Jensen has also created some of his paintings (such as the striped, afghanlike *United Nations*, 2005) by asking her to knit them according to his designs. Should such gender dynamics be filtered through a biographical lens, as a kind of tech-savvy reshuffling of the oedipal deck? Should the work be gauged in terms of early feminist art's approach to craft, and should one even invoke (in hushed tones) Pattern and Decoration? Well . . . probably not. These affiliations are there, and if the paintings broadcast anything loudly, it's their renunciation of machismo. But everything about Jensen's circumspect, reserved, and highly formal work militates against the belaboring of such interpretations. The sheer fact of disjunction itself—the negative space that erupts between means and meaning, longing and contemporaneity—seems more relevant.

It is in this light that one must reckon with another obvious address of the work, its rather oblique relationship to modernism. Jensen's production of the past eight years abounds with allusions to modernist painting, in a practice that might be described by the paradoxical formulation of referential formalism. (Even spontaneous-looking marks are mimetic: The tangle of bleached squiggles in *Work VI*, 2005, he explains, represents the design on a piece of scorched aluminum foil.) There are what might be read as nods to Kenneth Noland's concentric color rings, Agnes Martin's gridded horizons, Alberto Burri's burlap sacks, and Kazimir Malevich's white fields. *Palette Head*, 2005, looks a bit like a head, a bit more like an artist's palette, and most of all like Jean Arp's *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*, 1916–17; "chance" here involved those bits of fabric that happened to be left over from the installation of a show, which Jensen sewed onto a swath of canvas. The very title of *Curtains*, 2005, suggests that a strip of bleach bisecting a square of linen be read not as a Barnett Newman-like zip between figure and ground, or between something and nothing, but simply as a reed of light slivering between drapes. But Jensen refuses to cast himself as yet another archaeologist of modernism's rack and ruin. "I don't wake up in the morning and think about deconstructing Josef Albers," he told me. Although the down-at-heel scruffiness of much of the artist's work squares with his childhood recollection of early-twentieth-century art seen on school field trips as "already old, already dusty," and although he literalizes his rehabilitation of its pictorial idiom by using recycled and scrapped materials, there is a sense (as with many of his peers who participated in "Formalism: Modern Art Today" at the Kunstverein in Hamburg in 2004–2005) that this thoroughly digested and largely tainted legacy appears in his work as a kind of inescapable given. His quotations are neither arch nor disillusioned, and insofar as they have a kind of default quality, one might question whether it is even proper to understand them as quotations.

In fact, some of Jensen's materials are out-and-out pretty, but it is a subtly strategic prettiness, confronting the bugaboo of the decorative by way of direct



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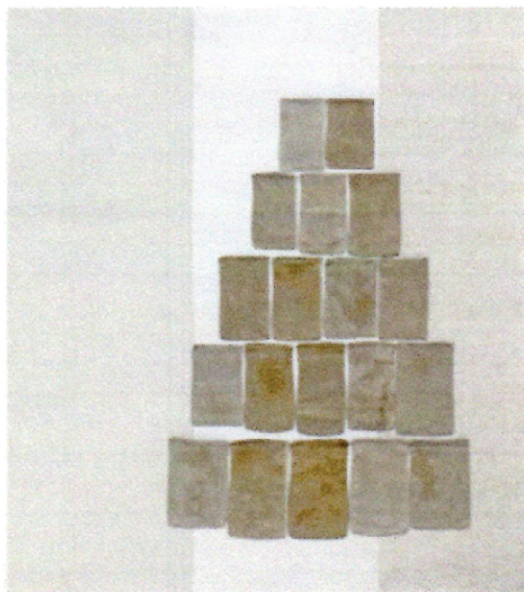
incorporation. This took the form, a few years ago, of carpets stitched together from shopping bags, several of which blanketed the floor of Berlin's Galerie NEU in 2004, which Jensen had refashioned as a living room. For this year's Berlin biennial, he designed a space in a newly renovated, off-site apartment building as a sort of generic waiting room, featuring chairs, his paintings, a Super-8 film (transferred to DVD) showing people wandering through a park, and a patchwork curtain suspended from the ceiling. These environments at once stage the domestication and corporatization of contemporary art and recall a '70s heyday of Scandinavian design, but his tack is not one of blinkered nostalgia, and even less so one of melancholic repetition. It's more of a hypothesis, laconically posed: What would it look like to emplace the "no places" of utopian modernism, to ground and localize its sweeping aspirations—in a provisional, minor key—in today's social world?

As one considers the conceptual warp and woof of Jensen's practice (childhood games, maternal instincts, yesterday's technologies), Rosemarie Trockel readily comes to mind. But the unlikely combinations of weaving and technology in the work of Thomas Bayrle, a teacher of Jensen's at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, offer the most germane precedent here. In fact, Bayrle might be the anchoring figure in the genealogy of Jensen's art—which also has some recourse to Richard Tuttle's neither-painting-nor-sculpture aesthetic but comes into focus most readily when contextualized within the sardonic legacy of German Pop, from Blinky Palermo's fabric paintings to the radically reduced compositions of Michael Krebber. Bayrle encouraged Jensen's move away from photorealist and gestural painting, but it is their conversations about music and literature that the young artist says he remembers most and which

perhaps guided his efforts to incorporate activities outside the realm of painting into his practice. In addition to his Super-8 films—which, like the DVD on view in Berlin, tend to be unedited exercises in minimalist verité and imply a certain connection to '60s experimental cinema—Jensen has pursued various musical projects: He had a punk band with classmate Stefan Müller, has recorded a CD of Nico covers with artist Michaela Meise, and is currently working on a solo album.

The same interest in the cultural systems around painting no doubt feeds Jensen's wry humor about the commercial mainframe that supports and distributes his art. Running through his practice is a subtle but persistent foregrounding of his own relationship to cycles of circulation and exchange. Jensen's waste-not-want-not method sends up the profligacy of the current market as well as the excesses of expressionism, and with the exception of those works that his mother has knit, his fabrics summon the worlds of industry and fashion as much as they do the sphere of the domestic. Disclosing abstract painting's absorption of the syntax of capitalism is not a new move. But in Jensen's hands the disclosure is unabashed (the title of *Come on, let's make fifty-fifty*, 2003, owns up to the terms of the artist-dealer split) and boldly material: The burlap sacks sewn together in a rectangle in *Tower of Nothing II*, 2004, for example, are money bags used to transport cash; manufacturer's colored-dye dots on the salvage of the wavy striped fabric in *Untitled*, 2005, serve notice that the work's nonrepresentational image has another life in commerce. In the show at Anton Kern, the medium of two pieces, in which the numbers zero and one are formed from rows of international currency, was listed as "money on canvas." The zero and one, of course, also evoke binary code. With characteristic economy, Jensen thus elegantly maps an analogy between the components that make the digital and analog worlds, respectively, go round, offering what might be construed as allegorical signs for the elemental materials of his practice—the simple building blocks of an endlessly recombinant program. □

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Opposite page, left: Sergej Jensen, *Work VI*, 2005, fabric paint and chlorine bleach on linen, 86 1/4 x 53 1/4". Right: Sergej Jensen, *XXXX Deco*, 2005, acrylic and chlorine bleach on canvas, 45 1/4 x 39 1/4". This page, left: Sergej Jensen, *Tower of Nothing*, 2004, cloth bags on linen, 82 1/4 x 73". Right: Sergej Jensen, *Untitled (Binary Zero)*, 2005, money on canvas, 51 1/4 x 47 1/4".

