

REGEN PROJECTS

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A Textured Palette Without Much Paint

By ROBERTA SMITH

Sergej Jensen's shy, luminous, physically scant paintings, often made of little more than scraps of linen and other found fabrics, are tightrope walkers that travel light. Balancing gracefully between reverence and irreverence while deftly eluding irony, they jettison so much of painting's traditional baggage that they almost question themselves out of existence. But not quite.

As evidenced by a quiet but fiercely beautiful show at MoMA P.S. 1, Mr. Jensen's best paintings are all-out pictorial events, as long as you pay attention. His efforts invite you deeper into the medium as a physical discipline while fuzzing the boundaries that separate it from other forms of pictorial expression. They also sharpen visual perception, awakening you to the mundane details of the surrounding world and expanding your understanding of the way images of all sorts imprint themselves on the visual unconscious.

In front of a small stretched patch of yellowish fabric with a faint, blooming stain at its center, which Mr. Jensen seems to present as is, I found myself thinking of the barren, sloping landscape depicted in Goya's painting of a dog, and of the light-struck suns and moons of the American Modernist Arthur Dove. It was a revelation to have two such different artists linked by this work, an accidental visionary painting in its own right.

The associations can sometimes be surprisingly Romantic. "Blessed" consists simply of two pieces of cashmere wool in contrasting shades of gray sewn together to form a stark horizon line. The composition can evoke one of Courbet's unadorned seascapes while the title can further conjure up, strangely enough, Jean-Francois Millet's work "The Angelus," the well-known painting of a peasant couple praying in a field, an image later appropriated by Salvador Dalí.

Mr. Jensen, who was born in Denmark in 1973, lives in Berlin and has exhibited in the United States since 2000. This exhibition, his third solo show in New York and his first in an American museum, was organized by Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson at the Aspen Art Museum and overseen at MoMA P.S. 1 by Peter Eleey, a curator there; it presents 29 works made since 2003.

Mr. Jensen is frequently quoted describing his work as “painting without paint.” When he is not sewing pieces of cloth together, practicing various forms of appliqué or using swaths of knitting made by his mother to his specifications, he uses bleach, making marks by removing color rather than adding it, or he paints with gesso, the primer traditionally used to prepare canvases but rarely evident in finished works.

Mr. Jensen comes from a long line of skeptical, ruminative painters determined to embed the medium in the real world, to make paintings without making too much fuss about them. His precedents include Kurt Schwitters, who made both paintings and collages from whatnot collected on the street; Sigmar Polke, whose visual aids have included everything from blankets and flowered dry goods to scattered mineral powders; and the down-home Minimalist Blinky Palermo.

Mr. Jensen also has something in common with the more refined worldliness of Robert Ryman, who turns every aspect of painting — down to the hinges or hooks that attach it to the wall — into an occasion for exquisite consideration. Like Mr. Ryman (but without his polish), Mr. Jensen wants us to understand that every physical detail of the object speaks to us: the stitching, the stains, the bits of fiber. The little, whiskerlike hairs — actually saffron — scattered on the surface of “Werewolf” contribute to the way its triangle of white paint on pink fabric implies a giant, grossly simplified face. While seeming mundane, the large patchwork of squares and rectangles of fabric that constitutes another piece has the painstaking proportional sensitivity of a field of tiny squares painted by Paul Klee, or a Schwitters collage.

Mr. Jensen is not above the occasional joke. “Ugly Diamond,” a scruffy white shaped painting with 11 sides of slightly different lengths suggests a faceted gem, but it also seems to rebuke one of Richard Tuttle’s early unstretched canvas wall pieces by adding old-fashioned stretcher bars. A bit more tender is “Curtains,” a wavering stripe bleached down the center of a piece of light-damaged canvas. The resulting motif image could be a Barnett Newman reject, but it also evokes fabric fluttering in the wind.

Still, unlike many painters working today — artists as different as Michael Krebber, Josh Smith and George Condo come to mind — Mr. Jensen rarely resorts to what might be taken as satires of painting. He doesn’t so much strip it down, or fill it with self-conscious ironies and stylistic flourishes, as simply open it out. In a way that connects to postwar art tendencies like French Situationism, Italian Arte Povera and even relational aesthetics, he emphasizes interactivity and randomness, embraces accident and takes what comes. (He has a tendency, for example, to take a decidedly unprecious approach to lighting, and usually accepts whatever has carried over from the previous show.)

And generally he seems intent on merging painting with a larger pictorial universe that

includes textiles and other crafts. Such inclusiveness seems part of the message of “United Nations,” an optimistically titled painting that consists of a colorfully striped, machine-knit afghan — an inexpensive item that could have been manufactured anywhere — sewn onto stretched linen. Its suggestion of a kind of rainbow coalition argues against the distinction between fine and applied arts, and, for that matter, all kinds of other hierarchies, whether visual, cultural or ethnic.

“Sergej Jensen” is on view through May 2 at MoMA P.S. 1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 784-2084, momaps1.org.