

REGEN PROJECTS

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Sergej Jensen

WHITE CUBE, BERMONDSEY

Sergej Jensen made his recent series of paintings from reclaimed cotton money bags culled from banks across the United States and Europe. Each bag was split and stitched, one to another, into a series of taut, wonky rectangular grids. The finished patchwork of sacks forms both subject and ground of the work. Jensen described his



Sergej Jensen, *Fired Jockey*, 2016, acrylic on sewn money bags, 84½ x 70½".

earlier process as "painting without paint," but in these works paint looms large, poured and pressed into the untreated cotton sacks to make abstract monochromes and odd figurative scenes derived from old-master paintings. As if floating over their fabric ground, their pale or muted hues appear from a distance as ghostly palimpsests.

The pendant pair *Nude 1* and *Nude 2* (all works 2016), blank save for the visible rows of stitches on the bags themselves, offer a knowing nod to the hand-drawn grids of Agnes Martin, while others incorporating patches of paint recall Michael Krebber's similarly cool and witty contemporary interrogations of abstract painting. The use of fabric brings to mind Alberto Burri's rough-and-ready burlap *Sacco* reliefs, and Lee Bontecou's

use of dirty, torn, and stamped postal sacks pulled and stitched taut over welded wire skeletons. Borrowings from earlier in art history are also in evidence—for instance, the small enameled painting depicting a Madonna-and-child motif that is stuck to one of the money-bag surfaces at bottom right of *The Rocos*, or the battle scene depicting men on horseback lifted from reproductions of a lost sixteenth-century painting by Leonardo da Vinci. In this work, *Battle of Anghiari*, one of the largest in the show, the money-bag support is almost entirely obscured.

In some cases, Jensen scuffed the fabric surface so it appears pilled, occasionally thinned to the point where small holes and tears have developed. Other works have been layered with thick blobs of oil and acrylic paint, or resin, sometimes pooled into glossy puddles. In some cases he has neatly lacquered the entire surface to obliterate the visible joins of the sacks and the stamped text detailing the logo of the issuing bank and the denomination of the money each bag contained. The point seems to be to allow the origins or original context of the bags to remain visible, even as they are repurposed and their surfaces are masked with paint. One, *£100 Midland Bank*, is even named for the

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issuing bank and the face value of the bills it was designed to hold, and in some instances the moneybags are all but untouched, with only the neat rows of stitching and stamped information reading US MINT 1000 DIMES or \$100 SILVER left visible, a readymade tactic recalling Warhol's iconic screen prints of dollar bills or Phillip Hefferton's earlier Pop-art riffs on the US banknote.

Money bags are cheap, simple things used to physically move currency around the world—cold hard cash transported in crude cotton sacks rather than digital information via computer cables. Moneybags is also, of course, slang for “a wealthy or extravagant person.” For a successful artist to make art out of the material ground of money is always going to be a complicated business. It can feel a bit preachy on the one hand or callous on the other. Jensen's series succeeds precisely because of its refusal to fall on the side of either the spectacle or the catastrophe of capital. These works have been executed with a formal understatement and modesty of means that feels, right now, entirely apposite. They remind us that money might be the ground, but not the point of art—not why the artist makes it, or why it matters that we look at it. Jensen draws on a long, avant-garde tradition of placing the idea of the artwork as commodity under playful pressure.

—Jo Applin