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Territory

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TERRITORY The work of Olav Christopher Jenssen, a Norwegian contemporary artist who works in Berlin, testifies that painting is still able to mobilize emotional energies into creative challenges. Jenssen studied for one year in Oslo and then, in 1981, began a course of "life training" as an exile first in New York, and then in Berlin, where he has lived and worked for the past fifteen years. From the beginning, he was guided by the belief that life experience was the best teacher. In lieu of extended formal training, he relied on a sense of "knowing without knowing." His success is driven by a natural curiosity that leads him to explore the possibilities of painting itself, but without any particular ideological bent. Jenssen does not look to the philosophers for direction, and he is not looking to change the world through his art, or provide a major contribution to mankind. Rather, he finds in the practice of art a sense of existential joy, "the closest one can come to feeling alive. Being close to a stream of good feelings that can be shared in the joy of showing what I do." Art thus provides him with the opportunity to become an engaged person and offers a mode of expression. He is content to work in a professional art context while contributing to the advancement of painting. His primary aim is to take part in art life by "finding different ways to do paintings." Without being intentionally experimental in his approach to art, he nevertheless enjoys the on-going act of discovering new things in the process of making paintings. Jenssen is one of only a few contemporary Norwegian artists to achieve international recognition. He feels an inde-
pendence from his Norwegian heritage but nevertheless maintains active dialogue with this heritage through exhibitions and personal contacts with artists in or from Norway, where he is regarded as a national artist. He also maintains ties with artistic communities, especially in New York and Berlin. While in New York, he was particularly interested in the aura provided by John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and the poet Allan Ginsberg. He also finds affinities to his own work in New York artists such as Jonathan Lasker, David Reed, and Stephen Ellis. His participation in Documenta IX (1992) brought his work into a wider international context. Jenssen's paintings are essentially in the tradition of modern abstraction, but his images are never far from the stream of lived experience, and sometimes also embrace representational elements. Jenssen would argue against the necessity of any firm distinction between abstraction and representation in art. In this respect he rightly perceives the difficulties of maintaining any sharp line that would isolate the images of art from the reality of other experiences.

Alfred Barr, Jr. previously divided abstraction into two main arteries: expressionistic with a lineage running from Gauguin through Expressionism, Dadaism, and Surrealism; and geometric with its roots in Cézanne and passing through Cubism, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus. Expressionistic abstraction, according to Barr, was grounded in intuition and emotion, whereas geometric abstraction relied on the analytic and logical calculation. Barr's distinction between two types of abstraction remains useful in art
history as a mark of broad tendencies in subsequent periods of twentieth-century abstract art. But the two arteries often converge in the work of particular artists.

Jenssen clearly embraces both strands of abstraction in his paintings. In the corpus of his work, there exists a dialogue between expressionistic organic and geometric forms. Often the paintings are predominantly expressionistic and organic in their forms, as in *Misanthrope*, 1991, and *Timid*, 1991, from the series called *Lack of Memory*. On the other hand, paintings such as *Favorite*, 1995, and *Once First Time*, 1995, exhibit strongly geometric features. The distinction breaks down, however, with respect to Jenssen’s works, in the sense that the expressionist works are also formally systemic in their structural features, and the more geometric compositions are often expressionistic in tenor. In these respects, then, Jenssen is eclectic with regard to the two main features of abstraction.

Underlying the wide range of marks found in Jenssen’s paintings are two key elements of composition: a respect for the indefinite and the element of system. The concept of the “indefinite,” which Jenssen takes from John Cage’s experiments with the principles of chance as an important aspect of artistic creation, leads to his commitment to a radical openness toward new ways of painting. This principle leads him to treat each composition as an existential performance in which he discovers the exact placement of the pictorial elements on the canvas. In this act of making paintings, he affirms his place in the world alongside others engaged in similar artistic pursuits.
Jenssen's work proceeds according to different series, each based on a system. These systems consist of discovered or invented visual structures which impose formal control on the size, shape, color, and type of marks applied to the canvas. The system represents a particular idea or set of ideas and provides the constraints for exploring as fully as possible the complexities of a limited visual concept. The system provides a framework for a collection of experiences that can only be worked out and expressed through reflections in association with the particular frameworks. Within his systems, there is ample provision for openness in the development of the individual works. The body of work changes within itself, and there is the freedom not to conclude the series. Further, there is no sense that one painting in a series must confirm the previous. These decisions are guided by intuition. In this respect, Jenssen's systemic paintings are not driven by the rectilinear grid, mathematics, or architecture as were the systemic paintings of Agnes Martin, Robert Mangold, or David Novros, whose earlier experiments with systemic painting form an important chapter in abstract painting.\(^2\) Aesthetics, in Jenssen's systemic works, has to do with weight, balance, and precision deployed with understatement and a certain amount of risk-taking. He is guided by the feeling that the composition is right. These decisions are not calculated, but are of the heart.

Jenssen's notion of a system for painting recalls the philosopher Nelson Goodman's discussion of artistic systems and aesthetics in his book, *Languages of Art*. The system provided by Jenssen allows for maximum com-
plexity and subtlety of artistic production. It affirms the autographic nature of painting as an art form that is, whose original forms cannot be duplicated in a forgery or a copy without loss of significance, or an art form incapable of becoming a notational system with rules for constructing or interpreting the paintings. On the other hand, Jenssen’s system provides a pictorial system within which the work generated belongs to a common family with common structural roots. Similarly, his approach to painting places the works clearly within the tradition of aesthetics where we are invited to “read” them by “making delicate discriminations and discerning subtle relationships” and by “reorganizing the world in terms of the works, and the works in terms of the world” in which they, the artist, and we, the viewers, participate.  

The paintings in the exhibition consist of two series. The first is comprised of images painted on small wood panels and applied permanently with glue to empty canvases 32 x 42 cm in dimension. A second series consists of large-scale canvases built around a neutral set of marks, a certain color scheme, which is developed in varying sizes, most typically on a 220 x 200 cm canvas. Wood panels used in the first series were painted at various times over several years and remained in the artist’s Berlin studio awaiting further definition of purpose. The paintings are newly assembled as a series for the current exhibition. Although miniature in scale, when compared to the larger canvases in the companion series, they are fully realized works. The works emerge from a confrontation of the two elements, plane and
image. To make these pieces, the artist freely moves the image across the canvas, in search of the “right” placement. The orientation in the picture space is mainly from the top left, but the precise location of image requires a certain creative act of intuitive placement. This action is complete when the artist gives identity to the piece by joining the painted image and the negative space of the picture plane. Hence the action of placing the small painting on the canvas is a key element, along with the image, in the work. Scale is also an important element in this system. The images themselves vary considerably from tightly controlled white circles with orange dots, arranged in rows and evenly distributed across the canvas to an animal-like shapes etched in black. There are also abstract pieces with thickly painted lines that resemble a serial view of a system of roads dividing plots of land. The system in these small works is one segment of the artist’s working process. The paintings show the range of visual expressions obtainable from a limited system.

The latest series of works developed by Jenssen is called Biographie and was introduced as part of a larger exhibition of the artist’s works held at the Astrup Fearnley Museum for Modern Art in Oslo and also in the exhibition Radio at the Kunsthalle zu Kiel, both in 1997. In its essential state, the structure of the new works begins with a set of neutral gestures resulting in a pattern of interwoven linear marks with many possibilities. The neutral structure within each work becomes influenced through emotions and is developed within a choice of colors. The colors are predominantly greens,
yellows, and reds applied in greater or lesser densities, depending upon the piece. Distinctions between lines and colors disappear in the complexities of the overall composition. The structure responds to the artist’s intuitive sensations with immediate action, serving as a medium for poetic expressiveness as well as a vehicle for creating the illusion of deep space. These processes are enriched by a pervasive luminiosity that recalls the light of the artist’s Nordic origins. The gestures are repeated with variations throughout the compositions until the artist arrives at a satisfactory point of departure, signaling that the work is complete. Again this action proceeds under the guidance of intuition which determines the moment that the process is complete. As in the previous series, the system functions to group together works with related characteristics. The works are held together internally by a delicately poised set of independent variables consisting of the marks, colors, and emotions all held together tentatively and without any hint of necessity for new works that might emerge from any further workings of the system. Externally, within the system, the works share a common systemic vocabulary of picture-making conventions. The artist is in command of the system and is responsible for giving a measure of order to an otherwise indeterminate process.

From what has been said previously, it is evident that Jenssen’s work echoes some of the main themes of intellectual culture in the mid to late twentieth century. He does not set out to destroy art, as did the Dadaists of the early part of the century, or to deconstruct the way art has been
practiced in the manner of post-structural and post-modernist theories. But his reliance on the inner life of unconscious intuition as a guiding source for his compositions echoes the concerns of the Surrealists, as do some of his forms. Similarly he invokes the principle of chance corresponding to the theories of modern physics concerning space and time. The systems that Jenssen is evolving are largely personal and idiosyncratic. They are nevertheless soundings intended to penetrate the walls of human solitude and to invite others to join freely the search for new discoveries, whether in art or in life.

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