



FEATURE

INTERVIEWS

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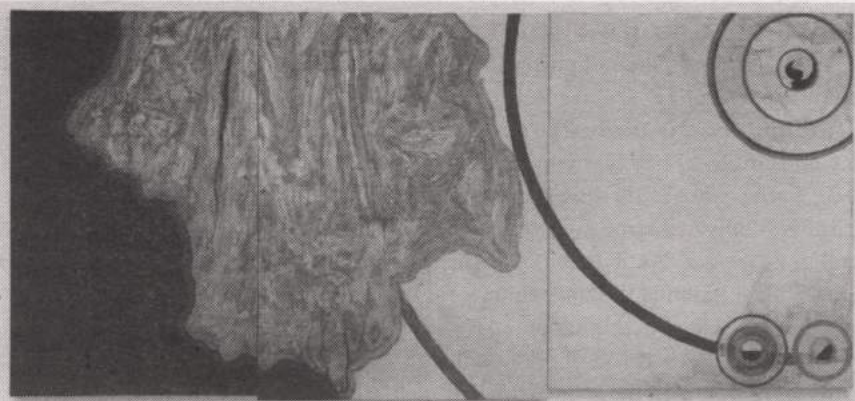
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MARCH 2022



BILL JENSEN

BY AMANDA MILLET-SORSA

Stillness/Flowing

Cheim & Read, New York

January 20–April 2, 2022

Bill Jensen's new body of work, largely made in the last three years, is displayed in all four rooms of Cheim & Read gallery in Chelsea. These paintings embody both the wisdom and maturity of a sage, while maintaining the energy and vulnerability of new life.

In the first room one can at once recognize Jensen's particular relationship to Mannerist and Baroque periods in *BLUE CUPOLA* (2020–21), where muscular, bulbous humanoid shapes are precariously joined together as a triptych in exuberant, heroic angels or demons guarding the baby blue heavens. This work has roots in his 2015 show with the gallery, where one might recall the triptych *Transgressions* (2011–14), with a linear painting style alluding to the Michelangelo-esque musculature. In the recent work, these amorphous bodies have accumulated layers of textured, vibrant, and transparent colors transgressing into a chromatic realm imbued with both *colore e disegni*. In this triptych there is an Indian yellow solar shape floating in the central panel looking straight at us, probingly. A construction of cross-cultural symbols, the shape evokes the evil eye, the third eye, the yin and yang, icon painting, a spiral knot in

plywood, or a target: all suggesting that another dimension or realm may exist past this mystical point of concentrated hot energy and color. This recurring form in his current work directly points to Jensen's polycultural influences, particularly his admiration for classical Chinese poetry and art and his pursuit of Eastern philosophy and thought. His early painting from the 1970s, particularly *Redon* (1976–77), which is in the back room of the gallery, is the onset of these fantastical geometric forms.

As we traverse into the second room, this curious circular shape becomes more pronounced in *VASTNESS/FLOWING* (2020–21) and *STILLNESS/FLOWING* (2021). In the same room there are two diptychs on the south wall: *WITH CHILD II* (2019–20) and *SISTA/SISTA* (2020–21), where we can readily see the arousing flow evoking aqueous environments, and painterly gestures swimming in currents of violet, magenta, sap green, dioxin red, alizarin orange, and Indian yellow, among other unnamable colors. The fluidity of the additive and subtractive brush and palette knife strokes are submerging and emerging from the surface. In *FATHER, DAUGHTERS* (2020–21) and *WHEEL RIM COMPASS V (FOR WANG WEI)* (2021), the texture of the paint surfaces are familiar to urbanites accustomed to seeing scratches and graffiti on limestone walls and mortar bursting through the seams of our imperfect urban sidewalks. Circular shapes are left on the surface through the casual print of a paint container or a contemplative cup of coffee. These are in conversation with the bold

circle shapes floating on seven of the paintings in this room.

Jensen is part of a long line of artists who honor the man-made craft with the tools of the trade, from brushes, palette knives, to mason's trowels which uncover the medium's potential through textured surfaces of flattened out impasto, dry brushstrokes, drips of paint, smudges, and scratches, which is unique in today's fast-paced manufacturing and economy of outsourcing labor. The handmade paints ground from pigments come from a deep personal understanding of color and alchemy developed through endless experimentation along with his ongoing dialogues with paint specialists and artist peers. Jensen's palette is evocative of nature in its full spectrum and recognizable as his own in the intuitive choices of hue combinations. Similar to Michelangelo's trusting his sense of material, which guided his vision as a sculptor to uncover a stone's potential into a sculpture, thus Jensen adopts a similar ethos for oil paint as his medium, where colors move like light on water.

The third room reveals perhaps the most direct reference to the man-made through the artist's isolated handprints, appearing to scale in the following works: *BITTER CHANT XI* (2020–21), *BITTER CHANT VII* (2019–20), and *BITTER CHANT VIII* (2019–20). Prehistoric cave paintings remind us that handprint marks are some of the first traces of the urgency of human creation and expression of authorship. With the turbulent movement of bold tangerine, ruby red, royal blue, and green, a molten lava of colors preside over vivacious abstract crevasses, falling, and rising, worthy of the palette observed in Venetian painting. One exception, *ORACLE BONES (FIRE SPIRIT)* (2017–20), has one surprising collage element: a piece of paper with a graphite line drawing, mirroring the work's central amorphous painted shape. The whole painting brings our attention to this strange suspended shape, evoking a sensation of floating, or perhaps stillness, caught in between these two worlds, which is the prevailing premise in many of Jensen's works. We notice cracks

from the paint film breaking on the painting's ground, an indication of the passage of time combined with ghostly traces, like fireworks of pink, blue, green, yellow, and black. Jensen's sensitive understanding of oil paint and its alchemy calls forth an artist he greatly admires, Albert Pinkham Ryder, who experimented tirelessly with the medium, disregarding rules about conservation and innovated painting in a way like no other American artist. The all over gesture in Jensen's work also follows in the heritage of American Abstract Expressionism of the mid-twentieth century, but rather than raw, violent Western strokes, Jensen's work has more affinities with the dual speed and slowness of Eastern painting. It searches for the energy in the cosmos, which passes through the artist like a vessel, rather than expressing an inner struggle of the self.

The last room attains that stillness coming from wisdom and lived experience. *HUSHED MOUNTAIN (FOR RON GORCHOV)* (2020–21) is completely dark, and resonates as two handprints tremble down the canvas, leaving a sticky, oily trace, like snail mucin. The energy is dense, purple, brown, and unnamable, as if searching in the dark. This mysterious black-purple surface is quintessentially Jensen, begun in 1999 after he lived through a difficult period of loss. Though Jensen knows how to create textured surfaces, he is also the master of smooth, supple, and elegant surfaces like *DARK ENIGMA* (2019–20), where the upper half of the painting has been scratched off from its dark violet satin exterior, contrasting the density of the lower half, which remains thick and oily like the shimmer in a pool of gasoline. The triptych *ABSENCE, NO GATE, GATEWAY* (2014–16) has a simplicity to it, light comes through in a rose streak and a subtle gray mark on the large white expanse, like a fog obstructing the view of a horizon. It is still. It is flowing—always in between.

Amanda Millet-Sorsa is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

ABBY LLOYD

BY ANDREW L. SHEA

Goodbye Dolly

Alyssa Davis, New York

December 11, 2021–April 3, 2022

Greenwich Village has gone to the dolls. In an apartment space 11 stories above Cornelia Street and Sixth Avenue is Alyssa Davis Gallery, now host to *Goodbye Dolly*, a sculptural installation piece by the Brooklyn-based artist Abby Lloyd.

The artwork, an oversized white-fabric rag doll, sits in the gallery's wedge-like corner, a unique feature in the building's floor plan created by the acute-angle

intersection of Cornelia and Sixth. With ample space and panoramic views of Lower Manhattan, the room is a nice chunk of real estate, but as a dollhouse apartment it would be tinier than a shoebox.

That's because *Goodbye Dolly* is scaled up to fifty-five times the size of your usual foot-long rag doll, according to the artist. So the doll is not only bigger than a typical doll, it's bigger than you and me. Much bigger. A site specific installation, it was designed for the space and assembled in it. She leans her head against the corner and rests her boneless arms atop the windowsills, her oven-mitt hands gesturing something between a solemn benediction and a frantic salutation. Perhaps due to the sculpture's size, I briefly thought of some of the larger-than-life seated



Abby Lloyd, *Goodbye Dolly*, 2021. Fabric, poly-fil, batting, foam, packing peanuts, plaster, vinyl, spray paint, 98 x 148 x 160 inches. Courtesy Alyssa Davis Gallery.

Buddhist statues I had seen earlier that day at the Met, but instead of sitting some variation of contemplative cross-legged, as those statues usually do, *Goodbye Dolly* splays her legs out—along the walls and into the space, indecent and inviting.

The doll's overall form and construction are derived from Raggedy Ann, a commercialized rag doll and story book character created by the writer Johnny Gruelle in 1915 that has since become an iconic plaything for generations of children. *Goodbye Dolly*, however, looks less like a mechanically reproduced corporate product, and more like a makeshift, home-made object. Perhaps it was stitched and stuffed by a giant mother for her giant daughter.

Two enormous "buttons" serve as eyes. Constructed with plaster and foam, they are differently sized and differently colored (the left, brown; the right, red), contributing to the doll's manic expression and reminding us that this was a penny-pinching operation. These are

attached to the face with black "threads" as thick as a wrist. (Incidentally, those threads form two X's that prompt a fleeting and fairly incongruous association with those of the foreboding KAWS colossi lining Park Avenue.) Three arcs drawn below in black make up a dimpled smile. The doll's hair is also black, and a bit thinned out, like an aging rock star who keeps it long and dies it to the ink of his youth, refusing to go gentle into the good night of infirm irrelevance.

The stripes of her leggings are black and white, playing up the *Addams Family/Beetlejuice* aesthetic, and they are bare to our view, because she has been stripped of her usual frock and apron. (In my experience with dolls as a child, the best fun was had by removing their clothes and seeing them naked.) For this reason, her white chest is also bare, and on the left side here we find a heart symbol. On a traditional Raggedy Ann doll, this would be stitched with the words "I love you" enclosed within, but in Lloyd's

adaptation, the heart is a blank and somewhat somber patch of purple-dyed denim.

The title, *Goodbye Dolly*, is an obvious play on the 1964 Jerry Herman musical *Hello, Dolly!*, whose title song was popularized by Louis Armstrong in a recorded version that year. As it turns out, the current installation is the final show for Alyssa Davis Gallery in this unique space. Yet one wonders: is this doll really telling us *au revoir*, with those outstretched arms that yearn for an embrace? Or, rather, is Lloyd, who has made doll-themed sculptures and installations in the past, herself saying goodbye to the long-cherished subject? That's one secret this creature keeps to herself.

One expects to find something sinister about a doll gone rogue. I never saw the *Chucky* series, but clearly those films and others like it are tapping into a disconcerting mélange of childhood memories, mimetic uncanniness, and our species' natural concern for the wellbeing of

babies, whom dolls typically resemble, and for whom they are designed. But on the whole, *Goodbye Dolly* doesn't give off the creeps. If any element of horror persists, it is akin to that of *Ghostbusters'* Stay Puft Marshmallow Man—dangerous, lovable, and a little pathetic, but above all hilarious. Good Golly, Miss Dolly.

Andrew L. Shea is a painter and a writer based in Providence, Rhode Island.

THE AFRICAN ORIGIN OF CIVILIZATION

BY DAVID CARRIER

Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York
December 21, 2021–ongoing

When you go up the stairs through the main entrance into the Metropolitan Museum of Art, if you turn to the right you immediately enter the Egyptian galleries. And if you head to the left and walk through the Greek galleries, you get to the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, where the Sub-Saharan African art is displayed. But since Egypt is *in* Africa, it's natural to wonder why the displays of African art are divided this way. The answer involves the history of the museum. From the very start, the Met devoted a great deal of attention to Egyptian art. But only recently has the museum also collected what was pejoratively called "primitive" Sub-Saharan art. The announced aim of *The African Origin of Civilization* is to rethink and undo this false distinction.

The Met's Sub-Saharan African Art galleries are currently closed for renovation, so the museum has taken twenty-one works from these diverse African cultures, and displayed them mostly alongside works from the Egyptian collection, but also upstairs among Greek works and in the European painting galleries. While the Met's press release concedes that "there was no contact between their creators," it proposes that "the works share deep and underrecognized histories."

Illustrating the claim of Cheikh Anta Diop's *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* that the ancient Egyptians were Black, and that their depicted figures are therefore Black people, this

exhibition thus makes a political statement, ostensibly restoring Sub-Saharan African art to its true place as the origin point of art history. To name a few of the twenty-one pairings: an Egyptian sculpture, *The King's Acquaintances Memi and Sabu* (ca. 2575–2465 BC) is set alongside *Seated Couple* (18th–early-19th century) by a Dogon artist from Mali; *The Statue of the Official Merti* (ca. 2381–2323 B.C.), Egyptian, is set alongside *Linguist Staff: Ceremonial Stool, Chain, and Swords Motif* (—*kyeame poma*) (ca. 1930) by an Asante artist of Southern Ghana; and *The Goddess Isis and her Son Horus* (332–30 BC) is juxtaposed with *Tyekpa Maternity Figure* (19th–20th century) by a Senufo artist from Côte d'Ivoire. "This exhibition ... reveal[s] unexpected parallels and contrasts," so the wall text says. Indeed, unexpected visual juxtapositions can be suggestive. One might, for example, learn about contrasting aesthetic worldviews by juxtaposing Chinese and European landscapes taken from a period before there was sustained cultural contact between those cultures. But the wall labels here don't develop any such comparisons for the Sub-Saharan art. What you see, rather, is simply how different the works really are.

Diop's basic thesis is that for racist reasons it has generally been denied that the ancient Egyptians were Black. It's no accident that he was writing in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when independence for the former African colonies was a live issue. "The Black man," he writes, "must become able to restore the continuity of his national historic past, to draw from it the moral advantage needed to reconquer his place in the modern world." And what follows from this logic, he argues, is that the ancient Egyptian art, including some works in the Met included in his illustrations, show Black people because they were made by Black artists. But only a few of the Egyptian rulers

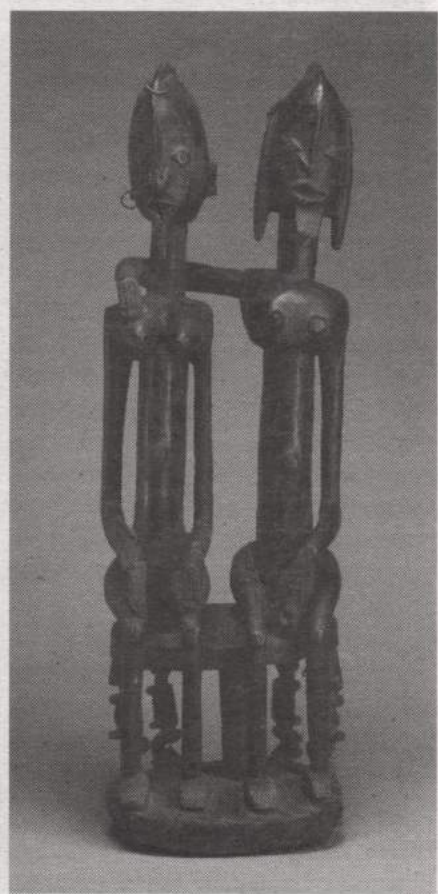
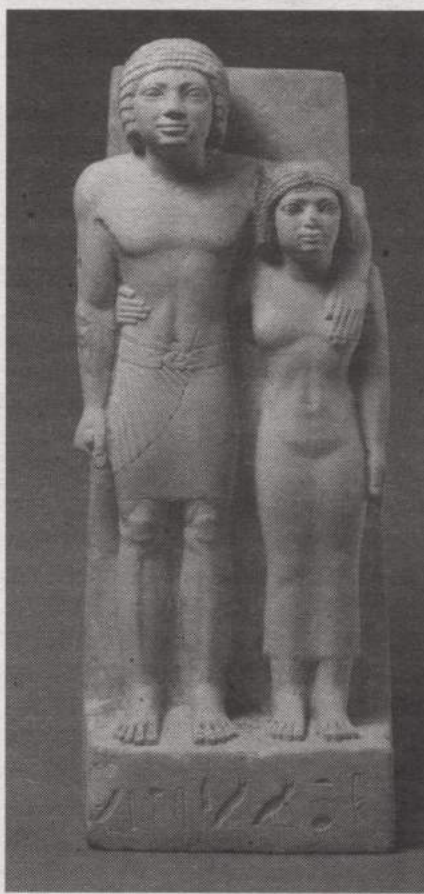
are known to be Black. And surely it is visually obvious that these juxtapositions of ancient Egyptian sculptures with relatively recent, very different looking Sub-Saharan works are problematic evidence about the race of these Egyptians. Suppose, for the purpose of argument, that the ancient Egyptians had all been Black. How then might we understand visual parallels between works that are thousands of years old and African sculptures made in the past couple of centuries? As anyone can see by looking, the would-be parallels presented in this show are pseudo-morphisms, for the works set side by side look very different. There really are no deep histories to be shared here.

But that conclusion is surely unsurprising: How could these works look similar,

when the religious ideals, entire cultural contexts, and uses of the art are so very different? What's depressing, then, is that instead of expanding the scholarship, these great African sculptures of the nineteenth and twentieth century are used to sustain an implausible argument. They are brilliantly original and deserving of close attention, but not for what they tell us about art in Egypt.

David Carrier taught philosophy in Pittsburgh and art history in Cleveland. He is writing a book about Maria Bussmann.

1. Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. M. Cook (Lawrence Hill, 1974) 235.



Left: *The King's Acquaintances Memi and Sabu*, Egypt, Old Kingdom, ca. 2575–2465 B.C. Right: *Figure: Seated Couple*, Mali, Dogon peoples, 18th–early 19th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.