

MAX JANSON'S PAINTINGS TELL STORIES WITHIN THEMSELVES

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The series that **MAX JANSON** works in bear little formal relation to one another but find common ground through their references to art history. His use of color and shape is intricate and eye-catching. Having grown up in New York City and now living on the West Coast, Janson's work blends together elements adopted from both locations. Janson received an MFA from Columbia University and a BFA from The University of California at Los Angeles. He lives and works in Santa Monica, CA.



Tell us a little about yourself. Where are you from originally and when did art first enter your life?

I was born and raised in New York City, in Soho. My father was an abstract painter. The loft I grew up in was Lee Bontecou's studio before my parents moved in. I grew up immersed in a community of art making and also one steeped in art history and particularly of painting. In some ways, abstraction was my first language, it is a natural part of the way I approach and experience the visual world.

It was a really interesting childhood, there were artists all around living illegally in these big loft spaces. The old man that owned the building had a leather goods factory above us, and he made me a little leather jacket because I was obsessed with the "Fonz" from the tv show "Happy Days". We had a very untraditional, bohemian existence.

Which artists most influence your work?

There are a lot of artists that have impacted me and influenced my work in different ways. I would have to say, Morandi, Matisse, Bonnard, Van Gogh, Raoul De Keyser, Wayne Thiebaud, Brice Marden, Lari Pittman, Tip Dunham, Milton Avery, Marie Laurencin, Kees Van Dongen.



Can you tell us about your process? How do you go about creating a new work?

My work always begins with looking and taking in the world around me. My eyes are my first point of departure. Then I draw, constantly. I keep little books with me all the time, and I just work through different things in them, trying not to self-edit. From there, I wind up with a lot of material, new forms and potential directions to begin a painting. I then try and wait and let the painting come to me. I let it form in my mind, until its clear, and then everything else just follows. I find it requires, a lot of focus, patience, and the ability to allow yourself to serve the painting.

The actual painting process is fairly open. I start often with a loose underpainting or drawing, and then I let my hands take over. I give them permission to have fun.



You mentioned the use of nails as a way of stretching canvas. Can you tell us more about this technique?

The materials I choose tie everything together. The hand cut tacks that I use are an old and antiquated way to stretch canvas, but they provide me with a physical link to the history of painting, which is an important subject in my work. I also find their materiality satisfying. By pounding each one in by hand it allows me to begin to connect with the work I am about to start. I really enjoy the banal tasks of preparing the canvas, before the painting is made. It is like a series of warm ups before the main event. Like an athlete, painting requires a lot of physical preparation.

Do you have a philosophy behind how you approach your work?

Painting for me is almost a philosophy. It is a way I can engage with the world in a completely different way. I love how slow it can be, how the more you sit with it the more it gives you. I enjoy looking and relishing the small moments and details in life. The way I work, the approach I have chosen, the materials I use are in a way my personal protest to the current digital modes of engagement.



How does lighting play a role in your work?

How the light plays off of and glides over the brushwork really activates the painting and helps to create a complete experience. It is something I am obsessed with. It is part of the reason why you need to see and experience the paintings in person. To me it is so important that a painting provide an experience that cannot be revealed at all in a picture or on a digital screen.

Why flowers? You've mentioned that each flower has its own language of how it's made. Can you tell us more about these languages?

The flowers I use in my work allow me to deal with different senses of space and paint handling in the same painting. They almost act as individual paintings within the painting, or as portals. Each one has its own logic and qualities that define it, like people in some ways. I like how they all coexist and play off of one another.

I love how you incorporate historical artists such as Franz Kline and Clyfford Still in the vases of your new paintings. Can you talk about what inspired this as well as other elements in the work, such as the use of fire and water?

When I was young my father used to set up still lifes for me to paint on Sundays in his studio. I think I was about 8 or 9 years old, and I was working on this still life, and instead of just painting in the background, I used his gestural abstract painting as the background for the still life. That was a moment of realization for me, and that continues in my work today.



I enjoy using the history of painting as a subject in my work. I try and reference other artists work in unexpected ways, like transforming a Franz Kline painting into a vase, or a Frank Stella painting into a flower. For me it is a way to connect with painting in different ways both physically and mentally. I like to redefine things and create new meanings out of things that are familiar or iconic.

In the new paintings I am working on, I wanted to bring in a different physicality. The Abstract Expressionists were such an important part of my visual childhood (they always had a place at the dinner table), that in a way by referencing artists like Still and Kline, I could intertwine a personal history and historical painting. It also introduces a different sense of drama.

My work is very much influenced by the California landscape. The ocean, the horizon line, the quality of light are all interwoven into my paintings. When I am working on a painting I am always thinking about warm and cool. Making a painting is always about finding a balance, creating a sense of rhythm.

Can you talk about how the different bodies of work (portraits of artists, geometric, triangles and flowers) relate to one another and the connections that happen?

All the subjects in my work ultimately provide me with a vehicle to engage with the language of painting. My subjects often act as a touchstone or way into the painting. I like them to be easily definable – a portrait, a flower, a triangle, – this allows me to get lost in the nuances of the painting.

The different subjects I work with allow me to constantly shift the lens. So how a flower can become an abstraction, a geometric shape can become soft and organic, or a still life can be transformed into a landscape. These relationships interest me. I want to reveal and show the connections you can make, how you can redefine things, shift your perceptions, and ultimately change the way you see the world. That's what I feel a painting can do and has done for me.

The presence of the hand is important in your work. How so?

To me the hand is everything. It is how a painter connects with their subject and reaches out to the people that choose to look at their work. I firmly believe in the power of the handmade, I believe it communicates a vulnerability and a very human experience. When you remove the hand or present a homogenous surface, I feel you are creating a barrier and keeping people at a distance. I want every inch of my paintings to feel touched and cared for. I want to draw people in and allow them to participate.

The varied and nuanced brushwork in my paintings rewards a close look and creates a path for a visual symphony.



A lot of your paintings seem to be referencing history through the subject matter and materials. Can you talk more about this?

In painting everything builds on itself. By that I mean that the things you have seen, the work you have done brings you to where you are now. A painting in a way is a result of a collision of time. So, I find it important to acknowledge that “collision” within my work by acknowledging the artists that came before me, my own previous work and iconography, as well as moving things constantly towards new horizons. Even the physical layers of the paint applied shows the passage of time.

The materials I use tie everything together. I often use paint from rare sources and mediums made from aged oils. All of these things bring physical qualities that I desire, and I take a certain amount of satisfaction in finding new meaning in these old and antiquated materials.



What's next for you? Any shows you have coming up?

I am doing a project and a show in Mexico City with [AFTER & AGAIN](#) and I will be doing a group show in Switzerland at the [MARC JANCOU CHALET](#).



At the end of every interview, we like to ask the artist to recommend a friend whose work you love for us to interview next. Who would you suggest?

CHRISTINA FORRER. I love her work, she's amazing.