

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Enamored Magicians: The Hermetic World of Jess and Robert Duncan

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by Christopher Lyon

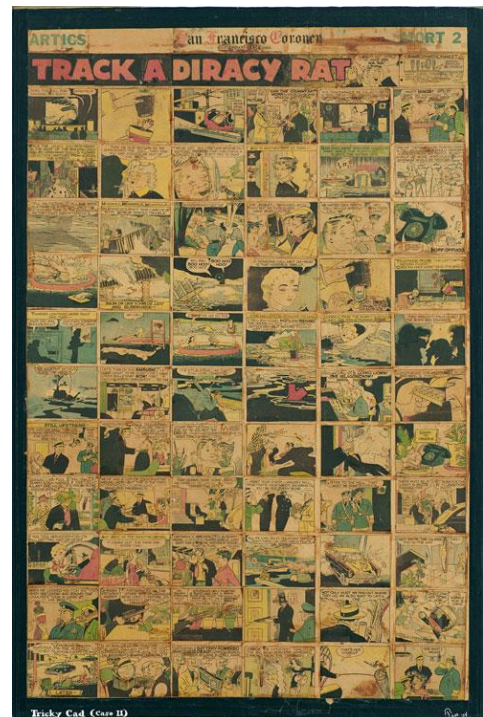
In 1952, intrepid detective Tricky Cad climbed (anagrammatically) out of the letters Dick Tracy to inhabit frames of Chester Gould's popular comic strip. The artist Jess, with an unerring ear for uncanny word juxtapositions, scrambled the existing dialogues (with what he called his "maxmister") and deftly wielded his X-Acto knife to create subtly Surreal visual interventions. His aim, he said, was to demonstrate "a hermetic critique self-contained in popular art" — in other words, to read the detritus of quotidian life as if it were allegory.

Language plays many roles in Jess's art, from unrestrained puns (the lowest form of humor, said my father) to delightfully inventive rearrangement of found texts. His reworkings of Dick Tracy comic strips are the best known of these. "Tricky Cad (case II)" (1954), a splendid early example recently rediscovered, is now on view at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, in a show titled *Jess: Looking Past Seeing Through*. The other five surviving examples from the full run of eight Tricky Cad cases, together with a generous selection of the many small collages created by Jess, are reproduced in *Jess: O! Tricky Cad & Other Jessoterica* (Siglio Press, 2012), edited and introduced by Michael Duncan.

With a headline reading "TRACK A DIRACY RAT" under the banner *San Francisco Coroner* for Septunday Duly 35, 1954, the recently found collage contains 66 Dick Tracy cartoon frames assembled in a 2x3-foot grid. The rearranged dialogue in some cases rises to the level of Ashbery-like poetry:

The phone's threaded with
rain! But no exposures
have been fugitive.

The final frame has Tricky saying to a dumbstruck cop — significantly — "See what I mean?"



Tricky Cad (case II), 1954, paste-up, 36 x 24 inches

What does he mean? Investigate *An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle*, at NYU's Grey Art Gallery until March 29. The show presents a slice of the rich Northern California art world of the postwar years: paintings, sculptures, and ephemera — some works challenging in their density of allusion and conceptual sophistication, others cheerfully slapdash or provincially sincere — by artists and poets captured in the gravitational field emanating from the household of Jess and the poet Robert Duncan. Much of what is here is not “gallery art,” in a commercial sense, but art created by and for a small community of friends, colleagues, and lovers, rooted in a specific place and cultural moment.

A modest but choice selection of Jess's work provides the show's focus. The reclusive San Francisco artist became best known for his “paste-ups” — intricate, sometimes very large collages — and his *Translations* paintings, made between 1959 and 1972, which are based on found images including snapshots, Egyptian wall paintings, and illustrations whose sources range from children's books to a 19th-century volume of *Scientific American*. He met Duncan in 1950, and they became lovers and life partners. They made art and poetry together, sometimes collaborating directly but always responding in their work to each other, until Duncan's death in 1988 (Jess died in 2004).

The Grey's ambitious survey, which originated at Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum and was organized by independent curators Michael Duncan (no relation to Robert) and Christopher Wagstaff, who is co-trustee of the Jess Collins Trust, which administers the estates of Duncan and Jess. The challenge of a show that brings together such strong, distinctive poetic and artistic voices, especially two so intimately intertwined, intellectually and romantically, is to reveal how the work of each informed the other — formally as well as in content. Duncan, a not-untalented amateur artist, is represented by colorful crayon-drawn posters and drawings, but not, unfortunately, by key passages from his poetry that could have helped viewers to understand the intricate dance of Duncan and Jess's creative thought.

We are used to thinking that figurative art is readily readable — surrealism's strategy is precisely to play on that expectation with images whose uncanny or dreamlike appearance thwarts legibility — but Jess's *Translations* actually are hermetic, in the sense that their seemingly banal imagery obscures entirely hidden realms of meaning — obscures literally, in fact, as Jess habitually inscribed revealing texts on the backs of his canvases.

The title of *An Opening of the Field*, and of the nicely produced book that accompanies the show, is taken from Duncan's breakthrough volume of poetry, *The Opening of the Field* (1960). Derived from an influential essay by poet Charles Olson, the concept of an open field (to oversimplify shamelessly) involves the use of the page or canvas as a “field” on which to project language or images with which the reader may imaginatively engage. It creates the *possibility* of an imaginative response; it is “projective,” or future-oriented. A friend at the show's opening remarked that the Bay Area art scene of the 1950s and '60s, as represented by works in this show, was an age of belief in the power of art and poetry to effect personal transformation. She meant this as a contrast to the facile ironies of much recent art.

But in the case of Jess and Duncan, something more interesting is at work, a sustained faith in *make-believe* — that one can simultaneously be oneself and be many selves, past and future; that one can embrace the everyday and simultaneously experience in it an intensified poetic reality. Embedded in art or poetry, make-believe expresses a faith that someone in an unknowable future will engage with one's work and re-experience that intensification of the moment — this is existentialism recast as myth.

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

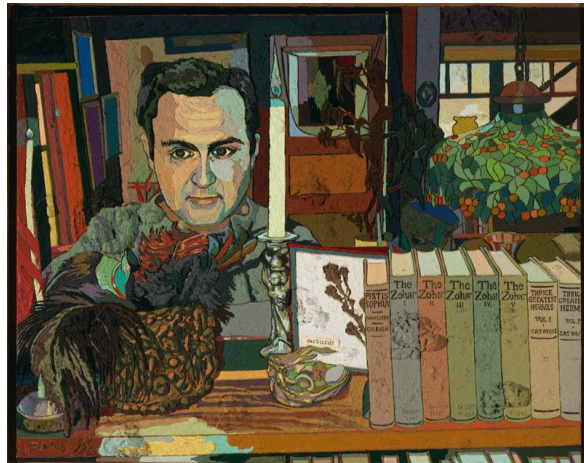
ESTABLISHED 1950

To that end, we see in the two shows repeated allusions to the elusiveness of identity and the imaginative release made possible by assuming personae. The signature painting of the Grey Gallery show is Jess's 1965 "The Enamord Mage: Translation #6," a heavily impastoed portrait of Duncan, based on a photo taken some years earlier at their Stinson Beach cottage, which shows him seated at a table, gazing inwardly with hypnotic intensity, separated by a lit candle from a prominent row of occult books, including five volumes of the Soncino Press edition of the Zohar (1931–34) and G. R. S. Mead's *Thrice Greatest Hermes* (1906). One simply could "read" these closed books as attributes of the learned poet, but the prominent foregrounding of the books suggests that they represent in some sense a parallel world, perhaps the one being imagined by Duncan the learned mage (magician, from the Latin *magus*).

The work's title, as Wagstaff explains, is taken from Duncan's "The Ballad of the Enamord Mage," from the 1960 collection:

*I, late at night, facing the page
writing my fancies in a literal age*

How all beings into all beings pass,
How the great Beasts eat the human Grass,
And the Faces of Men in the Word's Glass
Are faces of Apes, Birds, Diamonds,
Worlds and insubstantial Shapes
Conjured out of the Dust—Alas!
These things I know.
Worlds out of Worlds in Magic grow.



The Enamord Mage Translation; Translation #6,
1965. oil on canvas over wood. 24 ½ x 30 inches

This lyric (in which Bob Dylan and Shakespeare seem to rub shoulders) captures the mutability of self and "reality" expressed in Duncan's poems and Jess's art — and reminds us, perhaps, that the Zohar is one of the great examples of pseudepigraphy — writings that claim authorship by someone, often in the distant past, other than the actual author. (Probably written by a 13th-century Spanish Jew, Moses de Leon, the Zohar is presented as the work of Shimon bar Yochai, a second-century rabbi inspired to write it by the Prophet Elijah while hiding from Roman persecution in a cave for thirteen years.)

To those who know Jess mainly as a masterful maker of the large "paste-ups," "The Enamord Mage" and other *Translations* paintings will be a revelation. Together, the thirty-two canvases in the series, many of them executed in distinct areas of unmodulated color that lends them a paint-by-number appearance, constitute a kind of oblique biography, or multifaceted reflection of Jess's mind and personality. The very first, "Ex. 1—Laying a Standard, Translation #1" (1959) leads off the show at Tibor de Nagy. Recalling Jess's training as a chemist, the painting is based on a technical illustration, apparently of a device for preparing photographic plates, evidence of Jess's fascination with modes of reproduction. (One of only two Translations in New York museums, MoMA's beautiful "Ex. 4-Trinity's Trine" [1964], reproduces an illustration of 19th-century laboratory apparatus.)

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

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Still thicker, rendered in dense, puttylike paint, is “Montana Xibalba: Translation #2” (1963), in the Grey Gallery show. Jess was a tireless worker, with tremendous facility, and, like some similarly afflicted artists, sought ways to slow himself down. Hence the multilayered paint surfaces of this and some other Translations. Here he has chosen an obscure, presumably black-and-white, yearbook image of college athletes playing soccer and rendered it in straight-from-the-tube oil colors that turn the players into rubbery bas-relief. The title’s allusion is to the Popul Vuh, a sacred Mayan text in which the gods play ball to determine the planets’ movements and fates, as Michael Duncan explains, in the handsome publication accompanying the Grey show.

Beautiful boys as gods is a running theme in both shows, which feature frankly sexual works that presumably could be enjoyed only at home at the time they were made. (Jess broke with his family and dropped his surname, when they could not accept his relationship with Duncan.) After Jess found his way out of Abstract Expressionism (some pretty convincing canvases of 1951 and 1952 are shown at Tibor de Nagy), he developed and maintained an array of styles, including several near-life-size self-portraits, “A Thin Veneer of Civility (Self-Portrait)” (1954), at the Grey, in which he is naked and teasing a cat (a stand-in for Duncan); and a less restrained “Hyakinthos-Apollon” (1962) at Tibor de Nagy, an erotic reverie of a priapic Apollo wearing Jess’s heavy eyebrows who pulls down the head of a pubescent Hyacinth toward the erect shaft being stroked by the youth. Spilled wine nourishes the roots of a hyacinth at the bottom of the canvas, alluding to Apollo’s transformation of his lover into the eponymous flower. One of the earliest paste-ups in the Grey show, “Untitled (Eros)” (c. 1956), represents a kind of delirium of body builders, sailors, bullfighters, and even erotic statuary.

Perhaps the most affecting of Jess’s collages on view at Tibor de Nagy are the *Emblems for Robert Duncan* (1989), small, exquisite tributes made after the death of his great friend. The seven little tondos take his partner from birth to heavenly rest, borne up by a beefcake angel, and include one in which the poet is at the center of a pantheon that includes Walt Whitman, Baudelaire, Cocteau, and James Joyce.

The Grey show has three large and several medium-size paste-ups, which challenge the viewer by inviting seemingly contradictory responses of viewing and reading: appreciating the bravura overall composition as a gestalt, and simultaneously absorbing text and individual images’ significance in detail. The most impressive of these are the 1962 “The Chariot: Tarot VII,” part of a projected but never completed series of paste-ups representing the major arcana; and “The Napoleonic Geometry of Art—Given: The Pentagon in the Square; Demonstrate: The Hyperbolic Swastika” (1968), an angry satire aimed at the Vietnam War and playing on two meanings of “demonstrate,” the scientific and the protest ones. Incised on the Plexiglas covering are dark lines transforming the Pentagon into a 5-winged swastika.

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

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This work escapes (but doesn't leave behind) Jess's solipsistic eroticism and occultism, which comes to seem a burden on his work as a whole. It reminds us of the vitality inherent in an outwardly focused art. It seems to be a quality of provincial art (and art of the insane, not to cast aspersions on provincials) that the work is very *finished*, every square inch accounted for, and often with an attention to detail that crosses the border into obsession. After the 1950s, when he was still finding his way, this airlessness is seen in much of Jess's art.

The star painting of the Tibor de Nagy show, for me, is the 1954 "The Door of Manycolord Glass Opend Imaginary Portrait #1, Robert Duncan," a near-life-size image of the poet, resplendent in a crimson and orange vest, an outsized hand holding a violet book at his hip (never has a book looked so sexy). The head is fixing us with his gaze and yet remains unresolved and brushy, as if the body and the writer's vocation were solid but the poet's creative thought still is coming into focus. A cat below, Duncan's "familiar," we understand, is on its hind legs, front paws on the rung of a chair, all anticipation.

*The Door of Manycolord Glass Opend,
Imaginary Portrait #1, Robert Duncan,
1954, oil on canvas, 70 x 33 ½ inches*