

ARTFORUM

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Jess

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

In 1974, the artist Jess (1923–2004) had an exhibition of oil paintings at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated by the institution’s legendary Kynaston McShine. The imagery and texts for the works were derived from a seemingly random variety of sources—including popular magazines, snapshots, and trading cards, along with quotations from Lewis Carroll, Thomas Hardy, Wassily Kandinsky, and Gertrude Stein, among many others. Accentuating the personal, evocative, and fantastical character of each piece, the poet Robert Duncan, Jess’s lifelong lover, emphasized that they were “related to the field of dream and magic.” Of the show, McShine wrote, “Jess’s paintings differ from most recent figurative work not only because of their literary connotations but also because their surfaces are so thickly impastoed with oil paints that the actual physicality of the paintings creates its own dialogue with the images.” This show featured thirteen early paintings and drawings, exploring what the artist called “the total network of color.” This chromatic system was clearly rooted in the artist’s feelings and fantasies, his myth of himself—or, more specifically, in that kaleidoscopic terrain known as the psyche.

Indeed, the emotions are strong, as the canvas *A Fairy Tale Landscape*, 1951—an atmospheric lyrical abstraction of pinks, golds, lambent greens, and autumnal reds—indicates. Jess painted the Böcklinesque *Mary Butts Landscape*, 1953, after reading the titular writer’s 1928 novel, *Armed with Madness*, a vaguely Arthurian horror story that has been frequently described as her version of T. S. Eliot’s 1922 poem “The Waste Land.” According to a 2004 article about Jess for this magazine, critic Michael Auping said that “[Butts] wrote stories that interwove ancient myth and ritual with a deeply felt spirituality that invariably verged on the surreal and supernatural.” She was apparently an inspiration of sorts—dare one say an ancestral muse?—and perhaps emblematic of Jess’s chthonic, more female side.

Stillbourne, ca. 1951, is a Cimmerian matrix of rippling, membranous forms in brown, black, white, and a particularly dour emerald. The painting, like the violent abstraction *Sea Cove*, 1952, is a darkly metaphysical work of what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called “creative flux”—that is, elemental and inescapable process. A trio of wax-crayon-on-paper drawings, *Mystic Writing VII, XI, and XII*, all 1955, are odd collisions of inexplicable sigils, decorative patterning, and winsome Matissean forms. Their sign language seems indebted to Paul Klee, or even to Aleister Crowley, revealing Jess’s catholic tastes and eccentric approach to picture making.

Although Jess’s art appears indebted to pataphysics—an “imaginary science” of “games governing the special occurrence of a sporadic accident,” as poet Christian Bök has written—the artist didn’t play around. He was a highly educated person, a sophisticated intellectual with a wide-ranging and virtually encyclopedic knowledge of culture, whether of the high avant-garde or the most guttural strains of pop. And he is implicitly the protagonist of the oil painting *Hero Reenters the Cave*, 1950. But is this lugubrious space Plato’s dark cave of ignorance? Jess had seen the intellectual light, obviously, but was he trapped in the emotional dark at the time of this work’s making? Sometimes the life of the mind prevents one from searching deep within the soul.

The painting *A Wish in the Form of a Landscape*, 1954, called to mind Richard Dadd’s canvas *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke*, 1855–64, a mad masterpiece of Victorian anxiety and English folklore that Dadd made while incarcerated in a criminal mental asylum after murdering his father. Jess didn’t murder his father, but he severed ties with his kin—Duncan became Jess’s family. And as the artist acknowledged, he owed much of his creativity to Duncan’s poetry. The pair were myth-obsessed and more than a little mad themselves. But this marvelous insanity, steeped in love, is what makes Jess’s art so great.

— Donald Kuspit