

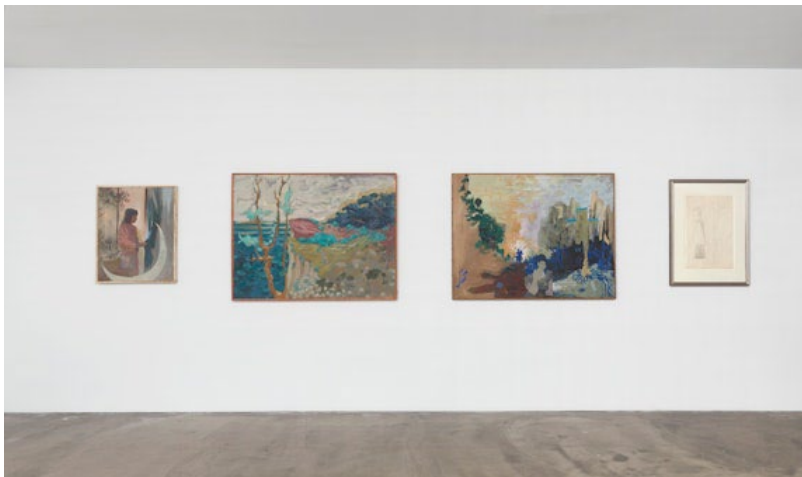
TIBOR DE NAGY

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BROOKLYN RAIL

Jess: *Piling Up The Rectangles*

By Patrick Hill



Installation view: *Jess: Piling Up the Rectangles*, Tibor de Nagy, New York, 2024. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy.

Tibor de Nagy

Piling Up The Rectangles

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New York

For those of us with a soft spot for practical effects movies and guitar solos, the confluence of technique & material so unexpectedly encountered as to render *novelty* or *discourse* irrelevant to the virtuosity before you, Tibor de Nagy's latest Jess (1923—2004) retrospective, *Piling Up The Rectangles*, is a total thrill. Their seventh solo showing of the Beat-era artist after nearly ten years and their first to confidently combine Collins's painstakingly-crafted collages and paste-

ups with his oracularly touched oil paintings, it showcases a breadth of techniques and densities that aren't just aesthetically *bonkers* but genuinely get at why we're so enraptured by art in the first place.

A good portion of the exhibition is devoted to Jess's "Translations," a series which tiptoes carefully between artifact and art-piece. Between 1959 and 1976, Jess made exacting reproductions of pieces from the personal archive he shared with his longtime partner Robert Duncan—Jess called it their "constellation"—in oil. Thirty-two exist, mostly held in the collections of the major New York museums, but we're lucky enough with this exhibition to properly meet three. *Mort and Marge: Translation #26* (1971), an illustrated Lewis Carroll poem, seems like it's been ripped from a nineteenth century funny page, but across its panels Jess has gradually soaked the pitiful Mort in sepia and shadow, "Shall Man Be Man?" laced in silver, the sun over the sea as he weeps into the sand.



Jess (Collins), *Piling Up The Rectangles: Translation #27*, 1975. Oil on canvas board 19 11/16 x 19 11/16 inches. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy.

In *Piling Up The Rectangles: Translation #27* (1975) a mosaic of smooth square tiles triangulate an off-center point between thirds of the canvas while colorful geodes and roughly hewn etchings surround its perimeter. If you saw it in a history museum you might think it was ripped directly from a wall. Except those aren't tiles, and those aren't geodes: it's oil paint, layered thickly and glimmering in the light. Similarly, *Crossing and Recrossing The Heart: Translation #28* (1975) appears to be a carefully restored temple painting with an Aztec man carrying a painted wooden cross in the shadows of a dune-filled landscape while a tailed Huītzilōpōchtli—the Aztec sun God—looks on from above. Taken together, the "Translations" seem like fragments of an alternate humanity as uncovered by an extraterrestrial archaeologist.

Game's Up (1981) and *Whatever!* (1992), the blockbuster "puzzle collages" in this exhibition, are surprisingly large canvases covered edge-to-edge with scavenged and re-printed puzzle

pieces. The former is a technicolor-pastoral daydream, with searching hounds prancing through an alpine field as a boy plays checkers alone in the corner. The latter is *not that*: a swirling mauve gives way to desert plateaus as chromed Lynchian owls stare aside the viewer, fish swim in the air, a frame-within-a-frame bursts with wildflowers and fireworks. (It's important to note that in Jess's pre-Beat Army scientist years, he played a small role in the Manhattan Project: ergo, this was someone who uniquely understood the apocalyptic power of a colossal explosion.) Both are cinematic and overpowering, and that's before you notice their impressive physicality, whether it be the canvas-on-canvas depth of *Game's Up* or the reptilian silhouette-pieces that climb desperately up the face of *Whatever!*. You can see these from the gallery's windows facing Rivington Street, and I'd start looking from outside in before giving them a slow zoom.



Jess (Collins), *Whatever!*, 1992. Puzzle collage, 38 x 37 inches. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy.

Additionally, the exhibition includes early work that is no less strange than the rest though it leans more on traditional techniques. In *Moonset at Sunrise* (1964) a woman is drawing curtains on the crescent moon, itself in front of native Bay Area trees, while the larger *A Wish in the Form of a Landscape* and *Don Quixote's Dream of the Fair Dulcinea* (both 1954) offer swirling scenes of landscapes and riders in cloudy tones. The graphite-on-paper *Study for Narkissos II* (no date) invites more fantastic trouble, its self-enraptured protagonist shadowed by a lion in king's garb. A smaller painting—*Petals of Paint* (1964)—is a bouquet that combines the neo-terrestrial roughness of the "Translations" with so traditionally *pretty* a subject as to be disarmingly not.

That was Jess's mastery: transmogrifying a studied admiration for the capital-P "Past"—and a scientist's "take it apart" understanding of that Past's techniques, icons, and forms—with the

primal, the spiritual, the deeply gut-felt. In other words: Jess was a beatnik. In that way he collected (poets would say “borrowed”) text and image from across the temporal plain, welding the cosmic aspirations of myth and fantasy with their ultimately mortal origin. Like Allen Ginsberg’s “Celestial Homework” reading list for students at Naropa, which paired a thorough summation of the (male) Beats with Melville and Blake, or the Grateful Dead’s psychedelic-tone-poem “China Cat Sunflower” transitioning into the near-100 year old blues riff “I Know You Rider,” these works are propelled by both a reverence for the storytelling of yore and a searching for the new. They’re highly rewarding.