SOME THINGS GOING ON IN JAN FRANK’S PAINTINGS

Adrian Kohn
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Hell, since my text’s got to fit on seven pages, I’ll need to race through only a few of upwards of three hundred paintings by JF—that many good ones anyway, he cracks—and I’ll have to shrug off altogether a thousand drawings, a number of sculptures and prints, even several performances, videos, and video-installations (some tapes were stolen, others JF’s planning to have fixed to see what’s on them). Of course and as usual, no one’s bothered to write down this history. Well, here goes, and it won’t be the most elegant beginning, though if you’ll pardon me, I believe I can say one thing’s for sure: The paintings are pretty fucking complicated. For starters, JF makes marks with a really long-handed brush. Just how long? It depends who you ask. He puts it at around five feet, give or take, but I think that’s only how far it is from where he grabs on out to the tip. End to end, the whole device could easily be seven, maybe eight feet. And watching him lay stroke after stroke with it is a sight to behold, let me tell you. With the rod all astrain and aguiver, he’ll shakily trace lines from the contours of some woman in the studio (unclothed, because why not) and finish up by depositing said lines interruptedly here and there all over the canvas/linen/plywood/cardboard support.
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Or, he’ll swipe lines from earlier paintings like Pollock’s, de Kooning’s, Guston’s, Warhol’s, his own (and the marks of his own come from, again, either the model lying about, or from prior works, P’s, dK’s, G’s, W’s, or his own . . .)—you can see how there’s a logico-mathematical recursiveness at play in JF’s art. Take Spike’s Heel of 1994 (page 22). It’s fairly Guston-y. The hairy-whisker black dabs everywhere, in the top half the flattened-out curves like in G’s big bulb heads, and in the lower left, I mean, try and tell me it’s not a cut-off nutsack that looks close to how G handles Nixon’s cheeks in San Clemente. The stubbled and saggy skin shows up again in Wild About Harry of 1996 and in Skip Away of 1998—by which time the scrotal/buccal goings-on (as in Poor Richard) appear to lie ‘behind’ or ‘within’ or ‘deeper than’ the actual linen surface which is its frontal plane (page 34). Then, however, your eyes meet with snippets of text hand-scrawled with a black sharpie marker, and you begin to read. Those words, like these words, these right here I mean, don’t look spatial or pictorial because you don’t view them as you would either (a) the 3D world, or (b) a 2D image of the 3D world—a photograph, a painting. And this shift from the pictorial illusion of deep
Or, he’ll swipe lines from earlier paintings like Pollock’s, de Kooning’s, Guston’s, Warhol’s, his own (and the marks of his own come from, again, either the model lying about, or from prior works, P’s, dK’s, G’s, W’s, or his own . . .)—you can see how there’s a logico-mathematical recursiveness at play in JF’s art. Take *Spike’s Heel* of 1994 (page 22). It’s fairly Guston-y. The hair-whisker black dabs everywhere, in the top half the flattened-out curves like in G’s big bulb heads, and in the lower left, I mean, try and tell me it’s not a cut-off nutsack that looks close to how G handles Nixon’s cheeks in San Clemente. The stubbled and saggy skin shows up again in *Wild About Harry* of 1996 and in *Skip Away* of 1998—by which time the scrotal/buccal goings-on are a mix of (a) Guston, (b) JF himself, and (c) compounded iterations of JF’s copying of JF’s copying of Guston (pages 25, 28). All of this amounts to a sort of chronologico-pictorial ‘layering,’ a nifty metaphor and a grand concept for the works, behind which is the simple fact that you can always pick out several distinct layers of color on a given support. Case in point: For around five years JF’s been silkscreening imagery onto stretched linen, after painting it some, and before painting it some more. So the red eyeglasses in *Wise Character*? It’s red oil paint, brushed on top of . . . a black screenprint of . . . his own brushed reuse (as in Dr. K), of . . . Guston’s cartoony version (as in Poor Richard), of . . . the clunky eyewear still sported by Kissinger today, and a perfect part-for-whole metonym of the man. Further, last year and this, JF’s been putting words into the works. You start off understand- ing *Hurricane Cat* as an image full of pictorial space insofar as the shapes (figures, even) appear to lie (stand) ‘behind’ or ‘within’ or ‘deeper than’ the actual linen surface which is its frontal plane (page 34). Then, however, your eyes meet with snippets of text hand-scrawled with a black sharpie marker, and you begin to read. Those words, like these words, these right here I mean, don’t look spatial or picto- rial because you don’t view them as you would either (a) the 3D world, or (b) a 2D image of the 3D world—a pho- tograph, a painting. And this shift from the pictorial illusion of deep
space ‘in’ the imagery to the non-pictorial and unillusionistic spacelessness of the text on the surface has the effect of wrenching back and fore the basic nature or structure or something of the work. What’s more, there’s a range of readability to the words. In Hurrican Cat, ‘it’s too good to be yours’ in the lower center, ‘king master pricek !!!’ a few inches above (at least I think that’s it), and, just up and left of this, _______. (. . . hmm, I’m not able to make it out after all). And in Sizzlin’ Joe, about halfway down the right side, ‘you can’t f II II’ (page 37). What’s the last word? If you can read the phrase, it’s because the bending and halting lines turn into letters, and letters turn into words, and words are things you read. But if you can’t, the lines are lines, nothing more. That might count as an odd little bit of philosophy: You change the marks into something very different from what they truly are when you understand them to be letters. Now in Module, one of the latest paintings from Jan. of this year 2017, you’ll run across office-supply-closet pink hi-liter, of all things. These marks come off as being real casual, behind-the-scenes, of course unashamedly so, as if they sketched out future moves for the brush—except the work’s then declared done, thankfully safeguarding its energetic unfinishedness from the well-inten-
tioned urge to completion that fubars most such efforts. For me, the marks resemble nonverbal notes-to-self on a photographic contact sheet, maybe, or a curatorial condition report mapping out the dings and scrapes on an incoming/outgoing art object. Where do those associations lead? What meaning do they unlock? No place and none, if you ask me. Instead, we’ll have to rely a great deal on what the pink highlighter does visually, and visually it does a lot. Each touch of pink is (a) itself, in other words, the color pink in whichever shape it winds up being, (b) an attention-grabber directing the eyes to other marks/lines/shapes/areas/colors that it encircles or sits atop or lies next to, and (c) a bulls-eye to shoot for, or a mooring to fasten onto, amid the eyes’ so-called saccade—when they zip and zoom between fixed points in your field of view, gulping in information on behalf of the brain as it sets about recognizing forms, figuring out spatial positions and relationships, reading words, on and on . . . . I’m noticing how I’m thin far gone, and I’ve managed to mention only seven of JF’s works in the show. There are another five. Together that makes twelve, and looking at a dozen paintings by Jan Frank—never mind three hundred—will take you some time. Best give it.
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This was Franz Kline’s favorite joke, you know. So this joke’s from the Fifties. Love this joke. And uh so he ah said, Two guys were going to go gold-digging in Alaska. And so they get to the outpost, and they get all their supplies and everything, you know. And and they’re best of friends, right. They’re gonna become millionaires, and find their gold. And so ah, so right before they’re ready to leave, the shopkeeper says ah, ‘Well do you want one of these things? You might want to take one.’ And what it was was a board with a hole in it and like a little fur around it, so it was like, you know, a fucking-board. And the one guy just laughs it off, you know, ‘Forget about it!’ you know. And the other guy says, ‘Ah, well, I’ll take one.’ So he takes it, you know. And they go off, you know. They’re gone for six months.

So after six months, it’s over, and the guy comes down. So ah the shopkeeper comes out, shopkeeper comes out, and he sees only one guy coming, you know, coming towards him. He goes, ‘What happened to your friend?’ He says, ‘Well, he fucked my fucking-board so I shot him.’

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‘The Rabbit Hole Interviews Jan Frank,’ online video, undated
Spike's Heel, 1994. Alkyd, oil, ink on plywood. 96 × 96 in (243.8 × 243.8 cm)
Wild About Harry, 1996. Alkyd, oil, ink on plywood. 96 × 72 in (243.8 × 182.9 cm)
Skip Away, 1998. Alkyd, oil, ink on plywood. 96 × 144 in (243.8 × 365.8 cm)
*Wise Character*, 2015. Alkyd, oil, ink with silkscreen on linen. 96 × 72 in (243.8 × 182.9 cm)
Hurricane Cat, 2016. Alkyd, oil, ink with silkscreen on linen. 96 x 72 in (243.8 x 182.9 cm)
Sizzlin' Joe, 2016-17. Oil with silkscreen on linen. 96 x 72 in (243.8 x 182.9 cm)
Modus. 2017. Alkyd, oil, ink with silkscreen on linen. 108 × 72 in (274.3 × 182.9 cm)