



# Fundamental*(ist)*

*New Paintings by*  
DENNIS MICHAEL JONES

**I paint words –**  
the skepticism, propaganda, delusions, absurdity,  
ambivalence and discontent  
**– all accumulating...**

# Fundamental(*ist*)

*New Paintings by* DENNIS MICHAEL JONES

Curated by Dick Goody

**Oakland University Art Gallery**

November 17 – December 23, 2007

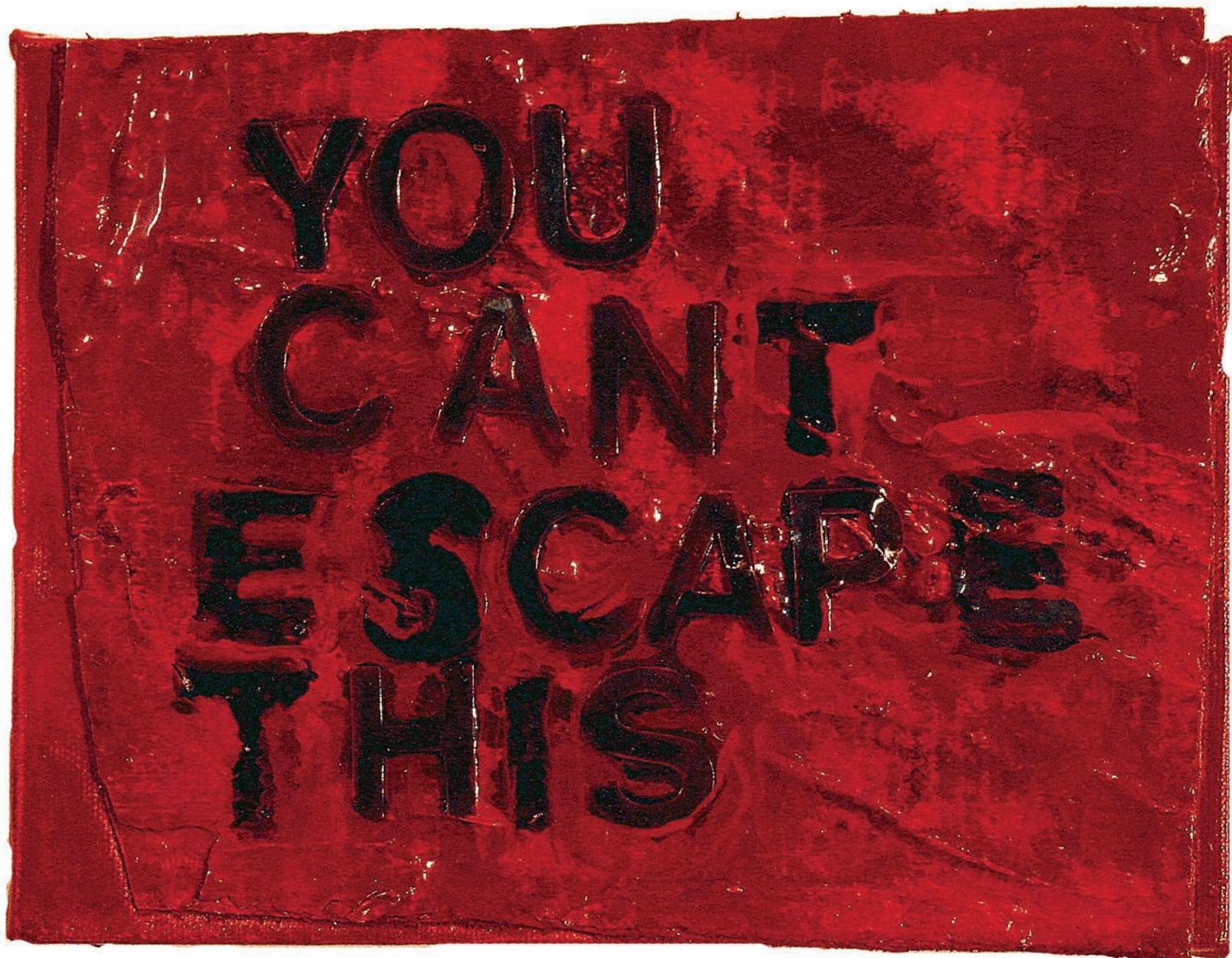


(2)

*paradise*, 2007, 78" x 72" x 2", oil and spray enamel on two canvas panels

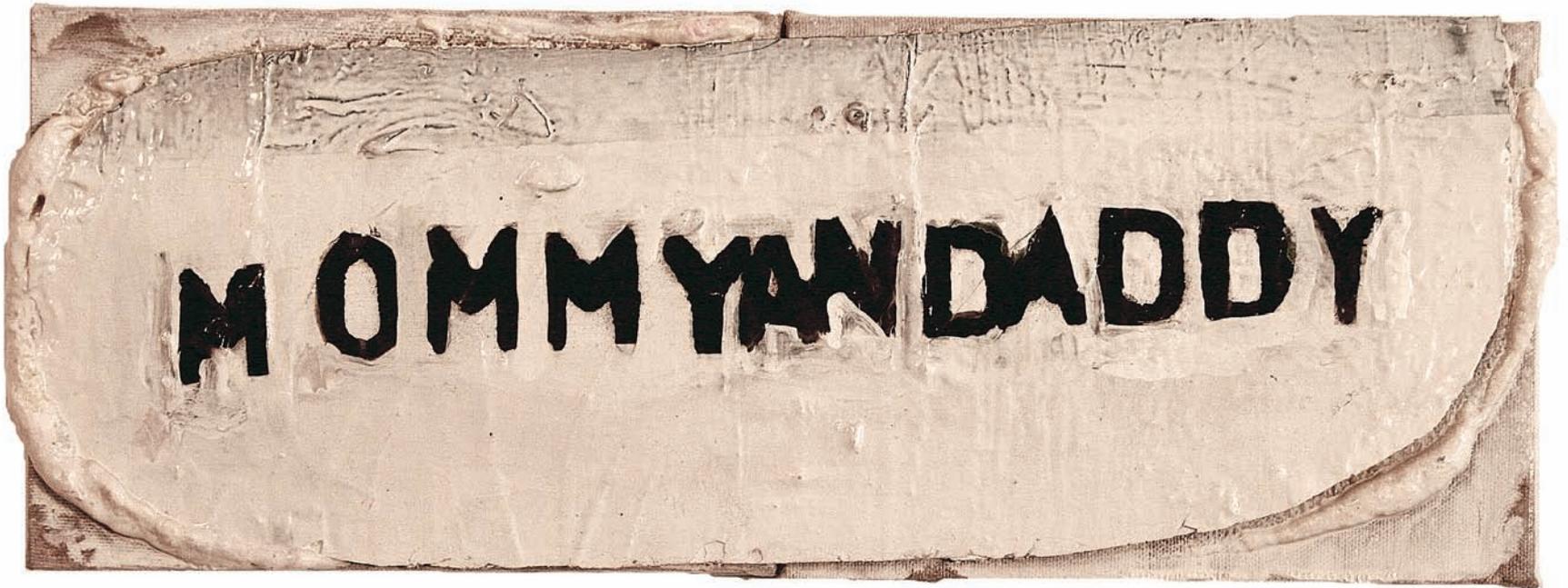


*it's a serious business*, 2007, 18"x19"x2", oil and spray enamel on tape, wire and discarded wood panel



(4)

*you can't escape this*, 2007, 8"x6"x1", oil and spray enamel on discarded canvas mounted to readymade canvas panel



*mommyandaddy*, 2007, 16"x6"x1", oil and spray enamel on discarded canvas, foam adhesive, on two readymade canvas panels



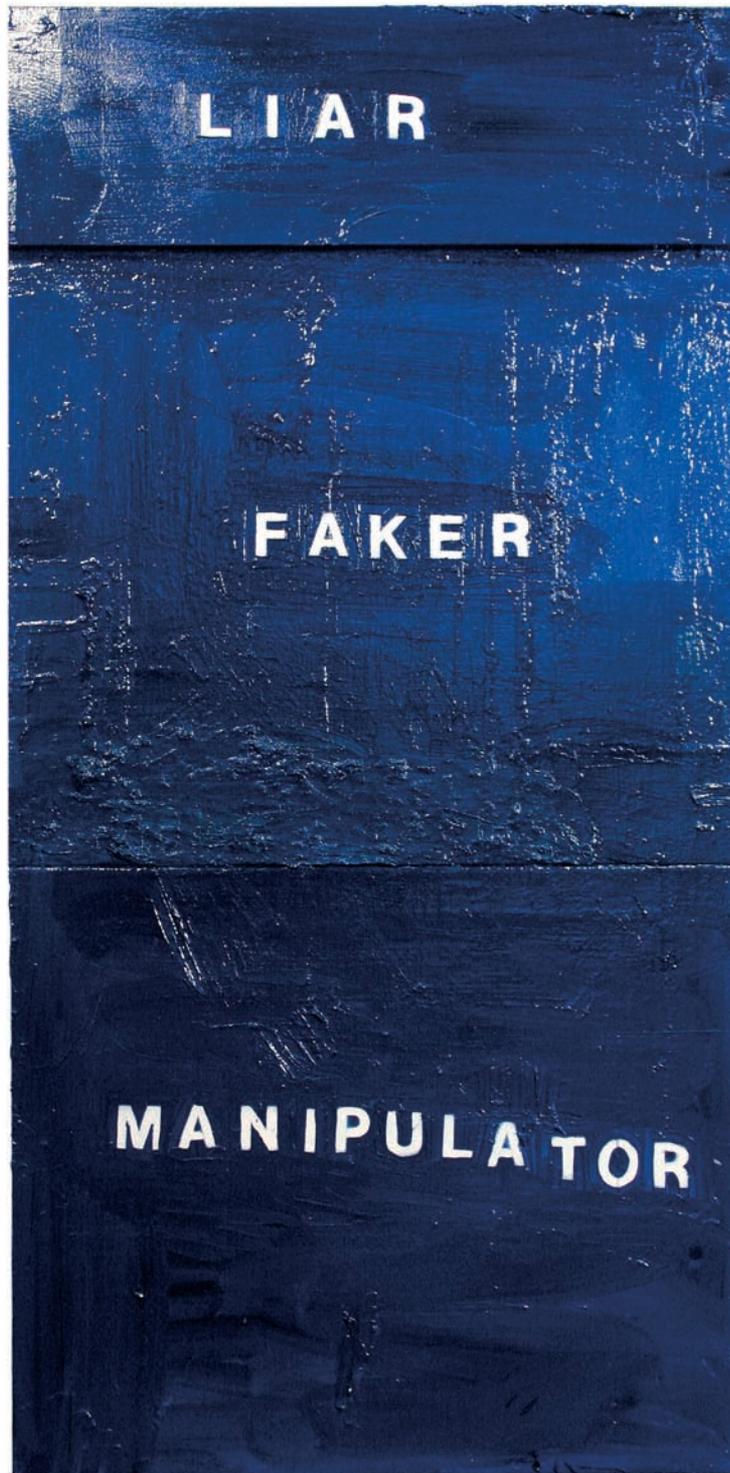
*flight uniform, 2007*

30" x 65" x 1"

oil and spray enamel on discarded  
clothing and hanger wire



wings, 2007, 180"x120"x2", oil and spray enamel on two 24"x96" canvas panels, joined with canvas discards

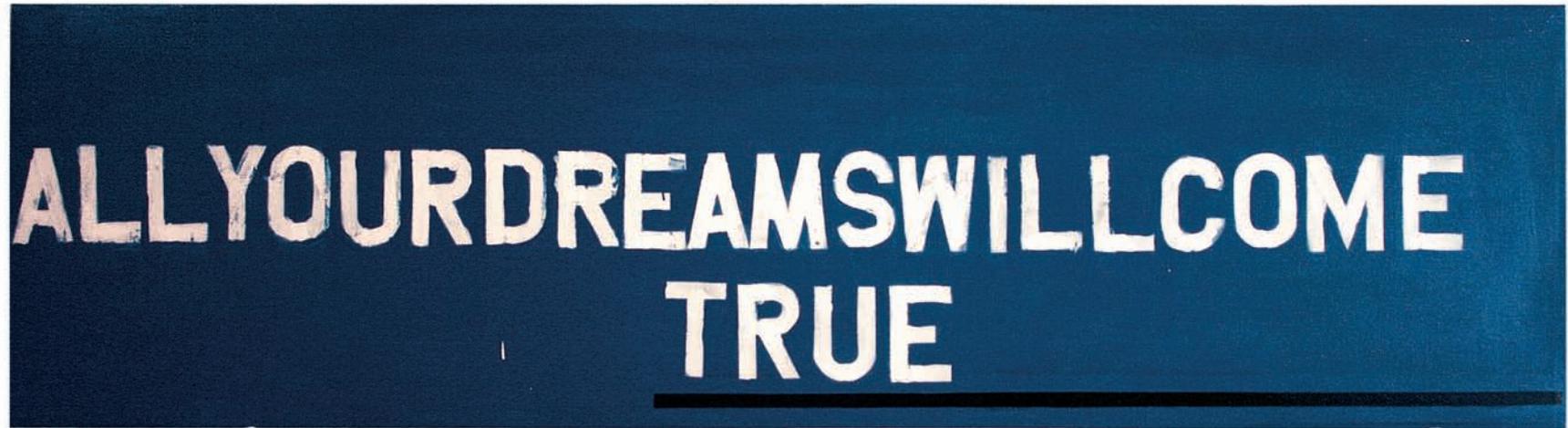


*liarfakermanipulator*, 2007  
36" x 72" x 3"  
oil and spray enamel on  
three canvas panels



*everything you ever wanted*, 2007, 144"x96"x2", oil and spray enamel on two canvas panels





ALLYOURDREAMSWILLCOME  
TRUE

**PAINLESSLY**

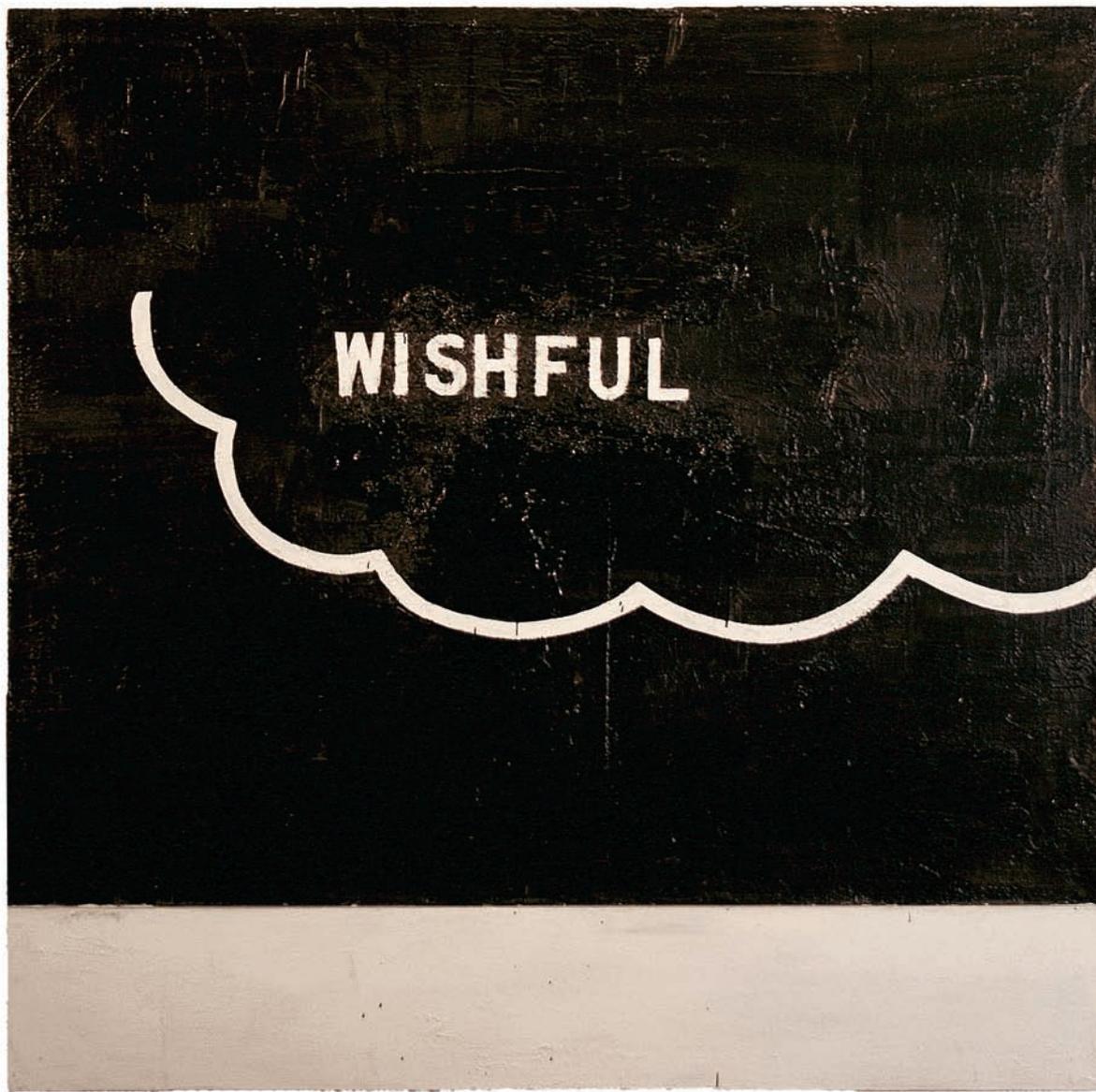
**LEISURELY**

**EFFORTLESSLY**

**SHAMELESSLY**



*perfect*, 2007, 20"x14"x3", oil and spray enamel on canvas panel





*fool's gold*, 2007, 8"x7"x1", oil and spray enamel on two discarded readymade canvas panels



*hopeful*, 2007

72" x 96" x 4"

oil and spray enamel  
on five canvas panels



*miraculous*, 2007, 70"x58"x2", oil and spray enamel, brush hairs on two canvas panels





*it's getting better every day*, 2007, 150" x 60" x 3", oil and spray enamel on three canvas panels





*empty me out*, 2007, 30"x16"x1", oil and spray enamel on six discarded readymade canvas panels and wood stretchers

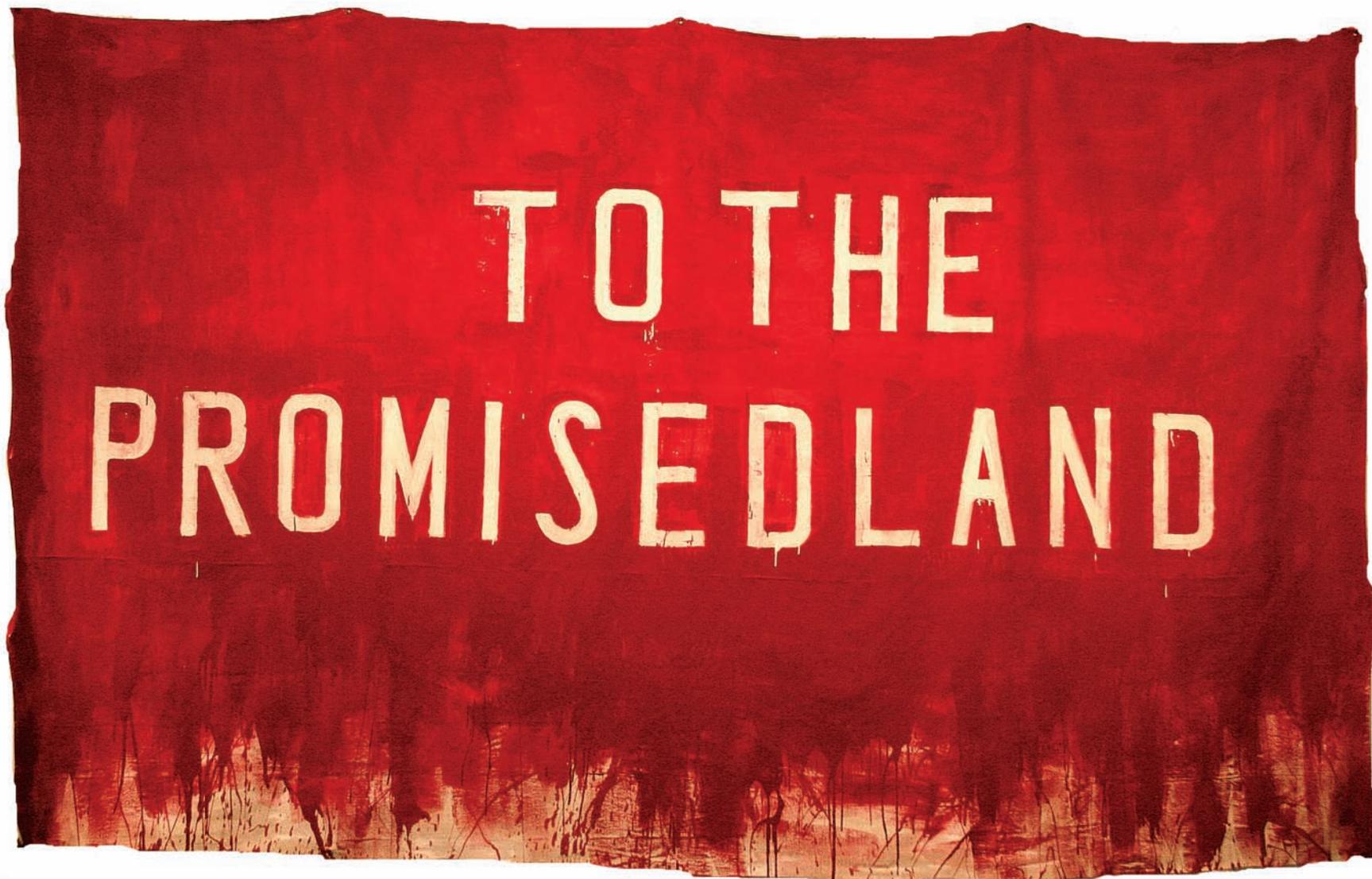




*gullible*, 2007, 20" x 16", oil and spray enamel on canvas board

A horizontal red banner with white text. The text is arranged in two lines, with the second line centered under the first. The red background has a slightly textured, spray-painted appearance.

IF YOU TRY REAL HARD AND PRAY EVERY DAY YOU JUST MIGHT GET  
TO HEAVEN



*promised land*, 2007, 176"x111", oil and spray enamel on canvas tarp with grommet hangers

Paintings are easy to talk about if you're talking to yourself, but become elusive when another's eyes are involved. That said, these paintings are about discourse. When I'm painting the discourse is private, between me and the painting. It's akin to *talking about talking* about paintings.

Paintings *are* their own language. It's not about making a picture – and it's not about making something where the end result is utilitarian – it's not intended for any purpose.

The language of painting is internal, embedded in the place of ideas, yet at the same time it's about the obvious concrete materiality of the object directly in front of us. This duality (idea/object) is something that has always fascinated me.

The words we use in daily conversations enable us to navigate the world. Words (texts) are ubiquitous, but the language of painting (syntax), for most, is something forgotten in early childhood. Paintings operate in the interchangeable region between thinking (language/text) and image (object).

– DENNIS MICHAEL JONES, SEPTEMBER 2007

# DEAD LANGUAGE

The dead language of high modernism was earnest business. Proto-pop artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, although no less serious, were inflected with irony which manifested itself in parodic adaptations of the dead style of abstract expressionism. To them, with their neo-Dadaist bent, the macho, flung and poured remonstrations of the New York School presented something worth customizing. Their reaction was to something authoritarian and monadic, but there was also an element of affectionate pastiche in their appropriation of the necrotic splatters of the old guard.

Modernism can be revered in silent contemplation through a historicist's lens as canonic orthodoxy. But, as postmodernists (unconsciously perceiving signifier to signifier), we tend to scan paintings as raw data. Reading them like texts, selecting and processing fragmented elements, we reflect and reject as we go. Consuming paintings in this intertextual manner, as the viewer, we *bricol* the work. And paradoxically, the work under scrutiny, if made after 1955, will be strongly inflected with its own intertextual *bricolage*; all postmodern art is a pastiche.

Pastiche is a viable postmodern strategy because it is a natural response to the over-saturation of images. It is neither sophisticated nor ironic, but simply represents visual fragments (images, signs, texts) which, in an age lacking any unifying ideology, have lost (or exchanged) their cultural value and become merely decorative. Although we cannot be sure that decoration, in and of itself, has no alternative value. Indeed, in the process of losing integrity, such fragments, whether appropriations, pastiches, or corrupted signs, become intertextual simulations (of originals) spawning new authentic hybrid discourses.



*dead sun flowers*, 2002, 144" x 96", acrylic and oil on canvas

The neo-expressionist painters of the 70s and 80s, preoccupied with metaphor and symbol, were too engaged in the production/performance of their work to be overly stimulated by the tenets of postmodern theory. All expressionists, unless they are fortunate enough to be highly collected, have to contend with overproduction. They make more product than they can possibly move because their work, done in a flourish, takes less time to manufacture than the exacting toil required of realism. Especially in a provincial environment where there is a limited market, a limited demand, their stock of paintings either rot or are painted over and recycled. Producing steady regional realism for a limited market is a better strategy for success than churning out a mammoth line of heartfelt expressionism. Regional artists often do quite well when they make small, intricate paintings, but bourgeois unassuming paintings are hardly worthy of serious contemporary discourse.

In America, any artist with contemporary ambitions working unrecognized outside of NY or LA that chooses expressionism as their *lingua franca* is

likely to self-destruct. Josh Smith, the successful New York painter who works in an expressionistic pastiche has carved out a niche by painting his name over and over again. Each of his canvases is the same size and bears the gaudy imprint of his signature in large uppercase letters. Were he doing this in the provinces he might never be heard from again. Simply put, painters that desire a career center-stage as a successful contemporary artist must operate out of NY or LA. All that can be done for the rest, if they *are* really good, is to show their work, maybe publish a catalogue, urge them to make the leap and hope for the best.



*idiot*, 2006, 60" x 120", acrylic and oil on canvas

Dennis Jones used to make "authentic" neo-expressionist paintings, each the size of a room. Scale was important. Jones is an architect and his paintings mirrored this. In reaction to his day job he constructed a parade of monochromatic, idealistically driven grid paintings as if he were attacking Le Corbusier in a synthesis of painting and anti-architectural utopianism. The work was also recycling the romantic modernist paradigm of painter as monolithic shaman, and his work from the 90s through the millennia was chiefly concerned with grand themes congruent with this: myth-building, disaffection and iconoclasm (most of the paintings *were* done over old paintings). He reveled in a neo-expressionist

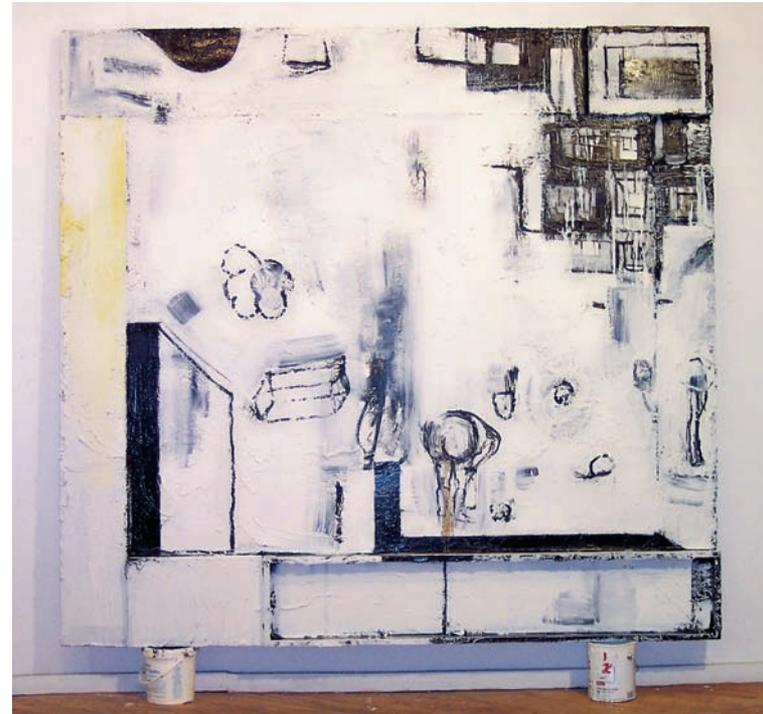
synthesis (pastiche) paying homage to his abstract expressionist heroes: Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and particularly Philip Guston (early and late). He wasn't mocking the form. He *was* ambitious; he wanted fame and fortune, albeit working from the (in)security of a provincial context.



*reconstructed*, 2006, 42"x50", charcoal and acrylic on paper

An abundance of unsold product could account for why Dennis Jones, in his new body of work, has elected to abandon earnest neo-expressionism (image-making) in favor of a more overt pastiche of painterliness and

text – pastiche/text being more current, relevant and promising. Also, in choosing to use text over image, he is saying something fundamental(ist) about the non-value of non-literary signifiers (representations) in a culture oversaturated with a simulacra of images (after all, he had spent the preceding two decades struggling with image, augmenting this over-saturation).



*studio shit*, 2006, 96"x80", acrylic and oil on canvas

His new works, with their banal/vernacular texts and pastiche(d) expressionist backgrounds, while functioning as authentic paintings, appear as ephemeral as propaganda; they *were* done fast, as if the day before a

protest rally – and in some cases they *do* resemble leftist political slogans, if not in their rhetoric, in their banner-like *Reds* manifestation. Formalistically, the texts are also visible pastiches – of Richard Prince (without the humor) or Jasper Johns (without the metonymy – Johns' words are/were unembroidered letter signifiers). However, there is something more than pastiche in Jones' new text paintings.

He has always been possessed by the notion that being an artist is an essentially heroic occupation. In keeping with this, entrenched in neo-expressionism, he was not always eager to assimilate the more contemporary tenets of critical theory. Trapped in the expressionistic myth that great art could only emerge from the elemental particles of modernist formalism, he was relatively *un*-preoccupied with new theories and practices, but what has happened recently is a fracture from his former self/formalism.

Hemorrhaging cant, purposely parading proletarian incantations, the texts in his new paintings are bluntly ironic with only their shape, scale and color to (re)connect him to his formalist past. The phrase in the painting *heaven*, 2007: *IF YOU TRY REAL HARD AND PRAY EVERYDAY YOU JUST MIGHT GET TO HEAVEN* snakes across the canvas reading like a deranged evangelical propagandist rant, and paradoxically, because of the formalism – the red background and white letters – it resembles a Soviet pennant in all but words. Is it a throwaway line or is it serious?



*heaven*, 2007, 168"x30"x3", oil and spray enamel on two canvas panels

In terms of semiotics and inverted logic, praying everyday would seem a sensible strategy to enter the spirit world. In truth, these texts could be both didactic and dialectical – if one were naïve enough they might appear to command while encouraging discourse. They *can* be read as raw data, but it would seem that such cant chanting was invented for instant dismissal. Ignored thus, they can be re-encoded as formalistic writing. Or, somewhat tediously, they can be read ironically. Or, very appropriately, they can be processed through a distinctly postmodernist lens.

Before exploring this analytical model, it is worth, momentarily, (re)assessing his old work which in and of itself was not without thematic substance. Dominantly formalistic though it was, it dealt with conceptual themes of uniformity and alienation. In their scale, these paintings possessed a macro-modernist architectural austerity and the occasional figures he painted were dwarfed and silenced by it. This manufactured *mise en scène*, constructed from new and used canvases (canvas discards, as he calls them), encapsulated a minimalist aesthetic while at the same time rejected such rhetoric as dehumanizing and authoritarian. In comparison, his new work looks and feels more contemporary and accessible.

A postmodernist reading of the work first brings up questions of authorship, *vis à vis* who was the auteur behind the old work and who the author of the new? The neo-expressionist paintings were made by someone interested in grand narratives and master-themes – someone who desperately wanted his work to be interpreted (decoded), but being so veiled in artist-myth and angst the message was distorted and obscured. His signifiers were too ambiguous making direct communication with his audience awkward. The author of these new paintings, however, is very explicit about what he is communicating. At the same time he wants to mobilize the reader. To facilitate this he employs contextual/visual apparatus in the forms/structures he paints – suggesting billboards, flags, wings, flying-suits – adding another layer of signification to the work. As in advertising, the text written across these hybrid forms



*purgatory*, 2007, 78" x 72", oil enamel on two canvas panels

replaces image, but it goes one stage further; the text itself becomes a signifier, a key, making image redundant. Jones has advanced from his earlier maudlin reflections to direct, intertextual metacommunication, signifier (to signifier) to reader. In this sense his strategy has evolved from modernism (alienation) to postmodernism (discourse).

In these new paintings Jones controls the flow of information – it's not about the words, *the dead language*, it's about data, context and intertextuality.

– DICK GOODY, OCTOBER 2007

DENNIS  
MICHAEL  
JONES

EXHIBITIONS



SELECTED ONE PERSON  
EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 *Dennis Michael Jones*, Oakland University Art Gallery, Oakland University, Rochester, MI
- 2006 *Featured Artist*, Kraft Lieberman Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2004 *Dennis Michael Jones, Paintings, Drawings and Sculptures*, Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 2003 *Playground*, 4731 Gallery, Detroit, MI  
*Child's Play*, Cass Café, Detroit, MI  
*Familia*, Tangent Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 2001 *Dennis Jones, Featured Artist*, Northwood Gallery, Midland, MI
- 2000 *Dennis Jones, Sculpture*, Plymouth Community Arts Gallery, Plymouth, MI

## INSTALLATIONS

(completed as an individual exhibition or a participant in a group exhibition)

- 2007 *Windsor Biennial*, group exhibition, toyland installation at the Art Gallery of Windsor, CAN
- Identity Expressions*, group exhibition, toyland installation at Gallery Project, Ann Arbor, MI
- 2006 *Dia de los Muertos*, group exhibition, toyland installation at Zeitgeist Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 2003 *Sandra Sagar Wall*, commissioned installation consisting of a large painted mural, alabaster sculpture and two lead sculpture pieces permanently located in the new Plymouth High School.
- 2002 *The City of Sparta's Sculpture Park*, permanent outdoor sculpture installation, Sparta, MI
- The Plymouth Community Arts Council Sculpture Garden*, permanent outdoor sculpture installation, Plymouth, MI
- Art 'round Town*, group exhibition, two temporary outdoor sculpture installations within the city of Saugatuck, MI, for the duration of one year.
- 2001 *Dennis Jones, Creative Spirit Soiree*, one-person exhibition/installation consisting of forty-three pieces of paintings and sculptures for a one evening presentation at a private residence in Midland, MI
- 1995 *Dennis Jones, Willis Gallery*, one person exhibition/installation at Willis Galley, Detroit, MI
- 1992 *The Home Show: Objects for or about the Home*, group exhibition, installed at Center Galleries, Detroit, MI

## SELECTED SMALL GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2006-08 *DeHuman Exhibition*, four-person exhibition, Thames Gallery, Chatham; also traveling to Kenderdine Art Gallery, University of Saskatchewan; Definitely Superior Gallery, Thunder Bay; Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, WKP Kennedy, North Bay; and Woodstock, Ontario, CAN
- 2007 *Fall Happening, Dennis Jones and Steven Deeb*, two-person exhibition, Next Step Studio and Gallery, Ferndale, MI
- 2006 *Detroit Drawing*, five-person exhibition, Commerce Street Artist Warehouse, Houston, TX
- 2004 *Summer Exhibition*, Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 2003 *New Faces*, Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1997 *Review Committee Selects*, four-person exhibition, Buckham Gallery, Flint, MI
- 1994 *Review Committee Selects*, three-person exhibition, Focus Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1993 *Willing Disbelief*, six-person exhibition, group exhibition at the Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI
- 1992 *Jones/Tobin*, two-person exhibition, Swidler Gallery, Royal Oak, MI

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2006 *Shelter*, CAID Gallery, Detroit, MI
- Faculty Now!* College for Creative Studies Center Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 2005 *Michigan Fine Arts Competition*, Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, MI
- Summer Group Exhibition*, Kraft Lieberman Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2004 *Artists Toys, Group Exhibition*, Kraft Lieberman Gallery, Chicago, IL
- Summer Group Exhibition*, Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- Michigan Fine Arts Competition*, Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, MI
- Great Lakes Drawing Biennial*, Ford Hall Gallery, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI
- Regional Juried Drawing Exhibition*, Elaine L. Jacob Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 2002 *Artists Among Us Exhibition*, traveling exhibition, Padzieski Gallery, Madonna University, National Gallery of Artists, Grosse Pointe Artists Association Gallery
- 1996 *Duns Scotus School for the Arts Exhibition*, Southfield, MI. Organized and curated an exhibition of Michigan artists to coincide with fund raising for a planned State of Michigan Charter School to be located in the Duns Scotus Friary. This was a group show consisting of fifty artists.
- 1993 *Drawing Invitational, group exhibition*, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI

# Fundamental(ist)

*New Paintings by* DENNIS MICHAEL JONES

Catalogue written and edited by Dick Goody  
Designed by Debra Lashbrook

## OAKLAND UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

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Oakland University Art Gallery apologizes for any inaccuracies or omissions.*

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[www.absolutearts.com/portfolios/d/dennisjones](http://www.absolutearts.com/portfolios/d/dennisjones)

I would like to gratefully recognize Dick Goody for his effort and patience, curatorial guidance and his exceptional essay. Many thanks to Alyssa, my wife, for her continued support, understanding and encouragement and to my daughter Kenzie whom I hope will always think before she believes.



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