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
paradise, 2007, 78”x72”x2”, oil and spray enamel on two canvas panels
It's a serious business, 2007, 18" x 19" x 2", oil and spray enamel on tape, wire and discarded wood panel
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"x65"x1"
oil and spray enamel on discarded
clothing and hanger wire
wings, 2007, 180" x 120" x 2", oil and spray enamel on two 24" x 96" 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
flakeysloppy, 2007, 27" x 13" x 3", oil and spray enamel on wood and linen panels
ALLYOURDREAMSWILLCOME TRUE

dreams, 2007, 99" x 26" x 3", oil and spray enamel on canvas
words to live by, 2007, 72"x56"x3", oil and spray enamel on discarded canvas panels and wood
perfect, 2007, 20" x 14" x 3", oil and spray enamel on canvas panel
wishful, 2007, 72"x72"x3", oil and spray enamel on two canvas panels
fool's gold, 2007, 8"x7"x1", oil and spray enamel on two discarded readymade canvas panels
hopeful, 2007
72"x96"x4"
oil and spray enamel
on five canvas panels
miraculous, 2007, 70" x 58" x 2", oil and spray enamel, brush hairs on two canvas panels
believe, 2007, 144"x96"x2", oil and spray enamel over acrylic on two canvas panels
it's getting better every day, 2007, 150"x60"x3", oil and spray enamel on three canvas panels
let me inside you, 2007, 20" x 2", oil and spray enamel on paint stirring stick, screws
empty me out, 2007, 30" x 16" x 1", oil and spray enamel on six discarded readymade canvas panels and wood stretchers
lumpy, 2007, 3" x 5", oil and spray enamel on discarded readymade canvas panel
gullible, 2007, 20"x16", oil and spray enamel on canvas board
IF YOU TRY REAL HARD AND PRAY EVERYDAY YOU JUST MIGHT GET TO HEAVEN

heaven, 2007, 168" x 30" x 3", oil and spray enamel on two canvas panels
promised land, 2007, 176" x 111", 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 bricoler 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.
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 heart-felt 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.

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.

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).

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

**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 Red’s manifestation. Formally, 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?

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

heaven, 2007, 168"x30"x3", oil and spray 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

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**EXHIBITIONS**

*Dennis Michael Jones*

**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

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* purgatory, 2007, 78"x72", oil enamel on two canvas panels
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 Sagear 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, Chicago, IL

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
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Catalogue written and edited by Dick Goody
Designed by Debra Lashbrook

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www.absolutearts.com/portfolios/d/dennisjones
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