

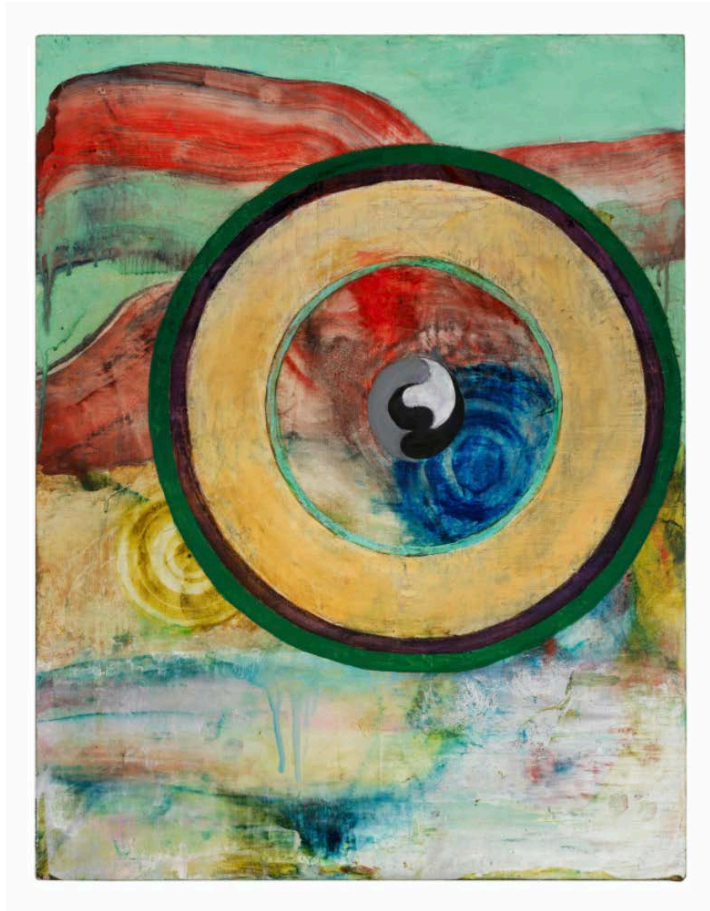
CHEIM & READ

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Bill Jensen: *Stillness/Flowing*

By **David Rhodes**



Bill Jensen, *WHEEL RIM COMPASS III (FOR WANG WEI)*, 2019-20. Oil on linen, 26 x 20 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

Paintings from 2017 to 2021 make up this exhibition of Bill Jensen's remarkable recent work. This period was one of growing instability capped with a pandemic, unforeseen in 2017 and still very much in progress in 2021. In the face of these challenges, Jensen continued to sustain a way of life that finds dynamic balance in dedication to work: in this case, painting. Passages of change abound in the works currently on view at Cheim & Read: signs of obliteration and recuperation, of process, movement, and traces of material gesture that are both corporeal and spiritual. Taoism and the aesthetics of Chinese landscape painting come to mind—not surprising, as Jensen is himself a scholar of Eastern philosophy, poetry, and art.



Bill Jensen, *BLUE CUPOLA*, 2020-21. Oil on linen, triptych, 59 x 120 1/4 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

WHEEL RIM COMPASS III (For Wang Wei) (2019–20) is one of five paintings here from the “Wheel Rim Compass” series. Wang Wei was a Tang Dynasty musician, painter, and poet. This painting features a double Yin-Yang, a constant throughout the series. The shape first appeared in Jensen’s work with *Redon*, a canvas from 1977 that was reacquired by the artist in 2019. The focused, or meditative, concentric circles that surround the double Yin-Yang at the center are situated asymmetrically in a ground of loose curving horizontal gestures that also include disc motifs echoing or iterating on the concentric circles. Together the motifs create an unexpected effect of visual paradox. The surfaces of all Jensen’s paintings, including this one, are extraordinary; paint, often made with particular combinations of pigment and medium in the studio, is applied one strata after another, worked, and sometimes removed with brushes or other tools. An *Ab Ex* spontaneity of technique and a focused concentration coexist together, one not diminishing or competing with the other.

There are two large-scale triptychs and four diptychs included in the exhibition, in addition to the singular works. The larger triptychs recall panels used in both Chinese and Italian settings: Chinese room dividing screens or Italian religious paintings. Jensen has spent much time in Italy studying Renaissance painting in situ, and forms that are reminiscent of some of those in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (1536-41), at the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, are present in several paintings shown here. For example, consider the triptych *Blue Cupola* (2020-21). On either side of the center panel—which is positioned an inch or so lower than the flanking panels and contains a double Yin-Yang motif—are anthropomorphic, biomorphic figures all on a sky blue ground. One of these, flesh colored, steps on a cloud form. In thinking through this painting, it is interesting to consider the fact that images and ideas from East Asia were already present in early Renaissance Italy, as both monks and traders travelled between the China Sea and the Mediterranean.



Bill Jensen, *BITTER CHANT IX*, 2020-21. Oil on linen, 40 x 32 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

BITTER CHANT IX (2020-21) is another painting from a series, one of six “Bitter Chant” works included here. Interlocking shapes made with repeated accretions, including hand prints, of variously viscous paint have a color range and emotional tone appropriate to the title: blues, dark and recessive or strident and sharp; yellows, lemon or bitter; reds, purple and cadmium; and greens, cobalt and emerald all appear. The black *HUSHED MOUNTAIN (FOR RON GORCHOV)* (2020-21) provides a stark contrast. Two vertical, curving, gestural marks subtly echo Gorchov’s own compositional forms, referencing the physical presence—and now absence, perhaps—of the departed artist. There is a quietude to this work that recalls Chinese poems, which frequently refer to the mountains of the painting’s title. Encompassing a wide visual and emotional range, Jensen’s work continues to consistently evolve and surprise, its complexity a consequence of the artist’s dedication to the practice of painting on a path all his own.