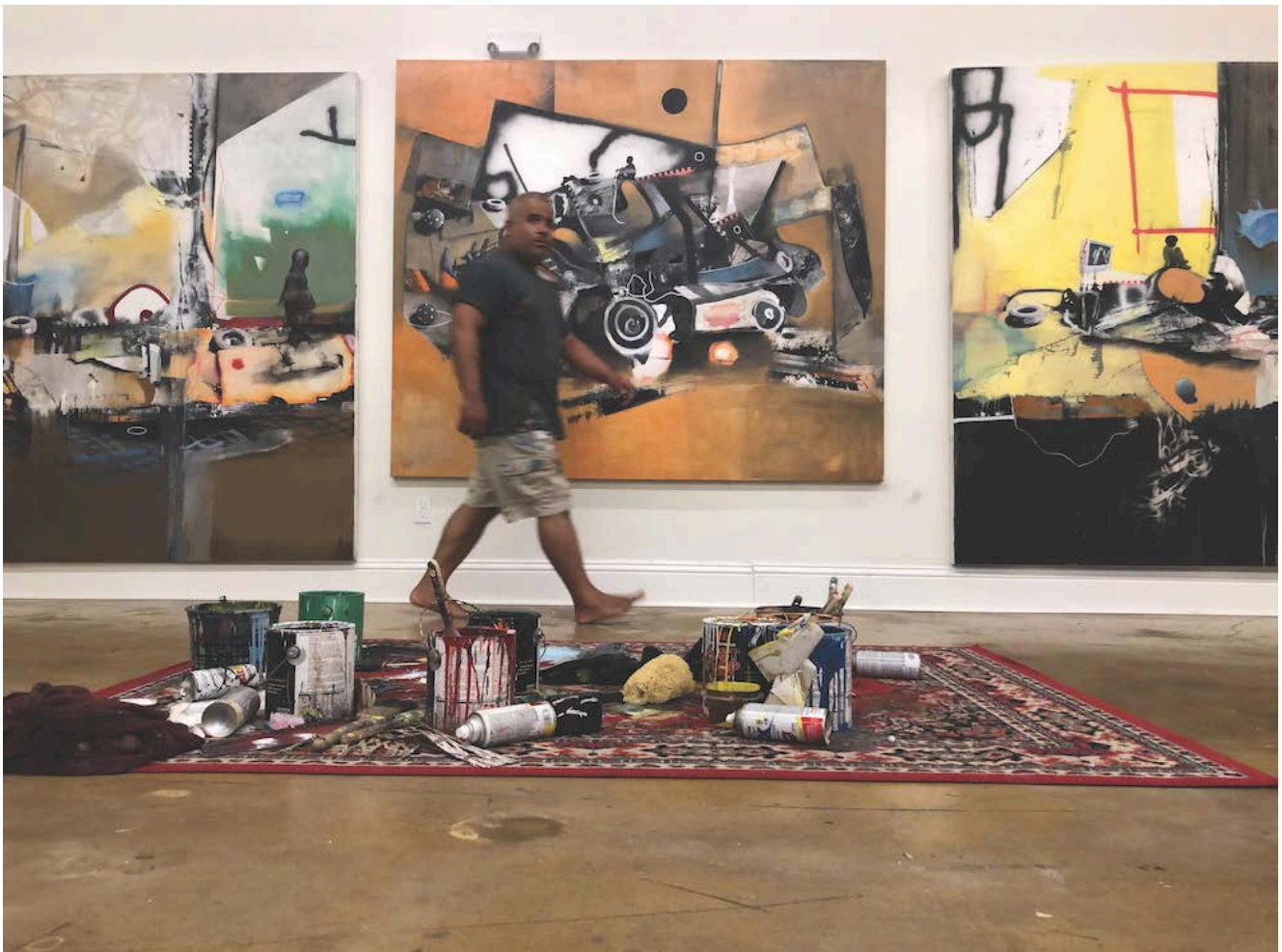


By Sasha Bogojev
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E Pluribus Unum: A Conversation with Marcus Jansen

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ALMINE RECH

The life journey of NY-born artist Marcus Jansen strongly informed the focus of his work which speaks of the powerful struggle to grapple with the nuanced reality of our time, while promoting dialogue about the inherent social issues. While this current moment might feel like a particularly fitting time to present his paintings, the themes have been a lifelong absorption, and thus, lead to this concentrated retrospective of his work to be presented at The Cornell Fine Arts Museum, just outside of Orlando, Florida, on September 18th.

Born in the Bronx, raised in NYC, as well as Germany when living with his parents, he enlisted in the U.S. Army in his early twenties, and afterwards, fully embraced a life in the arts. After a 25 year creative career, documented in the 2017 film *Examine and Report*, his new retrospective show *E Pluribus Unum* focuses on paintings made in the last 15 years of his practice. Exhibiting some never before seen works from 2019, the Cornell's curator Gisela Carbonell focused on underscoring Jansen's ongoing engagement with social, political, and justice issues. Topics of systemic racism, political protest, police tactics, as well as an all encompassing study of history and the human condition have always been front and center of his personal and creative life.

We got in touch with Marcus Jansen recently and talked a bit more about this milestone showcase, as well as the location and moment in time in which it is taking place.





Sasha Bogojev: Can you describe the moment in which your life took a turn from service in the army to the profession of art?

Marcus Jansen: It is difficult, because there were so many moments when I wanted to drift back to art. I simply didn't have the courage to pull it off in part because of the security the military provided. Being an artist is perhaps one of the most difficult fields there is. It is, most of all, a field of passion and survival in itself. You have no economic safety compared to the military unless you are sent to war. An artist works usually in isolation and must assume, and shouldn't care, if no one else will pay attention. If someone does, it's always a rewarding surprise.

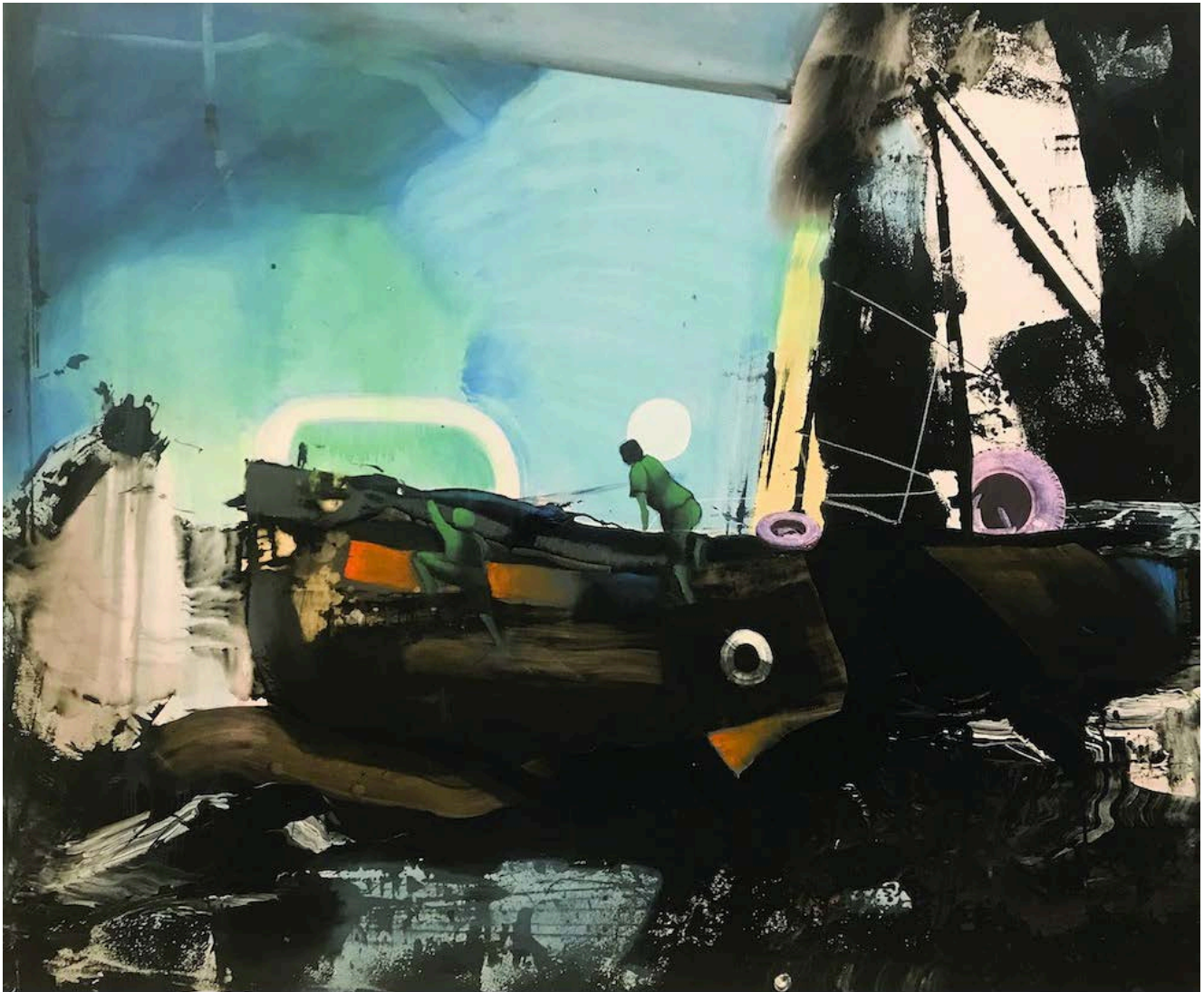
I'd say one of the first moments that come to mind is of the moment I was in art therapy sessions at Walter Reed Hospital almost 30 years ago after my combat deployment to Desert Storm. I realized that being away from the day-to-day routine in a calm environment was soothing.

Did your work always have the same focus?

I think I subconsciously decided to transition, and one day devote my life to being a full-time painter. A more recent scenario was the horrific political event of September 11, 2001, that prompted me to become active in my commentary, as I saw my own past deployment unfold all over again, watching my brothers in arms enter the same region. I had been discharged and painting for not quite five years by then, and it was the concern for a repeat or worse that prompted me to paint.

How much did the military experience in general influence your work and the way you perceive the world?

I think in hindsight it had everything to do with how my worldview was shaped, and certainly had a strong influence on the impulsive, action painting style approach in my work, as well as the political and social inspirations that called me to respond. It was more about making sense out of my experiences and the world around me, and by doing so, challenging more common narratives. I realized over time that history is rarely written by the victim and instead written by the victor. I guess I felt a need to change that with my contribution, even if just for myself. Painting is a great way to come to terms with humanity and one's self, and that is why I've always insisted, it's the most intimate act of war.



Does it feel prophetic to see your ongoing subjects emerge as the major issues we're grappling with today?

Yes and no. Yes, in terms of how much my subjects are playing out in real time and no, because history simply repeats itself and we have not learned to make the necessary changes to avoid repeats, which in my opinion, lie more in the lack of human empathy rather than the use of power and or exploitation.

How important is it to you, and your artistic mission, to be recognized by an institution such as the Cornell Fine Arts Museum?

It is always a pleasant surprise to be recognized for what you have found in your work. Perhaps the highest honor for a painter is to be recognized by an art institution, and in this case, an academic institution, as well. It validates one's time and efforts, and although my paintings have always been undertaken for my own understanding, it is most rewarding to share them with others—which is the final step of any painting—when the viewer can respond to the findings of the painter.

Having said that, I am very thankful for this exhibition at this time in America and world history, in particular, coming from a state that was among the hardest hit by COVID-19.

Were any works in the show painted specifically for this presentation, and what is their focus?

All works in the show were selected last year in 2019 by Dr. Gisela Carbonell, curator of the museum, based on works from the last 15 years that fit the show's theme of various power structures. Because of this, we have older retrospective works, as well as works from as recent as last year. But none were solely or specifically painted for the exhibition.

Is the subject of COVID-19 present in the work, and how did you present it based on your experience?

I would say the aftermath or awareness of a COVID-19 world have been in my works for two decades. The now very obvious economic inequality that the virus has exposed, the failing structures of political power and their inability to act to save lives when needed—health services for ordinary Americans, education, environment, increasing militarization, etc. COVID-19 exposed it in one example to those that weren't as familiar with these issues. Economic, military and psychological tolls on humanity have always interested me, and I've expressed them through landscape painting.

How have you activated the Marcus Jansen Foundation Fund in terms of current events, and do you plan to connect it with the show?

We are still in the early stages of the foundation fund that we recently opened right before COVID-19. The financing is handled by the SW Florida Community Foundation, in Fort Myers. We are always inviting donors and patrons to join us, and we hope to activate where needed in the near future. The goal of the foundation fund is to assist veterans and low-income children with and in the arts.

Marcus Jansen's exhibition at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum opens on September 18, 2020.