

The Lament for Icarus



The work of Jess, a San Francisco artist, stands clearly apart from any particular movement in contemporary art. While kinship with the Symbolists, the Surrealists, Action painters, Pop artists and California Funk is sometimes evident, in the end the "nostalgic lyricism" which characterizes Jess's work is, above all else, a curious amalgam of personal visual experiences.

Jess is best known for his paintings and for his collages which he calls "paste-ups." The six paintings on exhibition in MATRIX are from a sequence of twenty-six called Translations, recently shown in their entirety at the Museum of Modern Art, NYC. One of the most important of the group is The Lament for Icarus, purchased by the Atheneum in 1971.

Jess Collins, known professionally as Jess, was born in 1923 in Long Beach, California. He counts among his early influences the making of scrapbooks from magazine advertisements and newspaper comics and a visit, at the age of five, to an old prospector in the Mohave Desert "whose home is a small palace assembled from scrap wood, junk, tins, natural objects, with an interior paste-up décor."

For a decade Jess worked

as a radiochemist. In 1949 he enrolled in the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco and was "re-awakened." In 1951 he and the distinguished poet Robert Duncan became companions. Both were familiar figures on the San Francisco Beat Scene of the 'fifties. In fact, two works by Jess will be seen in a show coming to the Atheneum this April, poets of the cities: new york and san francisco 1950-1965. Duncan has written illuminating essays on the work of Jess, and Jess has illustrated some of Duncan's poems. Jess is represented by Odyssea Gallery, NYC.

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"The whole sequence [Translations] is a picture book, belonging then to the great primary tradition that extends from the illustrated walls of the Cro-Magnon man's galleries to the emblematic and magical art of the Renaissance and the revival of enigma and visionary painting in the Romantic Movement... It is important that they are copies, redundancies or visible ideas... His relation to the visible is as immediate as he draws from what he sees in an 1895 engraving from a painting by Dvorak as Cezanne's is as he draws from Mont-Sainte-Victoire. Each is painstakingly faithful in translating what he sees into his own world of paint and color... in the complex world of vision, when we are looking at a painting though a two-fold, a three-fold, a four-fold field of realities may emerge, extensions of visual language in which the full range of man's experience may come into play, there is but one ground of that play and that is the primary ground of the action painters, the properties of the canvas and the oils as they give rise to recognitions in the creative will. In the master generation of the action painters, the creative will had returned to affirm the primacy of that creativity itself over all representations. And, acknowledged in the ever-active presence of the paint in the picture, that primacy remains an important principle in Jess's work."

from "Iconographical Extensions" Robert Duncan, Translations by Jess

Works in MATRIX:

Ex. 4--Trinity's Trine
(Translation No. 5) 1964, oils, canvas over wood 48" x 46".
Lent by Museum of Modern Art, NYC. (From an engraving "Laboratory Tromp" in Scientific American, March 5, 1887.
Texts: I. Book of the Dead, passage translated by R.T.R. Clark. II. Fifth Ennead, "The 3 Initial Hypostases," by Plotinus, translated by S. MacKenna and B.S. Page. III. Piers the Ploughman by Wm. Langland.)

A Field of Pumpkins Grown for Seed (Translation No. 11) 1965, oils, canvas over wood 36" x 29 1/2". Lent by Mrs. Brooke Blake, Dallas. (From a photograph by D. Cummins, reproduced in the U.S. Agricultural Yearbook, 1909.
Text: Histoire du ciel by Abbe Noel Antoine Pluche, 1748, translated by B.F. Sessions.)

Fig. 4--Far and Few...
(Translation No. 15) 1965, oils, canvas over wood 26" x 18". Lent by San Francisco Museum of Art. (From a bubble-gum trading-card, photo of the Beatles, by "T.C.G".
Text: "The Jumblies" by Edward Lear.)

Fig. 204.--Gastro-duodenostomy (Kocher) (Translation No. 22) 1969, oils, canvas over wood 25" x 33". Lent by Art Institute of Chicago. (From an illustration by "Bosser" included in Operative Surgery for Students and Practitioners by J.J. McGrath, 1913. Text: William Blake's Marginal annotations to "The Excursion, Being a Portion of the Recluse, A Poem" by William Wordsworth.)

"Handing Me One Of The Halves, He Spoke The Single Word,

Drink." (Translations No. 23) 1969, oils, canvas over wood 20" x 30". Lent by Odyssea Gallery, NYC. (From an illustration by J. Augustus Knapp in Etidorhpa. Text: Etidorhpa, or the End of the Earth by John Uri Lloyd, 1894.)

The Lament For Icarus. (Translation No. 25) 1970, oils, canvas over wood 27" x 39", In the Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum. (From a half-tone reproduction of a detail of the painting "The Lament for Icarus" by Herbert James Draper 1898, in a Swedish art book c. 1905. Text: A letter to his translator W. von Hulewicz from Rainer Maria Rilke, November 13, 1925.)

Selected one-man exhibitions: Dilexi Gallery, San Francisco '60 (first); Cheney Cowles Museum, Spokane '67 (traveling show under auspices of Western Association of Art Museums; San Francisco Museum of Art '68; Odyssea Gallery, NYC '71; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago '72; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '74.

Selected group exhibitions: King Ubu Gallery, San Francisco '53; the Place, San Francisco '54; Pomona College, Claremont '61; Museum of Modern Art, NYC Assemblage '61; University of New Mexico, Albuquerque The Painter and the Photograph '64; Oakland Museum of Art, Popart USA '63; Museum of Modern Art, NYC American Collage '65; Hayward Gallery, London Pop Art '69; Reese Palley Gallery, San Francisco Symbol and Vision '70; Art Institute of Chicago, Annual American Exhibition '72, '74; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts and Pollock Galleries, Southern Methodist University poets of the cities: new york and san francisco 1950-1965 '74 (also San Francisco Museum of Art and Wadsworth Atheneum '75).

Selected bibliography:

Duncan, Robert. Translations by Jess. Odyssea Gallery (New York) '71.