

Husband and Wife, 1970



The paintings of Neil Jenney comprise a highly individual and emphatic statement about the need for realism in the contemporary visual arts. Characteristic of his work is the presentation of two different elements often against a generalized background. Another important characteristic is Jenney's placement of each painting in a conventional frame which always carries at the bottom a title marked in clear block letters. The frame and title are integral to the work. They are one of the ways in which Jenney asserts the appropriateness of illusionistic content in painting.

Though a classical sense of balance and harmony prevails in much of his work, he is primarily interested in the relationship between the subjects he chooses to illustrate. Jenney intentionally negates traditional spatial considerations by setting up what he calls "a didactic situation" in which he explores with paint on canvas how one object or concept relates to another. Not greatly concerned with depth or shading, Jenney is free to employ colors for their generally accepted symbolic content: green is grass, blue is water, brown is dirt or an interior floor.

While Jenney's paintings are refreshingly direct and unpretentious, their apparent simplicity is misleading. They are, in part, an audacious and eccentric synthesis of several seemingly antithetical traditions of mid-twentieth century aesthetics. Jenney has altered and transposed certain key interests of abstract expressionism, pop art and conceptual art into his own personal style.

Jenney's earliest introduction to serious painting was through a neighborhood collection of works by Truman Egels-

ton, a Boston area abstract painter. He was in his early teens at the time. Thanks to the support of his high school art teacher, Jenney was allowed to follow his own interests in painting "everyday for 45 minutes." He describes his own early work as being loosely related to the school of Hans Hoffman. Although Jenney has come to reject the validity of abstract expressionism, his work reflects these adolescent experiences. Despite the subject matter, frame and title, the surfaces of his canvases assert themselves with authority. The paint is allowed to drip. The presence of the brushstroke and the energy of the artist are everywhere apparent.

Jenney feels that pop art was possibly the United State's greatest single artistic movement and was, in its finest examples, a profound form of social realism. Certainly pop art was a highly visible renaissance of subject matter and social commentary in art. Often pop artists would zero in on one or several isolated objects - a soup can, a bath robe, etc. - and, like Jenney, their work usually acknowledged the explicit two dimensional quality of the canvas. However, while pop artists often selected specific images known to everyone through the popular press, Jenney always takes subjects familiar in general concept only. Furthermore, Jenney rejects the enlarged scale of much of pop art. His subjects are usually slightly smaller than life size.

Jenney is not interested in creating a detailed replication of a bewildered wife or an unplowed field. Rather he is painting what he has called "identities." He is interested in conveying the essence of an identity and then exploring how it relates to another iden-

tity. For this reason, titles are an important part of Jenney's work in much the same way they are important in work by William Wegman (MATRIX 9). Both incorporate language to explicate the conceptual aspects of the work, to direct the viewer to the essential idea at hand.

Jenney was born in Torrington, Connecticut in 1945. He spent most of his childhood in Westfield, Massachusetts. His only formal art training consists of a very brief stint at the Massachusetts College of Art. He moved to New York City in his early twenties and was originally recognized for his work as a sculptor. Though no longer doing sculpture, he considers himself a sculptor who paints. Jenney currently lives in New York City.

AMK

1. Idealism is unavoidable.
2. All illusionistic paintings require frames.
3. A return to realism is inevitable.

Neil Jenney
November 1975

My paintings are not concerned with color, space or composition. My paintings are concerned with realities.

from Anti-Illusion: Procedures/
Materials, p. 54.
Winter, 1968

Works in MATRIX:

Plowed and Unplowed, 1969, acrylic on canvas and frame, 60" x 58". Courtesy of the artist.

Here and There, 1969, acrylic on canvas and frame, 58" x 78". Lent by Steven Ross, New York City.

Cat and Dog, 1970, acrylic on canvas and frame, 58" x 107". Private collection.

Husband and Wife, 1970, acrylic on canvas and frame, 56" x 54". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Madison, Connecticut.

I am concerned with giving each item an identity...I don't try to make my statement with color, space and composition - but I use color, space, and composition to make the pieces coherent. The choice of a group of items in a piece is made solely by their identity and not their form. They are composed spatially for two reasons: so that they can retain their identity, and to relate to each other's identity.

Letter to Athena Spear about his sculpture, March 2 1970

Selected one-man exhibitions:
Gallery Rudolf Zwirner, Cologne (first) '68; Noah Goldowsky, NYC '70; David Whitney, NYC '70.

Selected group exhibitions:
Richard Bellamy/Noah Goldowsky, NYC 2nd Annual Arp to Artschwager '67; Noah Goldowsky, NYC '68; White Museum, Cornell University, Ithica Earthart '69; Kunsthalle, Bern When Attitude Becomes Form '69; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials '69; Finch College Museum of Art, NYC Art in Process IV '69; Allen Museum, Oberlin College Three Young Americans '70; Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi Eight Artists '73.

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Selected bibliography by Jenney:
Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials, Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC '69, p. 54
When Attitude Becomes Form, Kunsthalle Bern '69.
Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin (Spring '70) vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 123, 126.

Selected bibliography about Jenney:
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Spear, Athena. "Reflections on Close, Cooper and Jenney," Arts Magazine, vol. 44, no. 7 (May '70), pp. 44-47.
Levin, Kim. Art News, vol. 69, no. 8 (December '70), p. 21.
Ratcliff, Carter. "New York Letter," Art International, vol. 15, no. 1 (January 20, '71), p. 84.
Pincus-Witten, Robert. Artforum, vol. 9, no. 5 (January '71), pp. 79-80.
Wolmer, Bruce. Art News, vol. 69, no. 9 (January '71), p. 19
de Ak, Edit. "Neil Jenney," Art-Rite, no. 9 (Spring '75), pp. 24-25.