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NEW | ART

EXAMINER

Yishai Jusidman
Blaffer Gallery
The Art Museum of the
University of Houston
Houston, 77204
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reviewed by Dominique Nahas

"Pictorial InveSTIGATIONS 1989-1997" at the Blaffer Gallery is the terminus for this small traveling show of works by Yishai Jusidman, a native of Mexico City, who was trained at New York University and CalArts. This survey attests to the vitality of contemporary painting and its permutations, while also raising the level of critical inquiry regarding its viability in light of developments in installation work and sculpture.

Jusidman's dramatically eclectic style and his paintings' varied surfaces are perhaps less stimulating than his particular approach to subject matter. He shifts the meaning and rendering of loaded images (clowns, landscapes, geishas, sumo wrestlers) to a conceptual level using pictorial strategies that verge on abstractions. Consisting of five distinct yet interrelated sections, Jusidman's primary inquiry is how to coherently present the fracturing and slippage of perception that occurs within a representational realm. Toward this end—and with the help of a well selected, well installed installation in the commodious Blaffer Gallery space—the artist works with painted wood globes and oil on board and canvas to drive home his points about the fluidity of sight.

In his "Astronomer" series of 1989-90, Jusidman lays down deep, sweeping landscape scenes, reminiscent of canvases by Corot, on a set of solid, laminated-wood globes mounted on tall, steel rods and set in a row. Each remarkable image is illusionistically pierced by painted circles, like optical blind spots. From a distance, the eye perceives a conundrum of parts and wholes: one-point perspective is being applied to create pockets of deep, illusionistic space, which

is contradicted by the fullness of the bulging physical planes of the hemispheric forms. The viewer is encouraged to circle around the installation and line up the globes for a potential sequential reading. A ricocheting visual effect is created, in which spaces and places on each globe occasionally fit together with the adjoining globe's terrain like so many floating, intercalated puzzle pieces. Interwoven with the spaces between, they provoke a disorienting yet exhilarating effect of containment and release.

The iconography of the jester, the clown, and the *saltimbanque* has long been a mainstay of both "high" (Picasso, Beckmann, Nauman, McCarthy, etc.) as well as "low," that is amateur, art. Jusidman's large paintings from 1991-92, closeups of clown heads in greasepaint, bring up the inevitable problems and issues of identity associated with the difference between masks and the real skin of experience, between artifice and authenticity. The painted faces have exaggerated expressions. Mixed with the superimposed painted features, the faces serve as appropriate vehicles for a pictorial reading that moves from figuration and pure painterly fact to a type of carnivalesque fiction.

In the main gallery, six anamorphosized clown portraits painted on suspended wood spheres continued Jusidman's investigation of real/fiction, support/surface, abstract/representational dichotomies. Yet this dispersed installation gave an added edge of disembodied disquiet and unease to the subject matter. The excessive painterly and planar distortions offer the eye a range of images (close-ups of planets, clouds) that, while non-figurative, avoid the codes of pure abstraction.

In his 1992 "Geisha" and 1996-97 "Sumo" series, Jusidman raises questions about the absence and presence of the body. In the "Geisha" works particularly, the melded and obscured figure/ground relationships create perceptual quandaries, which Jusidman cannily plays against a

notion of metamorphosis. The best works in this series are the overall white pieces, in which a very faint image slowly emerges from the wood surfaces. Underlying social and sexual subtexts suggest a visual analogy of a submerging personality in the face of a totalizing and annihilating vision.

Jusidman's "Sumo" paintings are perhaps the artist's strangest and least programmatically evident works. Here painted images of the contentious other in the form of sumo wrestlers (in opposition to the self-deferring geisha images) are used as spatial delineators, their bodies in precariously held positions, commanding and disrupting the unified reductivist space of late-Minimalist abstraction. The "Sumo" paintings are the strongest in Jusidman's repertoire of images. The oriental imagery and its somatic inferences work together to bring out the deadpan obstinacy of Jusidman's ironic play

of similarity and difference, the familiar and the strange. The sheer incongruity of the imagery considerably expands the artist's sophisticated visual approaches and strategies.

Formerly, Jusidman seemed tethered to a unified and overtly systematized approach in his inquiries about the space and place occupied by the canon of Western pictorial conventions in a post-technological world. The results were remarkably comprehensive and fastidious artworks, yet were tinged, paradoxically, with a predetermined didacticism about the inchoate and the unknown. In his newest work, the artist allows himself the freedom to question his own approaches more spontaneously, while avoiding the overly logical bipolarities that mar his earlier work. This is a minor objection, however. As a whole, this exhibition heralds a major talent on the American scene.

Dominique Nahas is an independent curator and cultural critic living and working in Manhattan.

Yishai Jusidman

Sumo VI, 1995. Oil on wood. Courtesy of Blaffer Gallery.

