

Yishai Jusidman

at OTIS GALLERY, 8 February–29 March

Paintings are rarely modest objects. Whether through coy lures or blatant effrontery, they generally do their damndest to get one's attention. The work of Yishai Jusidman, a painter and critic based in Mexico City, is no exception. But what distinguishes Jusidman's pictures isn't the way they accomplish this mandate (they make no secret of revisiting every trick in the art historical book), it's that they won't let anyone forget that this is their mandate.

Five series of work dating from 1989 to the present are on view, and the earliest probably states the case in its most legible and schematic terms. The "Astronomer" series takes its title from a work by Jan Vermeer in which the Dutch master shows a scholar scrutinizing a globe. As a self-reflexive meditation on sight and image-making, Vermeer's picture locates itself somewhere between the optical illusions of the painter and the rational impulses of the mapmaker. Jusidman's reinterpretation of the theme adds new variables to the problem. He takes familiar landscapes by artists like Constable and Monet and repaints them onto the curved surfaces of wooden spheres. The pieces flesh out old problems about representation with new questions about reproduction, the object nature of painting, and most importantly, the role of spectatorship; in order to see the whole image, viewers must circle round the freestanding globes like orbiting satellites.

A bit too well thought out, these early pieces are not the artist's best, but they lay bare Jusidman's preoccupation with one central question: How does vision embody meaning? His subsequent work is more satisfying because it doesn't frame this question so rhetorically (in other words, safe from the threat of any real answer), but instead tests some actual possibilities. What's surprising is that it does this through the improbable genre of portraiture. The artist finds allegories that restate his question (and give some answers) through the agency of people.

Naturally, not just any kind of person will do. If this work is extremely conscious of its nature as painting, it seems fitting that the artist gravitates toward the kinds of people who are equally absorbed with all the puffing and preening of self-presentation. First through the depiction of famous circus clowns, then with paintings of geishas from Japanese theater, and finally with images of sumo wrestlers, Jusidman's subjects are metaphors not only for the issue of self-presentation, but self-dramatization—the fine art of externalizing oneself

for the benefit of others.

The circus clowns, first painted on wooden spheres that distort their faces, then onto oversized canvases which exchange that distortion for exaggeration, have neither pride nor shame. They make a spectacle of themselves in every sense of the word. The geishas, on the other hand, are painted as demurely as possible in tones of white that are barely distinguishable from the milky grounds over which they hover. The clown's faces are distorted, the geisha's are disguised, but both are united in a shared dissimulation of their respective arts and a tacit contract which that dissimulation establishes with an audience.

Jusidman designs his work so that a similar contract is also played out with the viewer of his paintings, reminding one that the experience of visual art is no less a "live" performance than Kabuki or Ringling Brothers (and simultaneously as sublime and ridiculous). His most recent work expresses this through the allegory of sumo wrestling. Presented against a set of dynamic geometric planes, the two wrestlers

in each image act out the ritualized negotiation of balance and power that is also what the whole process of looking at pictures is about.

All these theatrical forms draw attention to the fact that humans can't nail down the nature of their perceptions any more than one of Vermeer's scholars can produce a completely accurate map. But for the performer or painter, of course, dissimulation isn't a pejorative quality. On the contrary, Jusidman presents it as the grease that makes perception turn and the very thing that makes interaction possible. His work is designed to make you aware of your prying, staring, squinting gaze, and to recognize the degree of complicity this represents on your part as a viewer. The artifice in his paintings isn't just a tool the performers use to entertain us, it's a tool we all use to establish any kind of contact, contract, or coöperation.

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Yishai Jusidman
Sumo I, 1995
Oil on wood
15" x 15"

Yishai Jusidman
O.C., 1990
Oil on wood
22" diameter

