

Born in 1903 in Guatemala City, **Alfred Jensen** studied fine art in San Diego (1924–1925), Munich (1926–1927), and Paris (1929). After traveling extensively throughout Europe and northern Africa, Jensen took up residency in New York in the early 1950s, after which he devoted himself to painting full time. He exhibited widely following his first solo show at John Heller Gallery in New York in 1952. Among numerous group exhibitions, he was included in the Venice Biennial (1964), Documenta IV (1968) and Documenta V (1972), the Whitney Biennial (1973, 1977), the São Paulo Biennial (1977), and "Bilderstreit" (1989). One-person exhibitions included venues such as the Guggenheim Museum, New York (1961), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1964), Kunsthalle Basel (1975), and the Newark Art Museum (1994). Traveling retrospective tours were organized in 1973 by the Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hannover (traveled to Humlebaek, Baden-Baden, Düsseldorf, and Bern), and in 1978 by the Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo (traveled to New York, Chicago, La Jolla, Boulder, and San Francisco). Four years after Jensen's death in 1981, the Guggenheim Museum initiated a major retrospective of his work.

selected bibliography

Alfred Jensen: Concordance. New York: Dia Center for the Arts, forthcoming. Texts by David Anfam, Lynne Cooke, and Michael Newman.

Alfred Jensen: Paintings. New York: Pace Gallery, 1991. Text by Alfred Jensen.

Alfred Jensen: Paintings and Works on Paper. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1985. Texts by Thomas M. Messer, Maria Reidelbach, and Peter Schjeldahl.

Alfred Jensen: The Late Work. New York: Pace Gallery, 1984. Text by Alfred Jensen.

Alfred Jensen: Paintings and Diagrams from the Years 1957–1977. Buffalo: Albright-Knox Gallery, in association with the XIV Biennial of São Paulo, 1978. Texts by Linda L. Cathcart and Marcia Tucker.

Alfred Jensen. Basel: Kunsthalle, 1975. Texts by Alfred Jensen and Carlo Huber.

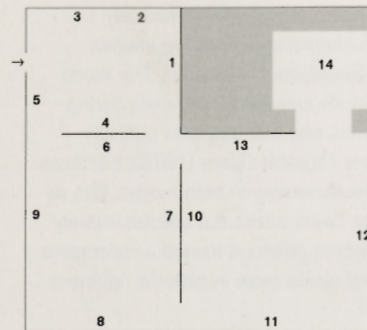
Alfred Jensen. Hannover: Kestner-Gesellschaft, in association with Kunsthalle Bern, 1973. Texts by Max Bill, Alfred Jensen, Allan Kaprow, and Wieland Schmied.

Alfred Jensen. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1964. Texts by Alfred Jensen and Eberhard W. Kornfeld.

Alfred Jensen. Bern: Kornfeld and Klipstein, 1963. Texts by Alfred Jensen and Eberhard W. Kornfeld.

Support for this exhibition has been provided by The Henry Luce Foundation and the members of the Dia Art Council.

site map and checklist



1. *A Quadrilateral Oriented Vision, Per I–Per VI*, 1960
oil on canvas
6 panels, each 84 x 50 inches
Courtesy The Sam Francis Estate, Los Angeles

2. *Parthenon*, 1962
oil on canvas
74 x 50 inches
Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York

3. *Mayan Temple, Per II: Palenque*, 1962
oil on canvas
54½ x 68½ inches
Collection Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art,
The University of Texas, Austin

4. *Square II Growth*, 1968
oil on canvas
72 x 72 inches
Estate of Alfred Jensen.
Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

5. *Square XXI Growth*, 1968
oil on canvas
70½ x 70½ inches
Estate of Alfred Jensen.
Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

6. *The Ten Thousand Things*, 1972
oil on canvas
63½ x 138 inches
Private Collection

7. *Das Bild der Sonne: The Square's Duality, Progression and Growth*, and *Squaring the 360 Day Calendar*, 1966
oil on canvas
84 x 336 inches
Collection of Michael and Judy Ovitz,
Los Angeles

8. *The Sun Rises Twice, Per I–Per IV*, 1973
oil on canvas
96 x 192 inches
Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and
Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington. Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase
Fund, 1990.

9. *Where the Gods Reside, Per I–Per VIII*, 1968
oil on canvas
94 x 376 inches
Estate of Alfred Jensen.
Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

10. *Twelve Events in a Dual Universe*, 1978
oil on canvas
108 x 288 inches
Estate of Alfred Jensen.
Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

11. *The World as It Really Is*, 1977
oil on canvas
86 x 240 inches
Estate of Alfred Jensen.
Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

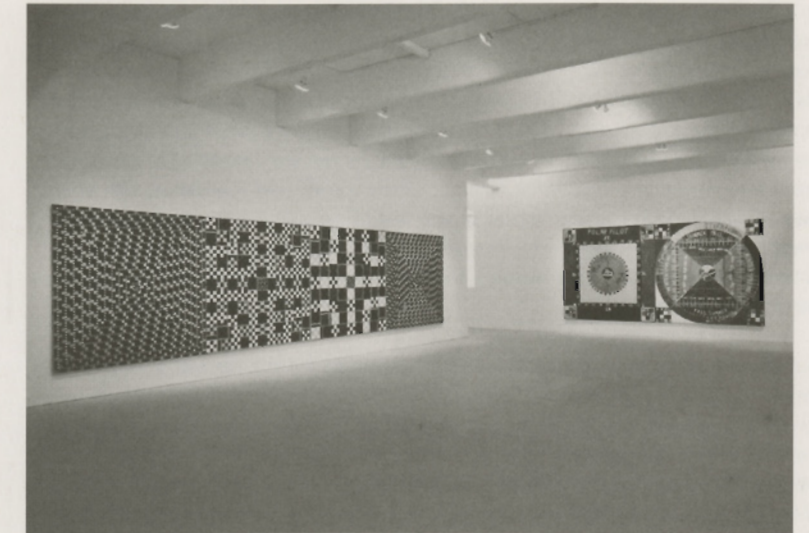
12. *The Great Pyramid*, 1980
oil on canvas
90 x 360 inches
Estate of Alfred Jensen.
Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

13. *Remote Sensing, Per I & II*, 1979
oil on canvas
86 x 96 inches
Estate of Alfred Jensen.
Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

14. *Physical Optics*, 1975
oil on canvas
86 x 153 inches
Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

cover photo: Bill Jacobson

Alfred Jensen
Concordance
September 20, 2001–June 16, 2002



Dia center for the arts
548 west 22nd street new york

Jean Dubuffet praised the work of Alfred Jensen for its absence of taste, deeming this singular figure a kind of "primitive." Donald Judd focused on what he perceived as a radical flatness in Jensen's work: "There are no other paintings completely without space," he wrote in 1963 in an appreciative early review.² That artists of opposing aesthetic persuasions, from different generations and different cultural legacies, should express their strong admiration for this maverick is telling. By his own account, Jensen saw himself as a "messenger," bridging two generations—that of the Abstract Expressionists (and associates) with whom he was aligned through age and friendship, and that of the sixties, with whom he shared the moment of his artistic debut and the milieu in which his work first received critical attention: comparisons with contemporary works by Frank Stella and Al Held are symptomatic of that coincidence.

Dubuffet's allusion to an art devoid of taste can be interpreted in a number of ways. Reference may have been intended stylistically, to Jensen's signature matter-of-fact mark-making, whereby the paint is applied directly from the tube, without flair or finesse, sometimes broadly with a palette knife, sometimes mechanically with a small brush, and sometimes squeezed straight on to the canvas, creating a thick impasto typically configured in flattened formats, often grids or repeating checkerboards. The clarion colors that comprise Jensen's palette are unmixed, chosen according to predetermined systems that generate both designs and chromatic harmonies. The resulting schemata rarely conforms to familiar or conventional ways of orchestrating color across a pictorial surface; their dissonant and unfamiliar optical rhythms pulverize or contradict any tendency to spatial depth yet, at the same time, impact vividly, hypnotically, given the overall surface pattern.

But "primitive" could also describe the idiosyncratic fusion of quotations from various ancient systems of divination and mensuration, from scientific hypotheses or from Pythagorean theories melding geometry, mathematics, and astronomy, all laminated with references to Goethe's ideas about color. Jensen's wide-ranging interest in esoteric Mayan, Egyptian, and ancient Chinese cosmologies is potently manifest in such mesmerizing monumental works as *The Sun Rises Twice*, *Per I–Per IV* (1973), where a bewildering farrago of numerical tables, glyphs, symbols, signs, emblems, and diagrams is woven into a recondite statement. Determined according to quirkily cryptic calibrations—the artist himself admitted "My arithmetic is a little unconventional"—these abstruse thematics do not form the basis for an exegesis.³ Far from conveying information or knowledge, his enigmatic pictograms form an armature for exercising cognitive calculus.

Their distinct eclectic systems, predicated as they are on dualistic opposition, a fundamental tenet in Jensen's aesthetic, cannot be reconciled. From this syncretic panoply of philosophical, cosmological, and scientific speculations, a cohesion nonetheless emerges. At their simplest, as witnessed in *The Ten Thousand Things* (1972) and *The Great Pyramid* (1980), intuitive poetics prevail over the "gesture" towards communication, for the content of the painting depends more on pictorial sense, on formally resolving an aesthetically

unified whole than on decoding the individual systems referenced within. Radically abstract imagery is subsumed into an all-over field of interlocking, repeating shapes conjured from a rainbow of delicately inflected hues. Elsewhere, as found in *The World as It Really Is* (1977), reading—which may at times include calculating and deciphering—alternates with a more visually oriented mode of address, one that reacts to optically charged chromatic patterns and juxtapositions. Or, as in *Physical Optics* (1975), the focus on the diagrammatic allows the work to be parsed simultaneously in both modes. But, as even the most syncretic works, notably *The Sun Rises Twice*, attest, the spectator rarely goes beyond appreciating the aspirations of this distinctive polemics toward a redemptive metaphysical engagement with the ludic poetics, which reside more in pictorial rightness than in programmatic iconography.

Following Dubuffet's and Judd's prescient statements, many other critics, among the most eloquent of whom is Peter Schjeldahl, have argued that Jensen's distinctive achievement ultimately depends neither on its ostensible thematics nor on efforts at decoding but on aesthetic resolution.⁴ By contrast, certain art historians in the 1970s and 1980s, professionally committed to iconographical analysis, devoted sustained attention to unraveling these occluded systems, offering illuminating accounts without necessarily altering an appreciation of Jensen's accomplishment.⁵ More recent methodologies, however, situate artists of that era in relation to their contemporaries who also drew on ancient cultures (in what proved to be a very different mode of primitivizing from any implied by Dubuffet). Reflecting this prevailing trend, David Anfam incisively compares Jensen's credo structurally, thematically, and stylistically with tenets central to Abstract Expressionist thought in which "the artist as seer . . . [becomes] someone who delves into the past for signs and symbols that will spring to life in the present as cryptic, though vivid, bearers of meaning."⁶ It was singularly Jensen's fate to advance this tradition "in the moment of its eclipse."⁷ By contrast, Michael Newman has lucidly mapped yet another interpretative position, one that reflects current philosophical inquiry. Concluding that what is at stake is not the accessibility but the strangeness of these systems, and hence their embodiment of a "falling away from signification," he posits as the central problematic of Jensen's endeavor: "How can we think and experience the relation between the meaninglessness of the universe that is the basis for science since Newton, and the desire for sense, for a meaningful and connected order of being."⁸

Jensen's self-proclaimed position "in-between," straddling two generations, owes something to the peculiarities of his artistic biography. Born in Guatemala in 1903, he was sent after his mother's premature death to school in Denmark, his father's homeland. A period of itinerant traveling, including brief stints in art academies in San Diego, Munich (with Hans Hofmann), and Paris, preceded a twenty-year sojourn in the company of American heiress Sadie May, whose collection formed with his guidance was eventually bequeathed to the Baltimore Museum of Art. Together they visited the studios of Giacometti, Picasso, Dubuffet, and other modernist luminaries, as well as traveling extensively in Europe and

North Africa. Following his patron's death in 1951, Jensen relocated to New York City, where he began painting in earnest. By his own admission, he discovered his mature artistic voice only toward the end of that decade, after repudiating his previous fascination with expressionist idioms and the chromatics of Sonia and Robert Delaunay in favor of an art based in the diagram. In key works from 1960, such as *A Quadrilateral Oriented Vision* (1960), with its signs drawn from Mayan systems of calendrical computation, its palette from Goethean color theory but informed also by echoes and memories of Guatemala's landscape and cultural artifacts (including, above all, its textiles and architecture), he limned the parameters of a vision that he would tenaciously, even obsessively, explore over the next two decades.

Fiercely independent, to the point of becoming, by his own admission, addicted to "the privilege of solitude," this quixotic avatar of arcane divination was nonetheless highly knowing, resolutely immuring himself at the heart of the contemporary art world of his day. Simultaneously naïve autodidact and erudite polymath, Jensen pursued a wondrously speculative quest that propelled and beguiled viewers of his uncannily resonant work to quizzical engagement. Once captivated, it is arguably irrelevant whether they elicit answers or elucidate conundra. Premised on the notion of Homo Ludens, his art challenges viewers to play, to play seriously. His vision thus diverged dramatically from the fatalistic, tragic, and existentialist positions of his peers toward something more celebratory, galvanizing that inherent inventiveness that seeks constantly to construe systems for imputing and inscribing meaning in what might otherwise be a meaningless world.

L. C.

notes

1. Jean Dubuffet's quote is referred to in Peter Schjeldahl, "Jensen's Difficulty," in *Alfred Jensen: Paintings and Works on Paper* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1985), p. 22. Born in France in 1901, and therefore a contemporary of the American Abstract Expressionists, Dubuffet was often, if misleadingly, compared with them, and his work was exhibited alongside theirs, especially in the immediate postwar years.
2. Donald Judd, "Al Jensen," *Arts*, 37 (April 1963), p. 53.
3. Alfred Jensen, in *Alfred Jensen* (Hannover: Kestner-Gesellschaft, in association with Kunsthalle Bern, 1973), p. 40.
4. Schjeldahl, pp. 21–26.
5. See Maria Reidelbach, "Reading Jensen," in *Alfred Jensen: Paintings and Works on Paper*, pp. 8–20. Also, Peter Perrin, "All the Beautiful Systems: Alfred Jensen," *Arts Canada*, 36 (May–June 1979) pp. 40–49.
6. David Anfam, "Alfred Jensen: A Cosmos in Context," in *Alfred Jensen: Concordance* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 2002), forthcoming.
7. Schjeldahl, p. 22.
8. Michael Newman, "There are no other paintings completely without space": Alfred Jensen's Diagrams," in *Alfred Jensen: Concordance*.