

rodolphe janssen

INFO@RODOLPHEJANSSEN.COM – WWW.RODOLPHEJANSSEN.COM

The Act of Seeing With One's Own Mind Jason Saager in Conversation with Bob Nickas

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BN: Most viewing your paintings would describe them as landscapes, which they are, even if the longer we look at them the more it appears you almost seamlessly interrupt conventional pictorial space, which you do. These spatial realignments register for me in filmic terms—the jump cut—which, because film is a moving image, also create temporal leaps, abrupt yet advancing a continuous image movement. This only holds true for a representational sequence, not for abstract film. Let's say a person is coming down a flight of stairs, from the top, and then they suddenly appear at the foot of the stairs. We don't wonder how they got there. We know that's where they were headed. And so viewers will accept this, especially if they think the movement is meant to account for the inner reality of the person, their state of mind. But what of the inner reality of a painter? You've said you don't necessarily see your paintings as a landscapes. This makes sense to me. It certainly makes sense to you. You invented the image. It's a world as you imagine it to be. You want us to see the world differently. You're taking us "there." I love that you've said, rather than landscape, your engagement is with "earth magic." This needs some elaboration on your part.

JS: I grew up in Arizona far away from great museums and galleries so many of my early influences were from books, records, and movies. I love old movies that use jump cuts. I remember, from when I was a teenager, watching movies like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Vertigo*, with its famous dream sequence, and *Easy Rider*, with its drug scene. I'm sure you know "The Dawn of Man" in *2001* where a prehistoric man throws a bone into the air and it transitions into this advanced spacecraft.

BN: Yes, the satellite suddenly appears passing through a dark sky—a jump of about four million years.

JS: There are temporal displacements and discontinuities going on in my paintings so it makes sense that you are drawing this comparison, but it is interesting you bring up the subject of landscape. Movies are a moving image, but I think parallels can be drawn between jump cuts in film that produce time compressions, dream sequences, or psychedelic effects and some paintings from the early Renaissance. Works by Simoni Martini, Master of Osservanza, Stefano di Giovanni, and Giovanni di Paolo come to mind, but there are certainly others. These paintings are depicting miraculous narratives by multiplying the figures in the same frame. The Blessed Agostino Novella Tryptych, Saint Anthony Goes in Search of Saint Paul the Hermit, Saint John the Baptist Goes Into the Wilderness, and so on. In my work, viewers can see the landscape itself multiplying in miraculous ways within the same frame. Sometimes this is granted through an ether of alterity that the clouds provide, as in paintings like *Horizon Deceivers* or *Secret Mountains*, but much of the time I find it too difficult to put into language. For example, the garden paintings with the alien breakaway spaces and works like *Wind Below Reality* are just impossible to explain. Of course, Shan Shui paintings with multiple perspectives like *Early Spring*, by Guo Zi or Ni Zan's fantastical Taoist paintings could be said to engage with spatial and temporal compressions too. Sometimes I catch myself speaking in what sounds like magical or science fiction jargon when trying to describe what's going on. Doing this doesn't always work, yet it seems appropriate considering I often listen to fiction books when I paint. Unlike writing, listening to things doesn't always distract from the work, and in my case, I curate music and audiobooks specifically for the studio. For example, I was listening to the novel *Ubik*, by Phillip K Dick while I was making the *Intermediate Worlds* show and was playing around with this idea that my paintings are hyper-dimensional landscapes, essentially landscapes that possess magical properties and abilities

that defy conventional understanding. In this novel, the age of things accelerates rapidly as if time in certain objects just starts spinning backwards within an uncertain reality. I was engaging with this idea where objects like paintings can manipulate our sense of time, channel parallel universes, or bring us to higher dimensions. The worlds I make are too de-structured to work as illustrations for science fiction or fantasy, but what my paintings have in common with these genres is that I am building worlds which are not constrained by the current reality. It's all so curious to me. At other times, it feels like I am making abstract work. This is especially true while I am working on paintings at close range, upside down, or sideways for longer periods of time usually while listening to ambient music.

BN: Ambient music ... almost a flotation tank. Makes sense, Because you told me that you sometimes become disoriented in your paintings, and you don't know where you are. You mentioned that people who live with them have told you that they get lost in them as well.

JS: I sometimes get into this state where I feel out of my mind, where the speculative fictional side of the brain turns off, and everything just turns into colors, shapes, patterns, and textures. But let me further unpack this notion of earth magic. On the one hand, of course my paintings are landscapes because we see trees, mountains, water, earth, and sky. On the other hand, many of the trees, landmasses, or mountains seem to levitate, teleport, start to disappear, or bi-locate while existing in impossible spaces that disrupt the relationship of the earth and the sky. My work comes out of returning to archetypes from the earliest landscape traditions, before landscape was formalized in the western tradition, which leads us back to ancient Europe and even further back to ancient paintings from Asia, but not unlike ancient magical texts or more recent speculative fictions, there is an experimental play at work here that defies rational explanation.

BN: It's one thing to immerse ourselves in images; another to step into them and be there. The influence of the Renaissance paintings, as you've told me, was amplified with your first visit to Italy. You not only had the actual paintings before you, you found yourself in the places and vistas depicted, or similar to them. Those hills and trees were alive to you, the light, the whole atmosphere. Of course there were no floating mountains. For that you would have had to be highly under the influence. I understand how the Italian landscape would come fully to bear upon your image-making. Can the same be said for the Southwest desert? At least beyond the mountains and clouds, which you refer to as cloud-mountains, and which are solid and vaporous at the same time. Maybe you keep a distance on the immediate environment to avoid your art being too closely identified with where you're from? You are not a regional painter, that's for sure—unless from some outer region of the imagination. That said, I couldn't help but notice something of an overlay in a photo you sent me of your father's garden. In the background there are tall tapered Cypress trees, deep green, which might well be in Rome, and in the foreground there's a bronze bell from Arcosanti, the ongoing experiment of the Italian visionary architect Paolo Soleri, who had studied with Frank Lloyd Wright. They remain strong presences in the Sonoran desert to this day, although it would be hard to conceive two more polar utopians. In that garden I sense a real convergence, not only of locations but of past and future. The bell makes me think of it as a harmonic convergence, and I think you can hear it as well.

JS: It was the artist Karl Wirsum who convinced me to go to Italy as a young man. He was part of a group of professors in Chicago who championed the imagination with a visual approach to art history.

BN: There's no better way for it to be approached.

JS: As far as seeing the work in its actual place of creation, we certainly see the Italian countryside in some early Renaissance paintings more than we see the Russian landscape in ancient Icons, but many of these artists are still too fantastical to be realists. There was definitely a turning point starting with Giotto where a tension arose between the supernatural and more naturally depicted scenery, clouds and linear perspective, but I can't say that I saw anything like a Lippi or Gozzoli painting in the Italian countryside. The early Renaissance paintings are clearly blending imagination and symbolism with a more indirect observation of the natural world than we see with plein air paintings later on in art history. For example, any artist trying to capture the Italian countryside through direct observation would be competing with artists like the French painter Corot. Similarly, if one wanted to paint the

Grand Canyon plein air or even in iconic terms, they would be up against artists like Thomas Moran, Hiroshi Yoshida, and Philip Pearlstein, who all visited the state to paint a series. I remember laughing at how all these artists from Europe, Asia, and the East Coast came here as outsiders to paint the Grand Canyon while I was drawing between ancient art from Europe and Asia at a hotel next to the Grand Canyon. Anyway, it is interesting for me to think about the wild openness of space in the Southwest while drawing from old art history books. I remember buying a book filled with artists from the Yuan dynasty in Northern Arizona on the way to a hiking destination near Sedona. I remember an unexplainable revelation occurred during a divergent drawing session while looking between Fra Angelico, Benozzo Gozzoli, Wu Zhen, and Ni Zan. Just like with certain books and music, my work goes in and out of being in complex with ancient art, but this is just for the very beginning stages of small drawing exercises. I often find myself putting things away to take more creative risks, but there is certainly some kind of a magical magnetic chain of influences I connect to and I acknowledge that the environment I am in might be a part of that. There is an incredible amount of vastness that emerges while drawing in a small rectangle. It often feels like things are expanding and multiplying inwardly when I draw even though hiking or driving through this part of the country feels like space is forever expanding outwardly. It is also true that people in this part of the country can have their own little Medici gardens in their backyards as cypress, olive, citrus, palm and other trees do fine in the Arizona heat.

BN: Someone who left city “canyons” for the west, and who embraced dualities, with his interest in mirror reflection, Robert Smithson, once wrote: “For many artists the universe is expanding; for some it is contracting.” For artists going westward, there’s a whole other level of wonder, the natural world appearing as if it’s another planet entirely, especially for those who went from rolling green fields or dense cities to the desert, which appears alien and uninhabited, though mystical and expansive. When there’s more light and sky, and the view is longer and wider, where vanishing perspective is real, there’s more space for the imagination.

JS: It has been really good to move back to Arizona. I did my time in Chicago and New York City. It was necessary for me to be close to the best artists and museums, but it’s great to work here in the desert. You mentioned the most iconic Arizona architects. Frank Lloyd Wright and Paolo Soleri both moved here, but so did the space illustrator Robert McCall, who influenced the visual style of Kubrick’s 2001: a Space Odyssey. These were some of the Arizona artists I knew about growing up and I think that like the surrounding environment all of this can creep in to influence my work in certain ways. I honestly just don’t get inspired too much by contemporary art. There are definitely some exceptions, but I seem to do better away from it. I actually think much of it is mind pollution.

BN: No disagreement there.

JS: I like it when paintings transcend our understanding of space and time or create disorientations that throw off conventional modes of perception, but I also think all of this needs to be balanced with forces that enhance well being and have a calming effect. This is because I believe we need paintings that we actually want to live with. I think this is the challenge.

BN: When I first came out to meet you and see your work in-person, two years ago, you said that where you grew up was part of a reservation, and that your street hadn’t even been paved when you were a kid. Superstition Mountain must have possessed a certain mysterious energy, a sort of pull, especially for a younger, curious person, hiking and exploring. Recently, you mentioned that your grandfather introduced you to Kachina dolls, which represent the links between us and the spirit world.

JS: Both sides of my family were into exploring the outdoors and I have many good memories of camping throughout Arizona. The Grand Canyon and Superstition Mountains are probably the most memorable. Hiking and camping were a big part of my life before moving to bigger cities. I was born and raised in the suburbs of Mesa and Scottsdale, but my parents took the family all over northern and eastern Arizona, especially different cabins that family members owned at different times, and to Malad, Idaho to visit my mother’s side of the family. The Poenix valley was way less developed in the ‘80s and ‘90s, but most of the dirt road adventures I remember were in rural areas, most of which are

suburbs now. It's true that my grandparents collected Kachina dolls. This was probably the first art I was exposed to—Kachinas, Navajo rugs and baskets. I remember being taught as a kid that they were these strange messengers from the spirit world. Many of them were made to sell to outsiders as decorations, but there is still this cosmic dimension where they are supposed to represent the spirits of many things as intermediary beings.

BN: I'm aware that there are functional objects produced by tribes that are intended for use—baskets, for example—and others that are meant to provide economically for them, which are referred to as "fancy baskets," sold to tourists. What's interesting about Kachina dolls is that even if they go out in the world as souvenirs, they still remain, as you've said, messengers. In contemporary art, most objects are made to be sold, and don't have a specific use, not as most objects do. There is an obvious answer to the question: What in the world is made primarily to be looked at? The answer is art. I have the feeling that you, and you're not alone out there, see the artwork as a means for the viewer to pass through to another realm—the image as potentially transporting for the viewer. Where does it take them? Is it a place within them, in their imagination, a matter of expanding vision? Maybe it's enough that it takes them elsewhere? Saying this, I have in mind your clouds. We tend to see all sorts of things in clouds. At times they seem to be moving in slow motion. When we're on a plane that's just taken off on a gray rainy day, there's a point when, heading towards cruising altitude, we break through the cloud cover into blue skies and brilliant sun. And often, when a plane cuts through dense clouds, we experience rough turbulence, shaking and shuddering—the updrafts and downdrafts in the air currents. How would you describe the atmospheric conditions of your clouds?

JS: Lately, I've been transported to a world where trees are floating away in an ocean of clouds. It's a celestial gathering of the trees. In another painting, the ground itself turns vaporous and gets taken in, hovering in the air within an esoteric order of things. Most of my paintings from the past several years have been dealing with clouds, but there are also paintings without clouds where the sky or the earth cracks open. Clouds aren't necessary to transport the viewer to a different place, but they are unique in that they are extraterrestrial signs for us, and were often used as an intermediate zone or an alternative space between celestial and terrestrial realms in ancient art. Here I'm thinking about foundational works from art history like *The Ecstasy of St Francis* by Giotto. Of course, we also have the experience of flying through and above clouds in planes as you point out. So what are the atmospheric conditions in my paintings with clouds? It's a funny question and there is no right answer. These paintings are filled with scientific falsehoods and resist understanding. They don't teach us anything straightforward, but I believe they function as platforms for transcendence for certain people.

BN: I think you could make your own version of *The Ecstasy of St. Francis* and it wouldn't be tied to any religious system. Maybe the ecstatic state would be arrived at by other means entirely. That brings me to "the how" of your paintings being made. Because even if they may appear to offer the viewer a placid, serene scene, they are physically involved to make and it's a long, often exhausting process from start to finish. You often work into the early morning hours. So would you go through it, step-by-step. You did the first time I was in your studio, but because my flight was endlessly delayed and I had been up very early, by the time I got to Mesa, as I'm sure you'll remember, I was almost sleepwalking. It was a real effort to focus.

JS: I remember that day so well. I figured you were going to be too tired after that flight to deal with coming to my studio for the first time. I was excited to meet you after a few email exchanges. I remember we were discussing more music than painting, or rather how music and painting can inform each other in different ways. We were connecting over Doc at the Radar Station by Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band. This was also right before you took me to see the Melvins play live. Like the Captain, the Melvins are clearly doing something special. Anyway, watching them play live with you was such a great experience.

BN: Captain Beefheart—Don Van Vliet—who lived and painted for many years in the Mojave Desert, and Buzz Osborne from the Melvins, also a Beefheart fan, who spends a good part of the year at home in the foothills of Tucson. But your process ...

JS: Right, of course, the process. I start out making little sketches where I go back and forth between drawing from several images at once to a more purely intuitive approach with my imagination. Once I really like a composition, I transfer the drawing on a large sheet of plastic and paint it out in oils before pressing it onto special paper that can take the oil. This is the monotype part and it's the stage in my process between drawing and painting where I often go into a kind of a mania where I am driven out of my mind. I first learned monotype techniques while taking classes at Mesa Community College as a teenager. What I learned back then was monotypes the way Degas made them, but there are many ways to make a monotype. The way I do it is without a press and there are many steps to this process that I have developed over the years. What happens during this process often throws off what I had planned in the drawings and this is usually a good thing. I pin up whatever comes out and will start painting things out as I find my place in the work. I will often paint something in great detail and then leave areas of raw monotype next to it. Up close, my work can look like a patchwork of monotype and painting. After it gets developed to a more mature point, I adhere the paper to canvas that is stretched over panel. I spend weeks, or sometimes months, working on one until it feels finished.

BN: Something I find fascinating with Degas monotypes is the second pull, which are referred to as ghost images, because there's less ink on the plate and, well, they're more haunting. Degas would go on to elaborate these fainter images. Of course in your process there is transfer and elaboration. The monotype is only the starting point. Your prints are one-shot. There isn't a second pressing. Have you thought about that as a possibility toward creating works on paper in parallel to the paintings?

JS: Sure, anyone using a press can run it through again and get a ghost print. Also, like Degas, anyone can get the smooch effect all going in one direction if they use too much oil and pressure. I can get the ghost effects without a press, but it's a little different as a press makes everything a little more uniform and predictable in ways. If I ever find myself in a print studio again, I would probably want to do other prints besides monotypes. Anyway, almost all of my works are on paper. I think you mean to suggest that I do some works on paper without mounting them on panel. I can't predict the future, but I currently like going from little sketches to a monotype and then adhering the results to canvas over panel. I like painting on flimsy paper for certain reasons, but things really come together when it feels like I am painting on a wall with the hard surface to lean on.

BN: Your future frescoes ...

JS: I know we are talking about process now, but I just find it difficult to get to the bottom of things by talking about the material and technical parts of the process anymore than what the work is in complex with, or what the content appears to be, and this now makes me reflect more about what you said at the beginning about the inner reality of the painter.

I believe the best art isn't made by sane people because it requires channeling divine madness and eludes formalization. When I make art it often feels like my work is crystallizing mystical daydreams on a border between different worlds. It feels like I am summoning a new unknown reality.

BN: The last time we met, surrounded by a few new paintings at your place, in various states of completion, you mentioned that there's no vanishing point in your work. It reminded me of something you said about your childhood in Arizona, where there was, and is, a sense of infinite space. The expansiveness in the paintings ... I have the feeling that this is what you need for yourself, what you want in your life, and maybe it's something to recapture. You also mentioned that people who live with your paintings have told you they get lost in them. Of course, when they say lost, I would expect they mean pleasurably, which is what the paintings do for me.

JS: It is true there were no vanishing points in either of the paintings you saw that day. My work is filled with lots of spatial ambiguity, which can make things hard to pin down. Instead of a single point in the distance, viewers might see multiple vanishing points or none at all. Linear perspective is suggested in some parts, but there are fractured horizons, underground skies, shifting grounds, and disorienting relationships that make it impossible for us to locate and maintain a conventional sense of perspective. I do remember, when I was a kid, thinking that Arizona, and the Southwest in general, was endless. At the very least, it seemed much more vast in my childhood than I understand it now.

It's common for young children to experience space in more imaginative and experimental frameworks. Anyway, it is hard to know for certain what the expansiveness or spatial ambiguity in my work is trying to recapture or create, but I think there is definitely some kind of re-enchantment going on. Some people tell me they feel recharged with a sense of wonder when looking at the paintings. For many years, before showing my work in galleries, I looked at my paintings as these alternative worlds where I could escape and move around freely in my mind. Many of the tendencies in my work began to develop over a decade ago while I was painting in tiny rooms or studio apartments in New York. I wanted the objects on my walls to be filled with thousands of miles of beautiful magical space that I could imagine floating around in with perfect weather, miraculous scenery, and no people. I figured at the very least the work would help create a balanced energy flow in those tight spaces where I was living and working at the time.

BN: The images feel utopian, hopeful.

JS: I see my paintings as a counterforce to the dystopian narratives that permeate our lives today. Certain forms of art and music uplift the spirit, help us heal, energize us and calm us down, help us to create. I strive to be in the center of all that.