

EUGENE

HALTON

AN UNLIKELY MEETING OF THE VIENNA SCHOOL AND THE NEW YORK SCHOOL

NEW OBSERVATIONS
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When Fritz Janschka arrived from Vienna to teach at Byrn Mawr College in October, 1949, he entered a culture seemingly as alien to his art as one can imagine. Janschka is one of the co-founders of the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism, a group of painters who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna shortly after World War Two. Their teacher, Albert Paris von Guetersloh (who, years earlier, had changed his name shortly after taking a train to Paris from the town of Guetersloh), had been one of the younger members of the Secession. He is remembered today not only as a painter and the father of Fantastic Realism but as one of the outstanding Austrian writers of the twentieth century. Egon Schiele's oil portrait of Guetersloh hung at the Vienna 1900 exhibit at MOMA a few years ago. The seven painters now regarded as the original Fantastic Realists include, besides Janschka, Arik Brauer, Ernst Fuchs, Rudolph Hausner, Wolfgang Hutter, Anton Lehmden, and Kurt Steinwender.

Perhaps it is not so surprising that the city which produced Freud produced the Fantastic Realists. Or that Hutter should have gone to the Academy to become a painter, only to discover that Guetersloh was his biological father. Or that at one of their wild and crazy student atelier parties, the Fantastic Realists decided that they would have to put Fuchs in front of their own firing squad with an empty pistol. Fortunately Janschka's firing hand was not as steady as his painting hand, for when he took aim and pulled the trigger, a loud explosion and a bullet in the wall over Fuchs's head instantly sobered everyone up! Sometimes a cigar is not just a cigar.

Influenced by surrealism, Freud and Jung, the Secession, and a great love for the craft and traditions of painting, the Fantastic Realists began making paintings in the post-war period that suggested born-again Bosch and Breughels, at a time when non-representational painting was reaching its peak. Although drawing on surrealism, the Fantastic Realists were not as much interested in puncturing reality as in picturing the intrinsically fantastic nature of reality and in realizing the fantastic (see *The Raft of Medusa*, 1948-49). A number of their early paintings simply express human suffering (See *War*, 1951), and although utilizing fantastic elements, do not exhibit the "clever" or "referential" qualities which are so central to surrealists such as Magritte, Dali, or Ernst.

New York Abstract Expressionism and Viennese Fantastic Realism represent diametrically opposed ways of painting, yet both schools sprang out of surrealism. By the mid-fifties Abstract Expressionism, despite its powerful connections to surrealist "automatism," had become fully "automated": the vital surrealist roots discarded as a hindrance to the "pure" form of non-image painting.

The Fantastic Realists are widely known in Europe and hardly known in America. Given the dominant abstractionist tendencies of post-World War Two art this is understandable:

in the Abstract Expressionist fifties they must have seemed outdated, given the assumed fact that painters were supposed to



FRITZ JANSCHKA DAS FLOSS DER MEDUSA (THE RAFT OF MEDUSA, 1948-49)

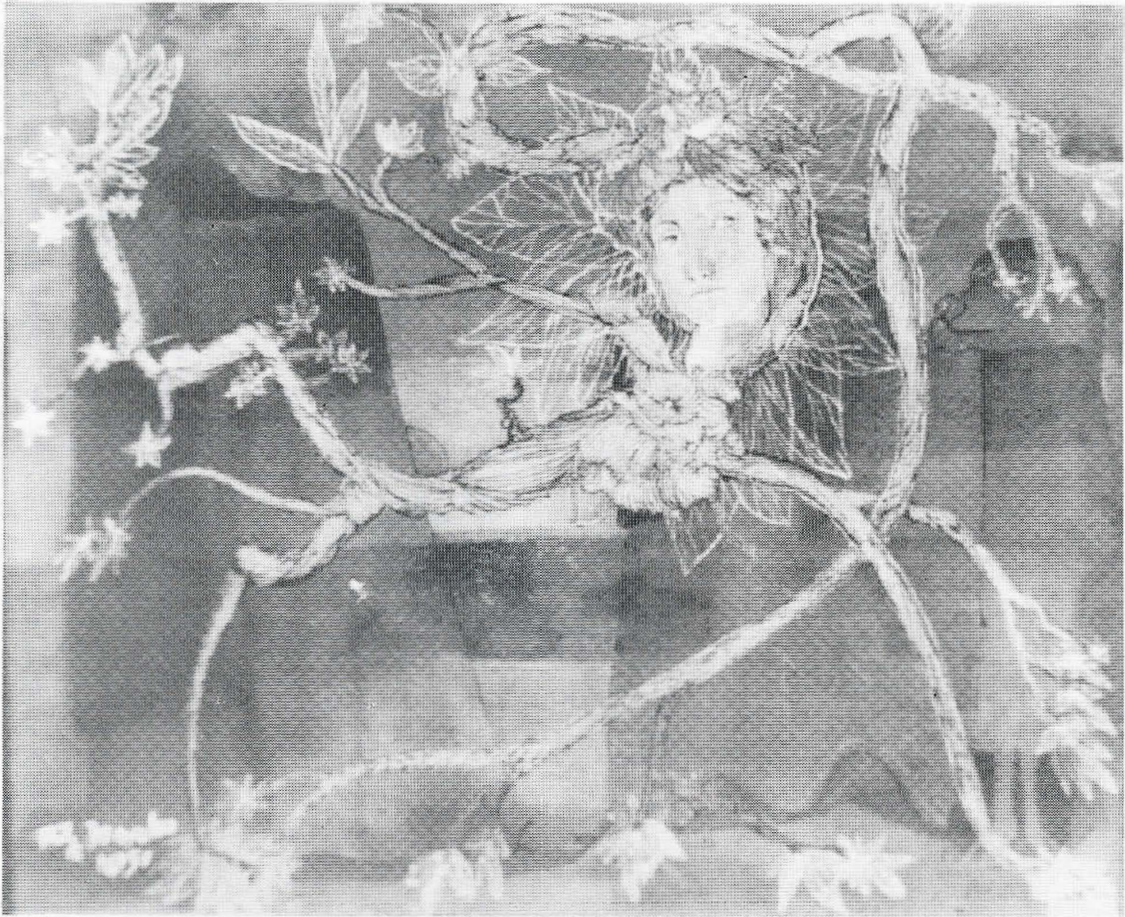
be “original” rather than influenced by the great traditions, techniques, and painters of earlier generations.

When Pop art began to displace Abstract Expressionism in the sixties, it simply inverted the idea of “originality” while not fundamentally altering the premiss that emulation of great predecessors was obsolete. After all, New York owned the correct ideology of post-war modernism, and when Pop, Op, conceptual, and other myrmidons of minimalism came to prominence, they knew well-enough to uphold the fundamental law of abstractionism.

New York was the terminus of modernism, the city of the abstract formal grid and formless life. One sees how New York functioned as emblem of modern life in Fritz Lang’s 1926 film *Metropolis*, with its infernal machines ruled by a calculating rationality which would substitute robots for human workers and human love. New York, the megalopolis which already in the early 1930s was besieged by that great symbolic beast of repressed human passion, King Kong, proved the superiority of the intellect by killing the primitive beast and its desire for beauty with techno-phallic airplanes. The decision to locate the United Nations in New York was virtually a mid-century declaration that the city was the capital of the world, and in the architectural symbolism of a towering Secretariat Building looming over the general assembly—the bureaucracy over the public forum—it was perfectly obvious that abstractionism itself was in command.

The modern metropolis, as sociologist Georg Simmel noted at the turn-of-the-century, is the spawning ground of the individual, site of the money economy, prime mover of the intellectual and abstract. Simmel believed that the eighteenth-century produced an ideal of the individual based in equality, that the nineteenth developed one of the individual based on difference from others, and that the twentieth-century had as its task the formation of a new kind of individual. Although he saw the city as the locus for new forms of individuality, Simmel believed that the conditions of modern culture and the modern metropolis were producing a great imbalance in which “objective culture” was outstripping “subjective culture.” As Emerson had put it even earlier, “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind!” The effect was that the modern cosmopolitan developed a psychic organ, the blase attitude, which was a protective shield from overstimulation, as well as a cultural and subjective form of alienation. Given the imbalance in favor of objective culture, the external blase attitude itself becomes the center of personality instead of the inner proclivities of the person: subjective culture is denied while external veneer is cultivated; individuality is subverted by idiosyncrasy; the heart is muffled by the imperatives of mind.

1950s New York seems to me to be an exemplar of these dynamics, as do the dominant trends in post-war art and culture, politics, and intellectual life in general. On the one side is pure objectivism or formalism, as seen in the steel-glass boxes which



FRITZ JANSCHKA ROOT (1951)

began to achieve hegemony over the New York skyline at that time, or perhaps in the paintings of Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, or Barnett Newman. On the other side is subjectivism or anti-formalism, heard in the chance music of John Cage or seen in the “process” paintings of Jackson Pollack, which by this time had become virtually “processed.” Both tendencies are united in their immunization from the effects of personality through the elevation of TECHNIQUE, whether through formalization or through minimalizing the elements until the technique itself becomes self-expressive. By the mid-fifties in my opinion, the combined forces of New York Power, Prestige, and Profit had squeezed the life out of Abstract Expressionism.

For these reasons Janschka’s openness to the techniques of the New York School forms an unlikely meeting point of seemingly irreconcilable positions. Janschka and the other Fantastic Realists cultivated technique, but with a fundamental difference. Because they retained the centrality of the image, some ideal of the person, and an active relation to the traditions of painting, technique or craftsmanship could remain a means to art, whereas the Abstract Expressionists tended increasingly to an art in which technique, rather than person or living form, becomes self-expressive: purely “subjective” action art without form, or formal art without soul. Formalism was also a problem for the Fantastic Realists, as is clear in more recent works by Lehmden, Hausner, and Hutter, and perhaps the shortcomings in both schools reveal how the practice of art cannot be divorced from the open engagement with life.

Janschka was fascinated by Abstract Expressionism when he came to America not only because, as he put it, “it was something in the air, something you could not avoid,” but perhaps more importantly, because of its potentially liberating techniques. He would later be influenced by Robert Rauschenberg’s work in the sixties for the same reasons, while continuing to evolve his own wide range of expressions. It was the possibility of welding chance, serendipity, and form together which intrigued Janschka, as he recounted to me in referring to his works of the early 1950s; “I did that very spontaneously, coming out absolutely not with an idea, but with an impulse. And then when I had the sort of rough image, then I began to look for things I could see in it. And it depended very much not on what was in it, but what you saw in it. If I were to do it two days later it would have looked different. You would see whatever was motivating you that day. I think that is very important” (interview, Nov. 9, 1988, Gruam, PA).

Janschka’s watercolor of 1950, *Saintliness*, illustrates the fusion of chance, serendipity, and form quite clearly. With a base of wet, bright yellow watercolor, Janschka leaned the paper against the wall and began to splatter India ink from a dropper: “And when it dropped down I took it so that it would not run too much: I controlled the running. And then I saw into it and looked at all the little images. I made little extensions suggested by some of the splashes. So I just imitated the accidental. If you talk about Picasso’s cubism or the collages—one time when he



FRITZ JANSCHKA SAINTLINESS (1950)

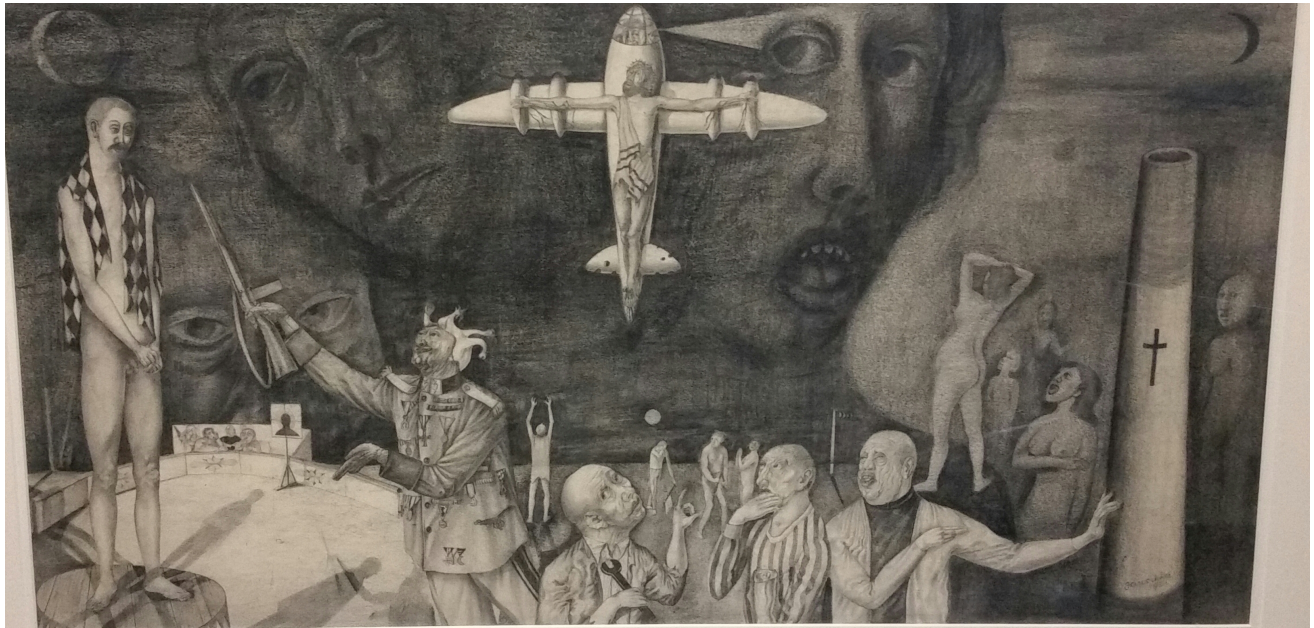
was through with that he imitated what he had done in the collages in his paintings. He faked trompe l'oeil—actually newspaper, wood textures, everything else, because he got the inspiration from the actual collage. But then in his cubist period he used this to fake what he had done before with foreign materials. And just painted it that way, to look like that. Of course it took on a different shape that way too.”

In *Saintliness* the drip-forms come alive, sprouting microbial cilia, plant limbs imitating splashes, butterfly and bee wings, human legs, and a variety of faces. *Saintliness* seems to take William Blake’s maxim, “For everything that lives is holy!”, and to add to it, “including the animalcules!”, for some of the spore-heads sport halos. Using a random starting point and free associations, Janschka was able to produce depth without perspective, and image out of anarchy. The playful humor and play of forms stand in contrast from the general humorlessness and austerity of the New York School, while yet drawing from its techniques. *Saintliness* is a kind of self-made Rorschach test (as all art in some form must ultimately be), which seems to suggest by its title that the saintly is elemental and playful, and that impulse tends toward image.

The impulse toward image can also be seen in another of Janschka’s works which draws heavily from Abstract Expressionism, *Root* (1951, see fig. 3). In this work Janschka was again able to use the “surface” techniques of the New York School

which he admired, while putting them to his own uses to achieve the appearance of visual depth. In the foreground is a Root Woman, her face the blossoming flower of a vine body. The background is composed of abstract color shapes, and what appears to be a rising or setting sun. To the right, a two-footed standing dog emerges out of the color patches, his gaze directed at the woman. The form of the root was made by the random application of rubber cement, as Janschka explained: “I used rubber cement and painted it on in squiggles. Then I went over it [the paper] with water colors—this way, this way, then that way—a very random brushing on in all directions. There are deep blues, reds, light yellows and all kinds of things. Then I would peel off the rubber cement. And then I would take a pen and draw into it, find whatever in it. And I used white ink over it. So I made it a combination. Some of it was here roughly, some of it done afterwards, superimposed on what was underneath.”

In other words, what Janschka seemed to do was to make a perfectly good Abstract Expressionist watercolor, and then to paint over it to produce non-abstract images. A purist of the New York School might say that Janschka went too far, imposing artificial image over authentic expression. Yet Janschka’s *Root* seems to state implicitly that image-making is somehow basic to expression. In this respect one might say that the iconoclasm of the New York School tended in its purest expressions to subvert the natural impulse to image: it ended up cutting itself off from its own roots and soon withered. This raises the question, Is there a natural impulse to image? And if so, does it have any-



FRITZ JANSCHKA WAR (1951)

thing to do with art? The first question was definitively answered in the affirmative in my opinion by a gorilla trained in sign-language who spontaneously invented a new word to describe what it did at night: "sleep-pictures." The autonomously produced psychic images of dreams may have been the original proto-human language, and art—the effort to transform the inner world to outer significant form—may have been the next, itself followed in turn by linguistic language.

Dreaming, the nightly ritual of inner icons, remains a formative power in human affairs. But the more difficult question is whether image remains a necessary ingredient of art. Until recently, modernism seemed to have decided this question in the negative. Then suddenly new forms of figurative expression began exploding on the scene, so that the art of our time—like the architecture, philosophy, and other cultural expressions—can be described variously as "pluralistic," "eclectic," or "anything goes." At stake is not only the technical question of "image or abstraction," but the deeper question of how human art might be possible in a world gripped ever-more tightly by the forces of abstract intelligence.

Twentieth-century modernism began in the revolutionary impetus to tear through the scrim of Western Civilization, to grasp the phantom of life itself. Yet, as Kafka once put it, "Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can

be calculated in advance, and it becomes part of the ceremony." By mid-century, revolutionary modernism began to "be calculated in advance" and became part of the ceremony, the great ritual of the ghost in the machine. In the 1950s the imaginative life of the Abstract Expressionists seemed to run dry, its leading representatives replicating their signature "one-idea" works for big bucks. From this perspective, New York Abstract Expressionism may not have been "representational" but it was certainly representative of its time.

Perhaps the chief task of the twentieth-century has not been, as Simmel believed, to cultivate a new form of individuality, but to show the face of what Fuchs calls the "invisible dictator" of modernity, whose ultimate purpose is to eradicate the human person: the ghost in the machine world of pseudo-primal subjectivity, reified objectivity; imageless spectre, purposeless machine. The trick, however, is to show the face without becoming either ghost or machine: to retain the myriad impulses, emotions, and ideas of the live human creature. And when that phase is completed—and perhaps it is—who knows but that we may find ourselves face-to-face with ourselves again, or eradicated.

I am not suggesting that Janschka's "Abstract Expressionist" works represent the solution for contemporary painting; there is no single solution. But Janschka's works do remain suggestive in showing one aspect of the battle between image and abstraction, in which the vital dream-image of humanity puts abstraction to its purposes.

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