



CONTRADICTION AND HARMONY: WORKS BY JERALD IEANS

INTRODUCTION

The Tubman African American Museum is named after Harriet Ross Tubman, an African American woman who escaped slavery to become an abolitionist, a Conductor of the Underground Railroad and an activist for the rights of African Americans, women, the elderly and indigent. The Museum's mission is to educate people about African American art, history and culture. In service to that mission the Museum organizes a yearly calendar of special exhibitions. Among the goals of this program are: to document and celebrate the history of African American art and artists, and to provide different opportunities for intellectual, civic and social engagement between the Museum and the community it serves. Thus, while the Museum always seeks to participate in the critical dialogue about contemporary art, its educational mission places it firmly on the side of "the people" when it comes to the question of individual artistic freedom versus social responsibility. "Art for art's sake" versus "art for people's sake" is a debate that has been central to artistic production in the African American community since before Henry O. Tanner traveled to Paris in 1891 seeking relief from the pressures of being a "negro artist." This debate is ongoing, and contributed, in a roundabout way, to the organization of this exhibition.

The Tubman Museum became interested in showing the work of Jerald leans in the wake of *Freestyle*, an exhibition mounted at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001. That exhibition featured works by a generation of young African American artists who represented a break from the traditional obligations to explore cultural identity or comment on racial politics in their work. Whether the exhibition represented a real break from established traditions, or rather signaled a new willingness within the larger art world to see the work of these artists in new ways is open to question. What is not open to question is that among the *Freestyle* artists, Jerald leans was roundly praised as a leading young abstract painter.

The Studio Museum in Harlem is nestled in the heart of an international community of arts institutions, and as a result has a degree of influence in the art world that the Tubman Museum, nestled in the heart of Macon, Georgia, quite frankly does not share. So, what value does an exhibition of pure abstract painting have for the Tubman and its audience? Perhaps the most important way that this institution fulfills its mission is by confronting and exploding cultural assumptions. In its art program the Museum seeks to dispel stereotypical ideas about the subjects, media, imagery and intent of African American art by exploring the diversity of contemporary African American visual expression. leans work is perfect for the Tubman because it challenges our traditional visitors personally and culturally. leans work is steeped in art history rather than racial history. It is about uniting seemingly disparate formal concerns into highly personal images that are very beautiful and soothing, and at the same time subtly unnerving and challenging, hence the title of the exhibition *Contradiction and Harmony*. Though not immediately apparent, leans' artistic goals and the Tubman's institutional goals are similar. What the artist works out on his canvas, this institution seeks to achieve in this community; to bring myriad ideas and forces together in an arena of action where something of lasting beauty and value can be built.

This institution's function is to be a primary source for experiences that enrich cultural understanding. As such the Museum has a responsibility to present the highest quality art to the public. So, the Tubman Museum is very pleased and happy to introduce Jerald leans to Macon, and to make the work of this extraordinary artist a part of our service to this community, Middle Georgia and the Southeast.

Jeffrey Bruce
Director of Exhibitions

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In *Contradiction and Harmony: Works by Jerald Ieans*, we are treated to a visual experience that demonstrates the best of the formalist, the thinker, and the sensualist. The Saint Louis artist creates paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints that are certainly abstract. Whether or not they are *purely* abstract is another matter.

If Ieans challenges notions of what African American art should be, he does so because he creates what art *must* be. He gives us a new way to see; one that recognizes what has come before, and takes on a life of its own in a connective and highly personal way.

At first glance, the paintings of Jerald Ieans are striking, and enigmatic. Large, colorful, seemingly spontaneous abstractions float inside the confines of each canvas. The images are easy on the eye. Light and dark sway together and around each other; shapes curl and dance like foam on the tip of a wave. Juxtaposing tones create a sense of depth and differentiation, and amorphous forms in often innocent hues combine to recall pop culture influences of the late sixties. The overall effect is pleasurable, and at times vaguely nostalgic.

Jerald Ieans was born in 1970, in Lake County, Illinois. Raised in Saint Louis, he is self-taught. Rather than attend art school, he chose to learn by reading, looking, and doing. He studied the collection housed at the Saint Louis Art Museum, absorbing the lessons of modern and contemporary masters. He worked daily in his studio, experimenting with various mediums. Giving a nod to Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, Mark Rothko, Brice Marden, and others for early inspiration, he exhibits a spare minimalist aesthetic. He also shows an affinity for the expressive qualities of color-field painting. But the work is, and has always been, distinctly his own.



Dancin' at the Blue Iguana, 2004
Oil on canvas on wood
54.25 x 48.25 inches
Private Collection



Untitled [Gray 17], 1991 — 2001
Oil on canvas on wood
17.25 x 17.25 inches



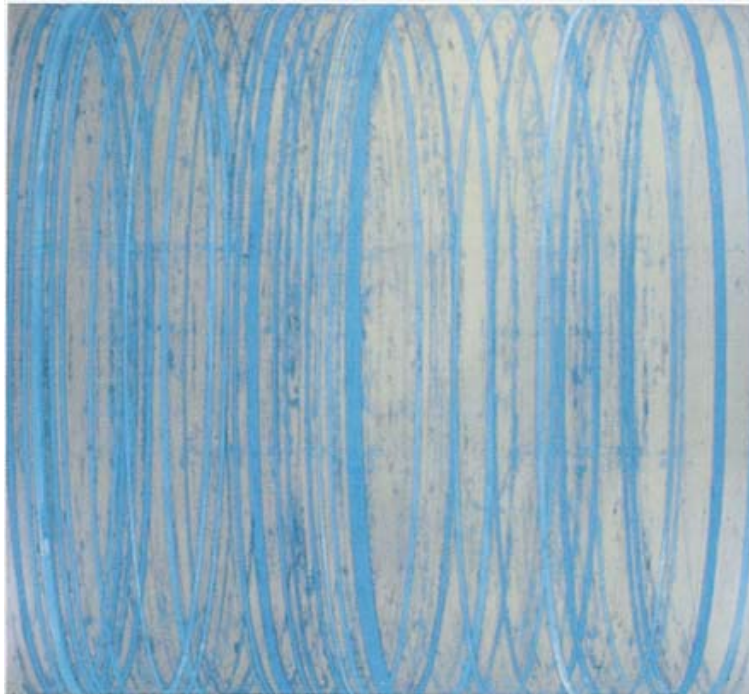
Ellipses 3 (From Blue), 1995
Oil and Elmer's Glue on Paper

leans gained notice in the early 1990s with monochromatic studies of the ellipse, an elegant form that he manipulates to mesmerizing effect. Working with a combination of oil paint and Elmer's glue, leans's ellipses slip and slide across the paper or canvas. Some collide, like microscopic organisms, while others advance in formation along a vertical or horizontal plane. leans achieves fascinating results by juxtaposing the soft, sculptural effects of the glue against the exacting quality of precisely rendered forms.

For Jerald leans, with both the museum and his studio as classroom, the decision to learn by doing must have been the right one. In 1994, at the age of twenty-four, he was the youngest artist ever to have a solo exhibition at the Saint Louis Art Museum, in their "Currents" series.

leans takes a decisive turn in the late 1990s with *Untitled S.H.* (1997-1998). Showing a transition to looser, more rhythmic, and more expansive forms, leans's carefully constrained ellipses are suddenly set free. Streaming across a large canvas, leans layers on paint and glue in

seemingly continuous lines of graceful elliptical form. The work remains controlled, but the effect is ribbon-like and gleeful, heady with its own movement; strong, symphonic and shimmering. This is a new openness, a broader reach that marks a definitive change in direction for leans, and the beginning of creating abstractions that evoke qualities of sound and movement.



Untitled S.H., 1997-1998
Oil and Elmer's glue on canvas on wood
61 x 67 inches
Private Collection

By 1999, leans's forms grow bolder and freer. He progresses to coolly detached, biomorphic paintings in surprising colors – loopy, fluid abstractions executed on a growing scale. His ample shapes are lush, albeit aloof; they are substantive, but not static. They seem almost to overflow, yet the artist holds them to boundaries with exacting edges. The effect is a satisfying tension between the fullness of the forms and the lines that seem to hold them back.

Working on the floor, leans uses a combination of taping, layering, and drawing techniques. Brushwork then subtly textures each layer in vertical or horizontal graining. The precision of his draughtsman's hand fashions exquisite curvilinear effects that heighten the impact of the layer beneath. Working and reworking, each layer of oil allows the color, shape, and surface beneath to breathe life.

By 2001, the art world begins to take greater notice. leans's work is chosen for inclusion in the much-publicized Thelma Golden exhibition, *Free-style*, at The Studio Museum in Harlem. Where

leans stands in the ensuing discussion on “post-black” art, or any political statement in art, is not noted. What *is* noted, however, is solid praise for leans as a fine up-and-coming abstract artist. In a 2002 article in *ArtForum*, leans is described as a young artist of “special promise” by Robert Storr, former Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. And the work that follows does not disappoint.

If his biomorphic shapes pay homage to art history, recalling Jean Arp or Elizabeth Murray in their sensuous, meandering harmonies, leans certainly makes the work his own. A closer look quickly reveals the human form in his paintings. *Dancin' at the Blue Iguana* (2004) is a sensuous composition of a man and woman in delicious depiction of movement. Enhanced by the fine lines of each paint layer that wind through these liquid bodies, both boundaries and blending are offered up, like lovemaking.



Blue Ruin, 2002
Oil on canvas on wood



Misty, 2005
Enamel on stainless steel
59 x 52 x 9 inches

A first glance at *Blue Ruin* (2002) suggests purely abstract shapes, spills of soft color overlaying other spills that came before. But a second look reveals different possibilities: life in full bloom, or life coming to a place of rest. In the foreground, are these two figures wrapped around each other? Or is this tender splash of light an apparition, or a spirit gently carried by the blue forms in the background?

Misty (2005) is a wall relief created of powder-sprayed enamel paint on steel. In sculpture, leans sets his forms free of the confines of canvas. But what are we seeing? The possibilities are many: cartoon-like ghosts, figures interacting, exhilarated by the chance to float unencumbered where they will. Is this humanity and its shadows, or humanity evolving?

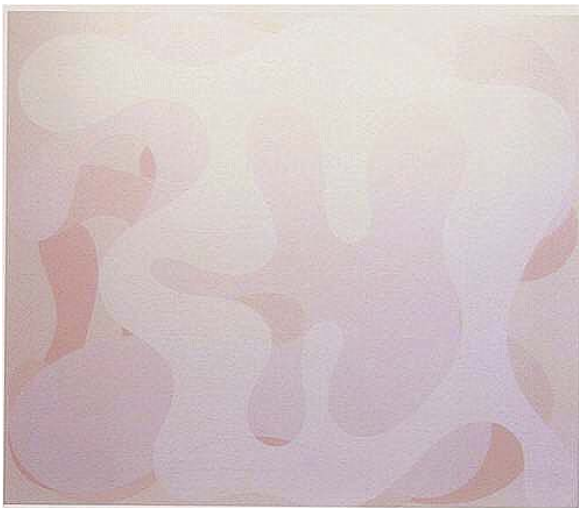


Installation view, *White Paintings*, 2005, Solomon Projects, Atlanta, GA

leans's color palette is unusual. Typically cool, it is tinged with subtle variations in hue. It is as though the artist is constantly pushing color to its limits, nudging it gently along the spectrum, playing with tint, and seeking to observe the changes that result. leans chooses related tones, focusing at various points in time on greys, icy reds, muted greens, and repeatedly squeezing subtlety from a glorious spectrum of ocean blues, baby blues, and tones evocative of sky and sea.

In the ironically titled exhibition, *White Paintings*, mounted in Spring 2005, leans pushes his experimentation with color another step. Mixing varying amounts of zinc oxide white into his other pigments, he creates luscious hues that are anything but white, making for eloquent, sophisticated results – a palette that is frosty and spectral, changing in the light.

Is leans teaching us to study color, and to expand our capacity to experience it? As he tweaks it, explores it, makes it focal and at the same time reduces it to a formalist exercise, is he playing out the elements of personal narrative, as well as social and cultural history?



Nipple Dimple, 2005
Oil on canvas on wood
84 x 96 inches
Private Collection

From the *White Paintings* series, *Nipple Dimple* (2005) stands out as a glowing example of leans's vision, with its undulating and musical shapes painted in delicate hues of rose, champagne, and palest pink. The composition is more intricate than many of his earlier works, and the first that contains a form within a form. Clearly imbued with the energy of human life, the viewer may see a mother bending over her child, reaching for him outside of herself, lifting him to suckle her breast. But is the negative space in the center of the canvas a void, or an empty womb? In that loose and flowering inner shape is she nurturing more life to come?

Nipple Dimple feels primal: it takes the viewer into territory that is spiritual, quiet, and unspoken – the uplifted hand, the open mouth, the tender nipple. Even as the coolness of the palette keeps us at arm's length, we are drawn in by the extraordinary intimacy of the scene – the elements of giving and sustaining life.

Like a poet, Jerald leans elaborates on certain works by using titles as gateways to his intention. Some are as direct as women's names: *Julianne*, *Sheila*, and *Mathilda*. Many are variations on the colors he is working with: *Blue Ruin*, *Champagne Supernova*, and *Pink Mosquito*. When he chooses, leans invents a word to suit himself: *Coolidge* is the name he gives to a gorgeous painting in silky, lemon tones — a play on words to capture the painting's frothy palette. With *Agrasion*, leans melds the word gray with abrasion, referencing his affinity for an abrading technique used in earlier works.

There's no doubt that leans's works are filled with psychological hairpin turns for those who ride the abundant curves into the heart of his artistic vision. He combines form, line, texture, and hue to create a funhouse effect that guides the eye here and there. We are led willingly; we wander the canvas, circle around, light for a moment in one spot, move in to ex-



Sheila, 2002
Oil on canvas on wood
72 x 80 inches

perience the details, move back to take in the big picture — the sheer physicality of his large scale forms and luminous colors. We are also struck by the poetry of it all, by its music and energy. The work is both literally and figuratively layered: biomorphic shapes transform into human ones; colors are changeable and ambiguous; titles lead us to dusky memory, and surprising possibility.

Yet even in abundance, leans remains true to the principles of minimalism: that what is spare leaves room for the viewer to enter the space; what is restrained can be powerful. It is no surprise that leans's paintings hang in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim Museum, the Saint Louis Art Museum, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and in numerous prestigious private collections.

If these images remain a riddle to some, they deepen for those who venture a closer look. The consummate visual poet, Jerald leans creates art that is lyrical — a highly personal rendering of feeling and experience — open, inclusive, and referential. It shares its secrets with those who will come to his imagery over and over again, taking pleasure in his restrained jubilation, hues that transform in the light, and surfaces that seem to undress like skins. Layers of color, like layers of meaning, reveal themselves; we find strength and nuance residing in each. We are encouraged to discover *with* the artist, but not at his insistence.

If we are drawn to these works of art, perhaps it is because leans accomplishes something irresistible: from the contradictions of past, present, and possibility, he offers a dazzling and soothing new harmony.

D. A. Wolf
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