

PRESSBOOK

Jens FÄNGE

#Legend

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Last Chance to View Jens Fänge's Latest Work

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Portrait of Jens Fänge (photo by Ringo Cheung)

Somewhere at the crossroads between the early 20th century practice of collage and the ancient art of shadow play, Jens Fänge has developed a surrealistic Matryoshka doll-like aesthetic, which consists of assembling paintings within paintings. He combines an entire hierarchy of genres into his composite works, converging iconic portraits, still lifes, domestic interiors, cityscapes and landscapes with geometric abstractions, all of which he renders using a variety of mediums and materials such as oil paint, pencil, vinyl, cardboard and fabric on panel. #legend spoke with him about his latest show at Galerie Perrotin.

Your work is multi-dimensional and full of repetition. This exhibition seems dominated by this single street scene, which appears in different forms and sizes in the other works? How did you happen upon that?

At some point there is some source, or found image. Most of the time I'm eager to pick a source that is insignificant. The street scene came from an amateur painting of Arabic architecture, and I took that aspect of it away; for me, the interest was more the perspective, and since a lot of the paintings are interiors, I wanted to present something outside. That idea of images within image, I'm playing around with it.

How long does it take you to get a work right – when are they done?

All the paintings here, at some point, they were all half done, or finished to 80 percent. That has become important for me, and I'm not able to finish a painting and put it aside. I have to have them all 'open' for as long as possible, just laying on the floor. In some way they are all one piece of work.

Structure, texture, dimensions, what are they in your art? Theme? Obsessions? What is the 'vibe' of the paintings?

Obsession immediately sounds closer than theme. It's very intuitive, my working process. There's not a certain idea or story that I want to emphasise and I'm not really into romanticising painting. For me it's very important to keep my interest in what I'm doing alive, it's important that the paintings are a riddle to me. Sometimes when working, if everything is right and perfectly balanced and the content makes sense, at that point, I understand the painting. I spend a long time looking at it, and it starts working in itself, as if I'm looking at a movie or something, if that doesn't sound too pretentious.

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What are some of your inspirations?

I've made some murals, and this time I wanted to be more abstract, but still referring to physical space. I thought about this [points] as being the floor, hence the cigarette on the wall. This [points] has echoes of the street, but we're inside. It's like a new iteration of the street inside – intertextuality. For example, when I painted this little painting it was around the time it was announced that David Bowie had died. By coincidence I had Hunky Dory laying around on a table... so this is a bed, and it was a portrait of David Bowie. But I'm no good at doing portraits, but it turned out – that it became too obvious, and I didn't want that, so I changed it.

You're Swedish and a Bergman fan. Which is your favourite film of his and why?

I am a Bergman fan, I would say *Persona*. The drama between the characters is in a limited amount of space, with shifting identities, I find that interesting.

I love Fanny & Alexander. Complex and upsetting but wonderful.

Yes. I agree. It's a very rewarding film. Talking about film, when I was making this painting, I had recently watched the Werner Herzog movie *Casper House*. It's not what the painting's about, but it came to be about that in some way, so the title is *Hause*, which is slightly ambiguous. It refers to the character in the house.

How hard is it to title work for you?

I love doing it. But it's much more difficult than painting. I allow myself some free ideas, sometimes I try to do it by chance, cling to a certain title and painting and see what happens, see if the content shifts and if so, how much and in what direction.



View of Jens Fänge's solo exhibition 'Sister Feelings' at Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong, 2017. (Photo by Ringo Cheung, c/o the Artist & Galerie Perrotin)

It reminds me of his video Black Star. And then this vase, such detail.

I've use that pattern sometimes, and don't hesitate to admit that I find it very difficult to paint patterns. But it also has a practical meaning. Sometimes I need to slow down the pace, and it's time consuming to do patterns. So it's about the pace of the painting.

One feels a strong sense of childhood and wooden toys. Why am I sensing that?

I think you're thinking of one particular brand, I hadn't thought of it, but they use black, red, blue and yellow.

The people in these images are upside down. Why?

I like to move back and forth between figurative and total abstract conversation, so for a moment I don't care about the practicality. I like it to be about perspective and the viewing point of the beholder. I like to think of that character not as hanging upside down but putting me in a position where I'm laying on the ground and seeing him from above.

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[Looking at painting Arrival] I'm struck by this – this character is very powerful. We rush with him into the image, yet we only see him from the back. His level of enquiry is like ours.

I'm so glad you say that because that very detail is by far the one I was working on the most, he went through several phases; at some point he was more realistically painted, with skin and hair and patterns on the clothes, but I had to redo and cut-out several times. It's called *Arrival*.

Is surreal a good description of your work?

I can't deny that I have a relationship to that movement, but I don't think of myself as a surrealist. I'm interested in dreams, the structure of dreams and how dreams unfold, the narrative of dreams. How broken up they can be. It's more the sequence of dream than moving images. I'm fascinated by the history of perspective, and how people took a view on perspective and how it came to be.

Do you listen to music when you work?

Yes. The show is a kind of reference to old records. At that time, it was a post-punk band which became Simple Minds. They had an early album called *Sister Feelings*. It was an early record of theirs. I wanted to embrace the feeling. I listened to that as a teenager. That title always intrigued me and I didn't really get what it was about. So it's the relationship between the paintings as siblings. I do listen a lot to music. And sometimes I think of painting as the perspective shifting from composing a song, the chorus of a song, how it repeats, the album format. They are like singles on an album.

And what do you listen to now?

I would say it goes in many different directions. Without being sentimental I'm interested in listening to the 80s. Susie and the Banshees, Simple Minds, or classical composers. I like to listen to Bob Dylan.

I came late to Dylan. Street Legal, around 1980-ish. Late. What about you?

I'm also late. But I got permission to make a Nobel Prize artwork for him. I had to make a connection in some way when making an image for the diploma. I made three Nobel Prize diplomas. That is always a challenge. I get to know who is the winner. It takes time to get a grasp on these things. You have to do something that relates to it but avoiding making it too illustrative or obvious.

You did art for Nobel Prize winners – and Bob Dylan – how does that work? I had no idea artists were connected to the Nobel Prize in any way.

Yes. It's rarely seen because it's in the diploma that is handed over by the king, and so it's not secret but it's also not very visible.

So Bob Dylan has your artwork in his diploma. How cool is that?

Yes. But he didn't come to get it yet, but when he does I hope he'll recognise it.

And the other two?

The first was Patrick Modiano, the French writer. That was really tricky. I actually was playing around with a reference to one of his books in that painting. And diploma number two was Svetlana Alexievich, a Russian writer. She bases all her books on a vast number of interviews with one hook like Chernobyl, for example.

So it's an artwork of them?

I have artistic freedom. It has to relate to them in some way, but is not a portrait. I'm asked as a visual artist just to respond to their work. They can be seen at the Nobel website or the Nobel Museum in Stockholm.

It's 100 years since Marcel Duchamp's Fountain urinal. Where do you stand on that work? How do you assess it now?

I was talking about that piece with a friend here, just before. We were discussing Maurizio Cattelan's golden toilet at the Guggenheim – it's interesting living in Stockholm, the collection of Duchamp is at the Modern Museum, executed with his permission. It's intriguing and interesting the different levels of authenticity because what we have now is a replica from 1964, not the original, which was lost. And he was directly involved in that process. I'm an admirer but I don't very much relate to what he does. I can more strongly relate to someone like Kurt Schwitters and his approach. I have difficulties with Kandinsky in terms of what is going on but I love his work.

When was the last time you went to an art gallery and thought 'wow'?

I wish I had a quick answer. Let me think. I saw a Morandi show last year in New York. That gave me goosebumps. Malevich is also an artist that fascinates me. Also the high level of uncertainty that takes place. He was messing up the chronology even of his own work. The relationship between his Suprematism and seemingly clumsy farmers.

What do you read? Do you have favourite books?

Thomas Mann. I have to pick something for the long flight, so I went back in time and chose Stendahl.

Which one?

Red and Black. I have never read it but always wanted to.

Will something of that creep into your next work?

I'd love to admit that it would. But it's on the subliminal level. I am careful to keep the doors wide open for that kind of influence.

Jens Fänge, Sister Feelings, is at [Galerie Perrotin](#), Hong Kong, until March 10.

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Story Told by
Stephen Short