



History of Modern Art
H.H Arnason
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Bill Jensen
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1067. BILL JENSEN. *The Tempest*. 1980–81. Oil on linen, 30 × 22". Private collection

BILL JENSEN (b. 1945) Jensen could very well have spoken for most of his contemporaries seen here when he declared: “My paintings are not really abstract.” Furthermore, he says: “I never heard of Pollock or De Kooning talking about their paintings as being purely abstract, completely devoid of any glimpses, of signs, of things they imagined they saw, things they really saw, things they felt.” Thus, in his small, intimate, richly chiaroscuro paintings—a mysterious, twilight, Redon-like world of strangely metamorphic forms (fig. 1067)—Jensen reconnects not only with the original, content-seeking Abstract Expressionists, at least in their preheroic works, but also with Pollock’s ancestry in such pioneer, Symbolist-inspired American modernists as Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, and Georgia O’Keeffe, or even their own immediate precursor, Albert Pinkham Ryder. Fully as subjective and “difficult” as the latter, Jensen nonetheless has created an engaging, communicative art, not by working on a huge, all-embracing, environmental scale, but rather by so compressing his curiously hybrid, personal image as to draw the viewer in, generously sharing a private, inner realm of fantasy and imagination. There the eye and the mind find themselves mesmerized by a shadowy dreamscape, whose coiling and uncoiling biomorphs appear to be in the process of both revealing and concealing their secrets—really the enigma of their own creation. No less obsessive and captivating is the artist’s facture, a dense, meditative painterliness, giving effect to a muted cream, bronze, and blue or green palette. Heavily cross-hatched in light-dark contrasts, the color itself reinforces the metaphor of conflict already evoked in the imploding-exploding shapes. Visionary as this art may be—a dark, Surreal, deeply spatial yet enclosed garden of horns, cones, seedpods, and giant, hairy stamens—it reaches out to nature and takes possession of the spirit. Like Baudelaire in his *correspondences*, discovering evocative correlations for all manner of visual, auditory, and olfactory sensations, Jensen seeks pictorial equivalents for the life-nurturing significance he finds throughout material and immaterial existence.