

Alfred MacAdam, "Sailing Over the Kitsch of Everyday Life: Asger Jorn at Petzel, New York,"
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SAILING OVER THE KITSCH OF EVERYDAY LIFE: ASGER JORN AT PETZEL, NEW YORK

BY *Alfred Mac Adam* POSTED 05/27/16 2:00 PM

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Asger Jorn, *Drama i junglen (Jungle Drama)*, 1952, oil on masonite, 31½ x 35½ inches
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK/ESSL MUSEUM, KLOSTERNEUBURG/WIEN

Born in 1914, the first year of World War I, Asger Jorn (1914–73) survived the worst of the 20th century: the Great Depression, World War II, the Korean conflict, and Vietnam. Like every European intellectual of his generation, he grew up amid the mortal conflict between Fascism and Communism. Early on, he joined the Communist Party, though he would inevitably abandon its Stalinist dogma. During the '60s, he tried his luck with Guy Debord and the Marxist Situationists, but even this dissident strain of Marxism was too absolute for Jorn's contrarian personality. He was unable to turn his art into propaganda.

Jorn's artistic development is clear and brief. Trained as a figurative artist, he fell under the spell of Expressionism, which contained elements akin to his own nature: caricature, unnatural color, and forceful gesture. The folkloric element in his work links him not only to a Scandinavian tradition but also to the avant-garde of the early 20th century: Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913), for example, is a Russian legend transformed into a modernist extravaganza.

This show, titled "The Open Hide," consists of 21 works, mostly oils, created between 1949 and 1971. They show remarkable stylistic consistency, considering that Jorn emerged from a figurative tradition, that he was a full-fledged artist during the 1930s, and that he worked right up until his death, in 1973. He was a printmaker, a ceramist, and a sculptor, and these fabulous pieces are just a soupçon of the artist's oeuvre.

Petzel

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Asger Jorn, *Portrait: Signora Albissola*, 1957, ripolin and oil on paper on Masonite (laid down by the artist), 59½ x 39¾ inches.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK

It is difficult to imagine a man from Denmark of no means and weakened by tuberculosis becoming a superstar. Jorn was the quintessential outsider, and that status infuses his work with irony. Small wonder that parody is one of his powerful weapons. His 1957 *Portrait: Signora Albissola* (Jorn lived in the Italian town of Albissola Marina) deconstructs all the narcissism conventionally entailed in portraiture. Jorn's 1958 *Portrait of Odilon Redon* is something of a mystery: what would he see in the effete Symbolist, whose image here seems to entail no parody? Perhaps it's the notion of allegory, whereby the visual image contains a message the viewer must decipher or invent.

Combining allegory with parody, Jorn appropriates a banal seascape and "modifies" until it becomes *The Flying Dutchman* (1959). Is this an image of never-to-be-fulfilled desire or of the outsider who cannot find a safe port? Jorn's graffiti and deliberately messy masses of color reflect a soul in torment sailing over the kitsch of everyday life.

Naturally, the personal and anecdotal also enter Jorn's work. His *Jungle Drama* (1952) could be an allegorical self-portrait: on the right an anguished figure huddles in a world of flame; on the left a grim, horned effigy stares at him. Is this Jorn suffering from tuberculosis, suffering the paranoia of the Cold War, or is it a mere mortal confronting the fact of his mortality?

Accompanying the show is an extremely useful catalogue with notes on individual works by Roberto Ohrt and Axel Heil. It's a treasure-house of information about both the life and work of this fascinating Dane.

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