

ARTFORUM

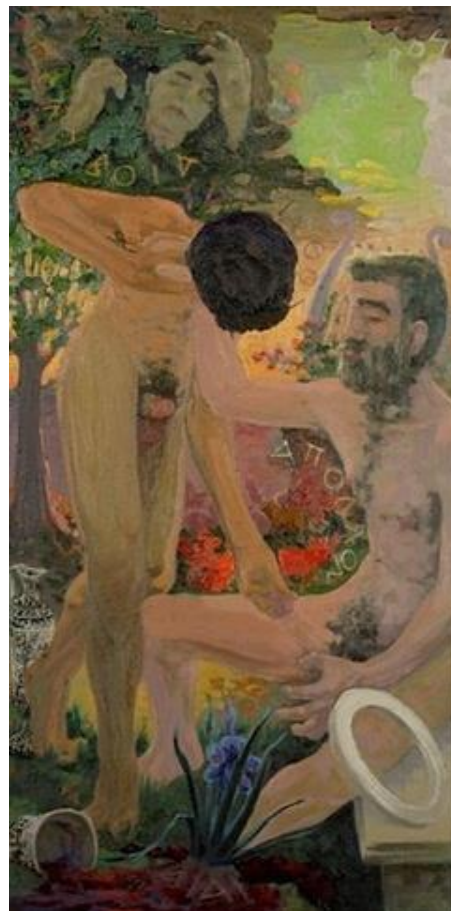
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CRITICS' PICK

By Joseph Akel

O, to be gay in San Francisco. With HBO's seemingly ersatz appropriation of Armistead Maupin's "Tales of the City," it's easy to forget that, once upon a time, being fey in the City by the Bay was less about fitting in than it was about, well, sticking out. One of two exhibitions currently featuring the work of Jess Collins—or simply, Jess—in New York (the other at New York University's Grey Art Gallery), "Looking Past Seeing Through" offers a mordant, abbreviated survey of works by the Bay Area magus of all things queer and fantastical.

Several oil paintings included evince the artist's deep-seated affinity for classical Greek mythology. Among them, *Hyakinthos-Apollon*, 1962, rendered somewhat crudely and with a tendency toward the impasto, takes its cue from a revenge-driven triangle of desire, in which Apollo and Zephyrus fight over the Spartan prince Hyakinthos. Jealousy and death ensue, and the slain prince is transformed into a blossoming hyacinth. On the painting's verso, a text by Jess's lover, the poet Robert Duncan, reads in part, "Thou too has loved / and borne / mortality's bourne." Williams Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980) had nothing on the ancients.



Hyakinthos-Apollon, 1962, oil on canvas,
57 x 30 inches

Jess was a prolific producer of collages—he termed them “paste-ups”—and the dozen on view here showcase his bent for the witty and the absurd. *Tricky Cad (Case II)*, 1954, reflects Jess's early surrealist tendencies. Appropriating Dick Tracy comics, he would rearrange the texts and alter the images within to produce nonsensical narratives. Elsewhere, the series of seven circle-shaped collages, “Emblems for Robert Duncan II,” 1989, comes off as a totemic eulogy to his lover of forty years, who died in 1988. In *3 (They Were There for They Are Here)*, 1989, the spherical form is crammed with cutouts of literary giants (Joyce, Baudelaire, Shakespeare, Pound), while in *5 (To Open Night's Eye That Sleeps in What We Know by Day)*, 1989, a discombobulated Duncan himself appears in a Bosch-like garden of delights, clutching a translucent orb, on top of which rests a cutout of Stonehenge. For Jess and his fellow San Francisco castaways, dwelling in mythical worlds was the only option in response to the one that had forsaken them.