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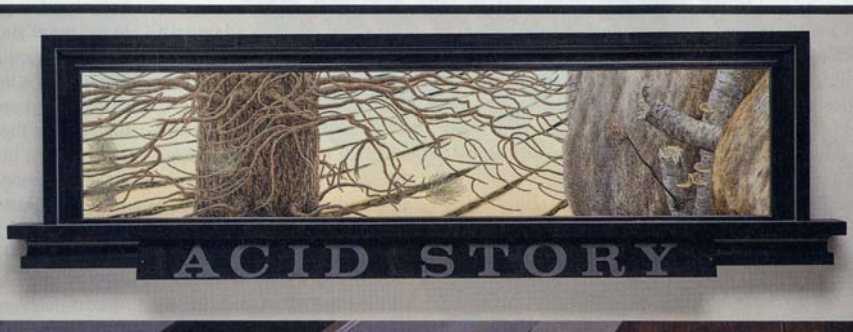
GAGOSIAN GALLERY

SCARY TERRITORY

IN THE FACE OF AN ART WORLD WARY OF THE REALIST TRADITION, NEIL JENNEY CONTINUES TO REFINE HIS SOMETIMES PANORAMIC, SOMETIMES CLOSE-UP LANDSCAPES BY PAUL GARDNER



COURTESY THE ARTIST

"People don't know what to say about realism today," says Neil Jenney with a smile. "Realism is scary territory. Nobody has codified the realist movement." Painter, self-taught art historian, and philosopher, Jenney, at age 50, remains a maverick of the New York art world. "Realistic painting is a heroic effort," he says. "It reveals instantly if you can draw. With abstraction, it's a matter of opinion."

Over the last 25 years, Jenney has secured his reputation without outside hype or knuckling under to passing trends. In the late 1960s, his work explored the relationship of people to objects (a weeping child beside her broken doll, a man glued to his TV set), painted with smeary brushstrokes. In the 1970s he began producing more meticulously rendered works—landscapes reflecting concerns about the environment. He has since continued to focus on outdoor scenes, but for some years now he has concentrated on vistas of solitude and silence that reveal an interest in 19th-century American landscape painting.

From the artist's "North America" series: *Acid Story*, 1983–84 (left), and *North America Divided*, 1990–94. OPPOSITE Neil Jenney (left) in his SoHo studio with longtime assistant Joe DeTullio.

Standing at a worktable in his SoHo studio, dressed in denim overalls and mixing paint, Jenney says, "I aim for idealized lines and accurate color. This is what I believe to be the pinnacle of realist expression." Jenney has made a conscious effort, though, to distance himself from the photorealists. "They try to be perfect, to hide the brushstrokes," he says. He does not use photographs when composing his canvases and works hard to give his paintings a distinct sense of drama and atmosphere.

He's now working on nine new paintings—some big, some small—all part of his extended "North America" series, first shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art's "New Image Painting" exhibition in 1978 and, more recently, in a solo show there in 1994. "I like the fact that it's not nationalistic," he says of the series. "It's us together with Canada and Mexico. 'North America' is a unifying title rather than reductionist."

His "North America" series, Jenney explains, is a reshaping of his childhood memories of views he encountered going to church and coming home from school.

Jenney spent his early years in the town of Westfield, Massachusetts, outside Boston, where his father was the foreman of a needle factory. The work ethic was instilled in him as a child: after school he delivered newspapers and picked tobacco in the Pioneer Valley. Social life centered on the Methodist church. "On Sunday, it was church—morning, afternoon, and night," he recalls. "I look back on it as a kind of social realism."

Later Jenney's family moved to Connecticut, and after his marriage to Debra, a former ballet dancer (they now have two children), he found it reassuring to buy a Victorian house in the town where his parents and grandparents are buried and where his sister lives. "My roots are in New England," the artist explains. "Although my studio is in New York and I own an apartment in Greenwich Village, it seems only natural to go back physically—and esthetically—to where my brain is programmed already."

When driving along a sinuous bend in the road to his Connecticut home, his gaze, he says, may suddenly be transfixed by a burst of streaming sunshine, a grass-grown path, or a gray stone wall encircling a field. Jenney feels a distinct sense of excitement about "the grandiosity of the ordinary landscape." He has a very positive attitude toward life and the beauty of the world. "I do not like negativism or negative art," Jenney says, shaking his head. "Graffiti art was an example of the negative."

In the studio he carefully studies his paintings of geometric clouds—formal clouds, he stresses, not soft, puffy, cuddly clouds—hovering over a mossy hillock. "You don't have to go to Niagara Falls or the Grand Tetons for inspiration," he points out. "Little things, the intimate and unremarkable, are far more important to me. There's something poetic about the tangled branches of a tree that I see in my own backyard." Trees, clouds, mountains, rocks, and stretches of sky streaked with light are signature images in Jenney's art.

"I like these elements," he says, setting aside a glass of cider and inhaling on a cigarette. "Unto themselves, they're abstract entities. A rock can be any shape, basically. So can a cloud or the limb of a tree. I'm doing abstraction in its naturalized form."

As a youth, Jenney was always interested in drawing—horses, barns, farm scenes—"little kid stuff." By the time he reached high school, he had set up a studio in the basement of his house. He attended the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston for two years and shared an apartment for a while with artist William Wegman. In art school he painted abstractions and realistic images on Masonite and beaverboard. Dropping out of school, he moved to New York, where he unloaded trucks, restored paintings, and swept floors at the Jewish Museum. "Artistically, I explored all kinds of material and sculpture. Everybody in the 1960s was doing sculpture. But I reasoned that collectors didn't have a lot of room for it, so I turned to painting and moved into realism with tremendous energy." He was given his first show in 1967 by dealer Richard Bellamy.

"Mostly I sell to American museums and collectors," Jenney says, "but I prefer that my work stay in America, anyway." And quietly, the Jenney "cult" has grown, though he has shunned the celebrity spotlight. His work has been acquired by the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among others. In 1981, a Jenney retrospective opened at the University Museum in Berkeley, California, and traveled to five European and American museums. In the fall of 1994, selected paintings also traveled to five European and American museums.

Although Jenney refers to Bellamy as his official dealer, he hasn't been formally associated with a gallery for over 20 years. "I like running the whole show myself," he says simply. Determined and sturdily uncompromising, Jenney essentially functions as his own dealer. Collectors and curators visit his loft on Wooster Street "by appointment only." If a dealer wants to give him a show, the work must first be bought. "I admire the courage of some dealers like Vivian Horan, Holly Solomon, Barbara Mathes, and Annina Nosei," says Jenney. "They buy paintings to sell in their galleries and have no problem with my idiosyncratic way of doing business. They have the instinct—and the money—to make it happen. To my knowledge, no one has ever lost money by investing in a Neil Jenney."

Jenney works slowly, so he usually has only one painting for sale at a time. Buyers don't get to pick and choose. He presents one: take it or leave it. He once received a phone call from a Hollywood raja. "I don't have anything for sale now; let me get back to you," Jenney reports having said. His friends, he recalls, were stunned. A media power broker who tells others, "Let *me* get back to you," had been put on hold! "I explained that I had nothing to show him," Jenney says, "and he listened pleasantly. If I rush a painting, it won't be right. The five paintings in the Whitney show represented 14 years of work."

Jenney strides around his amusingly messy studio, filled with stray baby toys, a playpen, odd chairs, stacks of newspapers and books, some paintings leaning against a wall, and a few empty frames. He generally chooses to put his paintings in sculptural frames, sometimes painted in three shades of one color, to give the work a sense of three dimensions. "The frame acts as a window onto the scene," he explains. "It is functional and enhances the feeling of mystery and illusion." Jenney plans to divide the floor-through studio in half and create his own gallery where collectors can peruse his work in a reposeful setting. "But no attitude," he says, with a laugh.

He's not afraid to talk about money: "It's nothing to be ashamed of." As for the buying spree of the 1980s, he recalls, "I had to pinch myself, the market was so wacky, so inflated." And today? He murmers, "I'm finishing a painting that will be priced at $2 million." Jenney doesn't waste words with bluster and bluff. "That's half the price of a Picasso, and I figure I'm half as good as he." Is the painting he's referring to a North American snow scene with a pattern of pine trees and clouds? "I don't discuss work that's incomplete," he says.

Although Jenney has "great respect for the dollar bill," he has an even deeper respect for his esthetic mission—the continued refinement of his sometimes panoramic, sometimes close-up sunny or snowy scenes. And he engagingly proselytizes on behalf of realism. "There's an implied notion that what I'm doing is looking back. I'm not looking back. I'm looking at today and tomorrow. Let's not forget that Pop art is realism, and there's a continuum from Pop to the realist movement of today. This is tomorrow's art," he adds, gesturing to a painting of a leafy bark framed against a fine blue sky.

"The technique of realism is not transmitted through the French Academy, as it was over 100 years ago," he continues "or from schools in Düsseldorf and Munich. It's why there are so many different stylistic attempts—everyone is doing his own thing." He leans back in his chair and adds, "Hey, it's tougher than exhibiting food blenders or vacuum cleaners in a plastic box or basketballs in a tank of water." ■

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