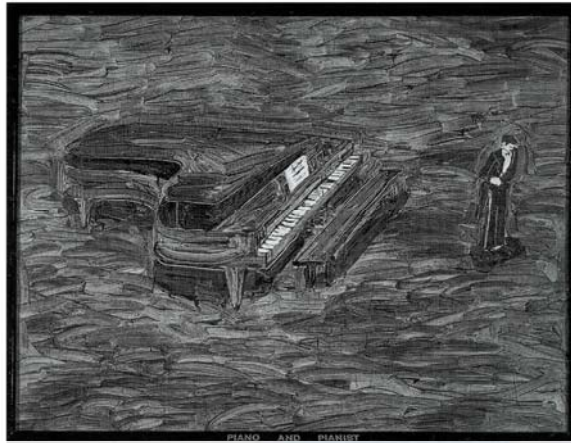


GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Neil Jenney, *Piano and Pianist*, 1969,
acrylic and graphite on canvas with painted wood frame, 58 x 76"

NEW YORK

NEIL JENNEY GAGOSIAN GALLERY

This retrospective of Neil Jenney's "bad paintings" makes it clear that they're anything but bad. The ironic label referred to the fact that they were figurative in the late '60s, a time when it was de rigueur to be abstract, but "bad" could just as well have pointed to his gestures, which seemed methodical and self-conscious next to such heroic models as Pollock's and de Kooning's. Indeed, Jenney's busy, broad handling appears to mock the Abstract Expressionists. In contrast to their bold displays of spontaneity and nerve, Jenney's gestures, for all their vigor, seem neatly, even systematically applied.

Jenney was a conceptual painter en avant the name. It's as if he paints the idea of a gesture, rather than making the gesture itself. He uses his controlled strokes as building blocks, composing them into a kind of wall or ground into which the figure—another structure of gestures—is inserted. "There are only two aesthetic styles—abstraction and realism," Jenney once wrote, and his trick is to synthesize them, using abstraction to enliven a static scene, adding a certain expressive indeterminacy to what is otherwise a legible image, especially with what look like *pentimenti*, "spacey" pencil lines that add a certain sketchiness and quickness to what is otherwise a realist picture. But what makes the scenes even more bizarre is the hugeness of the objects and the grandness of the space in comparison to the miniature figures. In *Piano and Pianist*

the (very) grand piano turns the pianist into a dwarf, the very small woman drives an enormous car in *Risk and Hazard*, and both man and deer in *Hunter and Hunted* are inglorious specks of activity in a vast empty space. There is a bit of Pop mentality here: Objects are more important than people, and people are "objectified" into corny things. On the other hand, Jenney's space is sometimes as empty as a Barnett Newman field painting (Jenney often paints green and brown fields, as though in mockery of Newman's famous abstract red field), with the object a kind of realist zip trivialized by the expanse of space.

Indeed, everything in Jenney's paintings looks like a toy: The airplanes in *Birds and Jets* and *Them and Us*, the lightbulbs, plugs, and sockets in *Homogeneous Collection*, the stop sign and shovels in *Tools and Task*, and the animals in the magnificent *Beasts and Burdens* seem like glorified playthings. But the pictures almost invariably deal with suffering, loss, destruction, menace. A father scolds his son, figures threaten one another with knives and guns, a wife is angry at her husband, who smiles at a pretty young woman, a swimming man is threatened by something in the sea. Though this painting is titled *Man + Thing*, the "thing" causing the man's terror is, absurdly, unseen.

Jenney shows us the subliminal, peculiarly comic angst of everyday life. He has found a way out of a style that had become a cliché by the late '60s, though it continued to produce intriguing works. He is truly an original—both as social commentator and painter.

—Donald Kuspit