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The New York Times

An Artist Reluctant to Sell Himself



Robert Wright for The New York Times

Neil Jenney with a portrait of himself by Joseph McNamara (2012-13), at Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue.

By DAPHNE MERKIN

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The art world has always laid claim to its share of oddballs and mavericks, including those who pose as such. True-blue originals, however — people who follow their own lights, make their own rules and essentially create their own frame of reference — are as rare in this context as any other. One of the few contemporary artists in this latter category, for better and worse, is Neil Jenney.

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Mr. Jenney grew up in Westfield, Mass. — “across the road from 1,000 chickens,” as he put it in a recent interview in his SoHo studio — and down the street from Truman Egleston, an Abstract painter who was a formative influence. Mr. Jenney was infused early on with a blue-collar work ethic, doing chores as a boy at nearby dairy and tobacco farms; his father, a high-school dropout who was the foreman of a needle factory, told him, “Artists starve.”

Mr. Jenney moved to New York in 1966 after two years at the Massachusetts College of Art driving a cab in Boston. Although he proudly notes that “eight dealers rejected me before I was 21,” his first efforts, which were minimal sculptural pieces, found buyers in Andy Warhol and Robert Scull.

Sometimes referred to as “the most famous artist you’ve never heard of” — the dealer Larry Gagosian, who is [showcasing](#) that elusive artist’s work through April 27, calls him “the art world Garbo” — Mr. Jenney has chosen, ever since he burst on the scene in the late 1960s and early ’70s, to go his own way, outside the dictates of the prevailing art trends. His “Bad Paintings” (the curator Marcia Tucker coined the term) bypassed the Abstract Expressionist and Photo-Realist fashions then current in favor of canvases that showed figurative images (people, fighter planes, fences, fish and oxen) set against backgrounds painted in broad, sloshy brush strokes of brown, green and blue acrylic. He gave these works elementary, allegorical titles like “Tools and Task,” “Sawn and Saw,” “Girl and Doll” and were originally left unframed. With their unrepentant commitment to verisimilitude (promptly labeled, with the art world’s penchant for establishing ever more refined taxonomies, the New Realism) and powerful visual impact, these pieces caused a stir, establishing Mr. Jenney as both a significant presence and an important influence on other artists.

In some ways the story of Neil Jenney might be said to be the story of what did *no*t happen after this opening salvo. In the ensuing years he continued to evolve as an artist, moving on to create meticulously painted and tightly cropped luminous bits of landscapes and skies (referred to as “Good Paintings”), which he painted in oil on boards. He built large, sculptural frames for them, stenciling titles directly onto the frames. As with the “Bad

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Paintings” he gave them simple but effective titles like “Meltdown Morning” and “Window #6” that pointed to the social concerns behind the art. (Later he added similar frames to the earlier paintings.)

In interviews he came across as a homespun philosopher, sounding a utopian note as well as issuing ornery statements about art and life, including “Art is a social science,” and “No real artist would ever use a camera.” Critics generally responded well; in *The New York Times* in 1981 Hilton Kramer called Mr. Jenney “a very political artist” and “a very talky artist — quite the talkiest of his generation,” while another critic later referred to him as a descendant of the Hudson River School “by way of Pop.” But for various reasons, including his habit of keeping much of his work scarce (“It took me so long to make my stuff,” he said of his paintings, “it’s hard to let go. They’re like my kids.”), Mr. Jenney did not go on to become a household name like, say, by his onetime college roommate William Wegman, and his paintings have never sold for the stratospheric prices commanded by the work of some of his peers, like Andy Warhol. (Mr. Jenney’s paintings sell at auction in the respectable six figures, with the highest price on record being \$590,500 for the sale of his “Girl and Vase” at Christie’s in May.)

Part of the problem, if you want to call it that, is that Mr. Jenney, now 67, has never wanted to relinquish the handling of his career to anyone but himself. It probably hasn’t helped his reputation with critics or his visibility in the larger world that he has not been formally associated with a gallery since 1970, although he has frequently shown with Barbara Mathes and in 2001 the Gagosian Gallery put on a show called “The Bad Years, 1969-70.” Or, for that matter, that he declined a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in the late 1980s. (Mr. Jenney said that William Rubin, the museum’s director at the time, agreed in a phone call to postpone the opening so that he could finish two paintings for the show, but that two months later Rubin was gone from the scene.)

All the same, far from being an art world naïf — which one might reasonably assume, given Mr. Jenney’s fiercely independent spirit — he is, despite his reclusive temperament, someone who has always enjoyed playing the art game. This includes selling his own work out of his 11,000-square-foot studio on Wooster Street, replete with a Ping-Pong table, where’s he’s lived since 1973. According to one collector, Andrew Hall, Mr. Jenney — whose

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pronouncements include “I have a great respect for the dollar bill” — is no slouch when it comes to assessing his market value. After Mr. Hall bought two pieces for more than he bargained for and requested an invoice, Mr. Jenney wrote the prices down in pencil on a piece of paper and then scrawled “CHEAP” next to them.

“Neil is not an innocent in the least,” said Mark Rosenthal, an independent curator who organized the only Jenney retrospective to date, in 1981, at the art museum at the University of California, Berkeley, “even though there is a tremendous idealism about him.”

None of this is to suggest that Mr. Jenney has disappeared under a rock. His work continues to attract serious collectors, like Mr. Hall, Eli Broad and Emily Fisher Landau, and it has been acquired by major museums in the United States and Europe. But for those who consider him a truly major artist, he has not only been overlooked but undervalued. “The prices his work commands in the market don’t reflect its quality and its importance,” Mr. Hall said.

Mr. Rosenthal concurred: “Once upon a time Neil Jenney was one of the hottest artists. Now so many people don’t know who he is. Anytime you see his paintings in a context with other people, he looks so great. It is long past due that someone do another Neil Jenney show.”

Enter Mr. Gagosian, salesman extraordinaire, whose passion for Mr. Jenney’s work goes back to the early 1980s and who, in what some might see as an unlikely pairing of a brash showman and a reluctant artist, has been representing Mr. Jenney since the fall of 2011. (Viewed another way, as the conjoining of two enfants terribles, the alliance makes complete sense.) “There’s something primal about the work,” Mr. Gagosian said. “It taps into something very American — it harkens back to folk art in a way — but also into something universal.”

The first fruits of this partnership were unveiled on Thursday, when Mr. Gagosian’s Madison Avenue gallery gave itself over to “Works of the Jenney Archive.” Mr. Jenney is the curator of the show, which includes his work (“Good Paintings,” silk-screened statements on canvas and several sculptures from the ’60s) as well as pieces by a group of friends whom he collects. It has been a long time in the making — as was the agreement to go with Gagosian.

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“He’s the devil to deal with, a real handful,” Mr. Gagosian said, half-admiringly, by phone from Los Angeles. “He’s true to himself.” When asked how he managed to persuade Mr. Jenney to give up his autonomy, Mr. Gagosian said: “We wore him down. I’ve been trying to convince him that he would benefit from having gallery representation for years.” (Kara Vander Weg, a colleague of Mr. Gagosian’s, was instrumental in getting Mr. Jenney to change his mind.) “He doesn’t really like to sell his work,” Mr. Gagosian said. “He sells it begrudgingly almost. Some people might see that as refreshing.”

Will success — bright lights, big prices, a flurry of media attention — spoil Neil Jenney? Having visited him twice in his studio, once for three hours of conversation covering everything from the Mideast situation to the time he was asked to write speeches for Edward I. Koch, I found him to be one consistent guy, not someone likely to have his head turned at this late date. (The second time I visited he was wearing a white shirt under denim overalls of his own design, which had him so excited that he has applied for a patent.) In many ways he has the work ethic of a tradesman, someone who believes in the sanctity of the process — “the vision thing,” as he calls it — rather than the quirks of the marketplace.

Although he reads a lot, mostly nonfiction, he never subscribed to an art magazine, and he is not one to spout artspeak about his or anyone else’s work. Instead he deals in bottom-line advice. “If you’ve an idea in the art business, and you’re working on the stuff, don’t tell anybody,” he counseled. “You got to wait until you’re on the wall.”

When I asked him at the end of my second visit whether he thought things would change now that he was with Gagosian, he looked thoughtful. “I’m comfortable under the radar,” he said. “I kind of dread what’s going to happen. Fame is not for me. I’m too rough and dry around the edges.” Then he added, with a subversive glimmer in his eye: “I’ve been practicing bobbing my head. I’m not going to say anything negative.”

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