

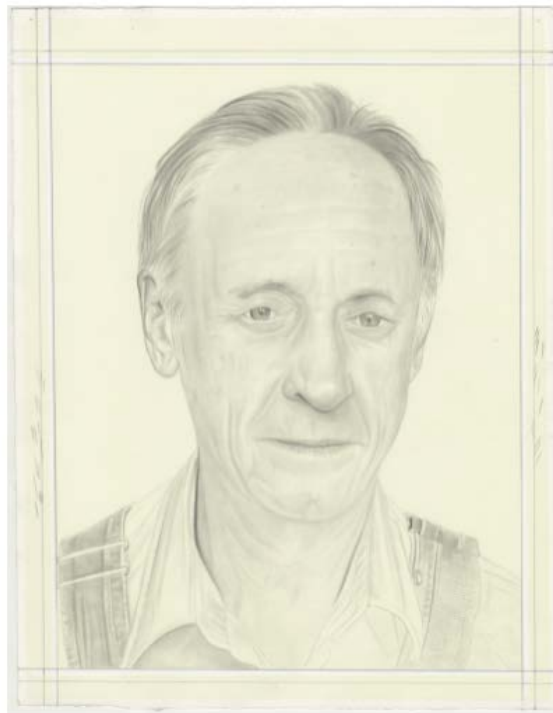
GAGOSIAN

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Neil Jenney with Jason Rosenfeld

“This is all about civilization and Mother Nature. It’s as simple as that.”

Jason Rosenfeld



Portrait of Neil Jenney, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Neil Jenney’s show, *AMERICAN REALISM TODAY*, is at Gagosian Gallery at 976 Madison Avenue (through December 18). It includes 15 works in multiple media dating back to 1992. The highlight is his most recent series (2015–21) of five over six-foot-wide oil paintings in the artist’s signature hand-built ebony-hued frames. The series is titled “Modern Africa,” and follows on Jenney’s path of artistic experimentation from his early installations and metal wall sculpture, brushy oils on panels that he calls “Bad Paintings” in 1969 and 1970, through to his work of the last five decades that he refers to as “Good Paintings.” I spoke to him in the exhibition on November 8.

Jason Rosenfeld (Rail): You just had a birthday?

Neil Jenney: Yeah, I was 76 yesterday.

Rail: Congratulations! I was wondering about your youth, growing up in rural Connecticut after the war.

Jenney: My father was in a family of eight, my mother a family of nine. They came up during the Depression in Connecticut and were determined that their children would experience depression, and we did. [*Laughs*] Connecticut and Westfield in western Massachusetts, too. As soon as I could ride a bike, my father got me a paper route. I grew up working. I worked outdoors for four New England winters. Six days a week. I did develop the kind of discipline you need to make art. I also worked in the tobacco fields in the summer and my sisters delivered the papers.

Rail: In the good weather your sisters delivered the paper! I had a paper route. My sister never, ever delivered the papers.

Jenney: Yeah, well, did you work in the field, so you didn't have to?

Rail: No, no, I was chased by dogs though. That was my big complaint —

Jenney: Oh boy, I had dogs in my route —

Rail: They'd just wait for you and chase you when they came down?

Jenney: I would avoid them. I would put it in the mailbox and get the hell out of there. I wasn't supposed to put it in the mailbox.

Rail: What paper was that?

Jenney: *Springfield Daily News*.

Rail: So you were an early resident of SoHo. Then all the galleries moved in. And then the galleries left.

Jenney: Larry Gagosian was the first one to leave and go over to Chelsea.

Rail: And he was right down the street from you.

Jenney: That's right. I helped Larry out when he was first starting.

Rail: On Wooster Street.

Jenney: He was a partner with Annina Nosei. She introduced me to him, and so I gave him a thing or two to sell. And I sent people to him. I sent David Whitney to him, who ran the Green Gallery when Dick Bellamy was drinking. Whitney was a boyfriend of Philip Johnson. He bought Warhol's Gold Marilyn Monroe for the Museum of Modern Art. You know that painting? Greatest thing he ever did. Actually, the second greatest thing. To me the greatest are the crying Jackies.

Rail: *Jackie (The Week that Was)*.

Jenney: That little round image. They break your heart. Tears rolling down.

Rail: He always denied emotionality, but he could do it.

Jenney: Those crying Jackies, wow. They're so devastating. And just black and white and small and wow.

Rail: Do you remember when Kennedy was shot?

Jenney: Oh, yes. I was a senior in high school. '63. I was in a brand-new school. We were the first class to graduate. And it had an internal sound system. And suddenly we're sitting there in class and, click, and you could hear the news on the sound system in class. And everybody's laughing, hey somebody kicked the plug, you know? Somebody pushed the wrong button, or something like that.

Rail: Thought it was a prank.

Jenney: And then it was announced, and wow, it was silent.

Rail: And then followed your decision to go to art school to avoid the draft and other paths. At Massachusetts College of Arts, in Boston.

Jenney: I had a close call. I didn't have the marks. And I was really lucky. My father got transferred back to Torrington, Connecticut, from Westfield. We moved in next to one of my mother's closest friends. The husband had a clothing store. They were moving from the downtown location to a mall right there in Torrington, so they needed help moving and my mother said, "Well, my son can help." I got a job at the clothing store and I had dreamed about getting an indoor job. That was my quest all through high school.

Rail: [*Laughs*] No more sunburns.

Jenney: I got an indoor job working in a clothing store, for the first time in my life I had to have nice clothes. You can't look like this, you know [*gestures to himself and his V-neck bib overall with a denim vest*]. I wear Dickies. The only garment they make is these bib overalls. And they're by far the best, it's the best material. It's got the right kind of pockets, the right kind of snaps. You can put all kinds of weight in your pockets and your pants are not going to fall down.

Rail: Did you wear these for indoor and outdoor work?

Jenney: Yeah. I've been wearing the same thing for, I don't know, 40 years.

Rail: They're just comfortable. [*Laughs*] You can fit everything in there.

Jenney: It's a walking office. My printer, my backup printer [*pulls out pens and pencils from his pockets*]. [*Laughter.*]

Rail: You know, there's precedent for this. J. M. W. Turner, the British Romantic painter, and Adolph Menzel.

Jenney: I love Menzel!

Rail: Both had custom designed greatcoats with different size pockets for their various sketchbooks. And their tools and their writing instruments,

Jenney: Because they're working in the field?

Rail: Yes. That way they could pull out the sketchbook, whatever size they wanted, and start to draw. I saw the one foliage drawing in your studio where you had the color notations. They did those kinds of en plein air designs.

Jenney: I draw in the field. And I mix in the field. But to paint in the field, you gotta be stupid. It's impossible.

Rail: Not on the scale of your "Modern Africa" series!

Jenney: Those guys that painted in the field, they come home and then they play with it for two weeks. But they do get accurate chromatic relations.

Rail: That is true. You will see local color.

Jenney: That's correct. But trying to paint? The wind is gonna blow it over, the leaves, it's almost impossible. And basically, I believe that if you're going to do sophisticated work, you want to do wet on dry. Not wet on wet. It's too much of a rush job, and too many things can go wrong. When you do an area and it looks perfect, let it dry! And then move on to the next thing.

Rail: I like the term "sophisticated work."

Jenney: "Refined sophisticated."

Rail: How do you define that in a general sense?

Jenney: It has to do with the quality of the draftsmanship.

Rail: Show me a detail in one painting of refined sophisticated work.



Neil Jenney, *North America Divided*, 2001-06. Oil on wood in artist's frame, 26 1/4 x 28 1/4 x 2 3/4 inches. © Neil Jenney.
Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

Jenney: This is *North America Divided* [2001–06]. Look at this fire barrel. It's known as the fire barrel. You ever see anybody paint a fire barrel before?

Rail: Not since Reginald Marsh's pictures of the Bowery.

Jenney: Not in the farm situation, that's an urban situation, a downtown thing.

Rail: This is painted from life but then finished in the studio?

Jenney: No. This is a combination of elements. Here's a post that was a gate post. You see the hinges are all rusted off. Then there's this stone here with the eye in it. This is what they used to use when they didn't have fences. They would tie an animal up with a long rope and he'd walk around and clean it up, and then they'd roll the stone on what they call a stone-boat and drag it over 100 feet and let him clean up his area. So you didn't need fences. That's what I'm saying with sophisticated — you see how the brushstrokes are hidden in the stone? It's the surface. That's refined sophistication. It's trying to mimic the textural elements of what's depicted.

Rail: The brushwork in the grass versus the brushwork in the sky is wholly different, there's just a stippling in the sky.

Jenney: That's right.

Rail: And the clouds.

Jenney: When you look in the sky you don't see brushstrokes.

Rail: And the brushstrokes become magnified as you get closer. Were you ever interested in the Pre-Raphaelites?

Jenney: Love them all. Well, not all of them, but yeah.

Rail: British Pre-Raphaelites?

Jenney: Yes. Yes, of course.

Rail: Have you been to London and seen the works?

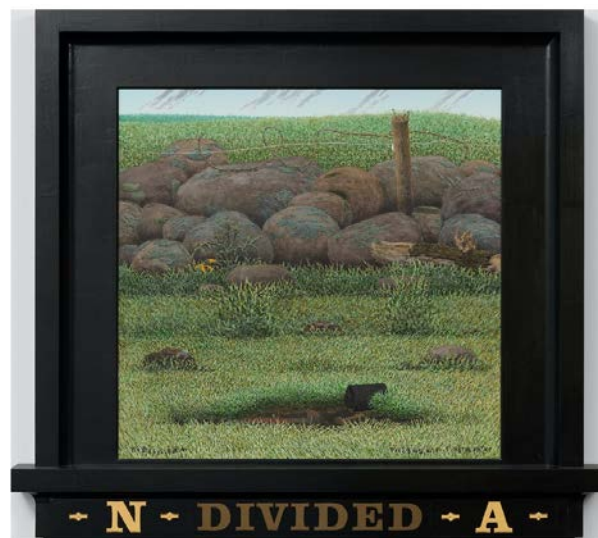
Jenney: Never been to England. I am not a traveler. Never been to Italy. Never been to Greece. Never been anywhere. Nope. I like staying home.

Rail: The Pre-Raphaelites worked in the same sort of very refined manner in terms of bright sunlight, local color, colored shadows, like you see there by the fencepost. And very minute touches.

Jenney: This is kind of where I'm from, where the grass grows to the sky. That's kind of me, that's where I'm from.

Rail: How does *North America Divided* this fit into this theme?

Jenney: I had done a lot of "North Americas" before I got to the "Divideds." The "Divideds" started with the breakup of Yugoslavia. And suddenly there's Herzegovina and Bosnia and Serbia. The barbs on the fence—it was like the Iron Curtain, borders between Serbia, Herzegovina. They were formerly the same nation. This is how we do it here, this is Canada [pointing at *North America Divided* (1992-94)], this is America.



Neil Jenney, North America Divided, 1992-94. Oil on wood in artist's painted wood frame, 54 x 58 1/2 inches. © Neil Jenney. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

Rail: In the sense that the borders are porous?

Jenney: It says a lot about our country and about our culture, that we don't hate each other. They have that fence there because they want to kill each other.

Rail: *North America Divided* (1992–94) is the oldest work in the show.

Jenney: You see the textural elements?

Rail: All this impasto here.

Jenney: Yeah, this is 30 years ago, three decades ago.

Rail: What's the material down here in the foreground?

Jenney: It's an oil filter from an automobile or a tractor, a particularly dirty one. And this is a little backyard environmental disaster. It's an oil spill. That is a lynchpin for if you're hauling a wagon, you need a pin to put in the hole. This is a bracket from a Farmall baler. It's just a little backyard oil spill. These are cow flops with a little steam coming off them.

Rail: Is this goldenrod?

Jenney: No, this is actual spilled paint, somebody was fixing something, and it just spilled.

Rail: And then these are the little ceramic ties for the rope —

Jenney: Yeah, these are for an electric fence. And the barbed wire. That's hog wire. With the barbs so close, that's hog wire. These have gotta have serious barbs.

Rail: These are quite elegant, these nails, they look like they're dancing.

Jenney: Yeah. There's always nails on the top if somebody puts a sign there, or something like, something's always going on.

Rail: So "North America Divided" is an ironic statement. It means that North America is not actually divided.

Jenney: Well, it's about private property. And it's about international borders as well. I mean, there's Canada, there's America. It says a lot about our cultures. We get along. We're normal. We don't have to fear for our lives that somebody is going to come across and kill us like they do in Serbia and Montenegro.

Rail: But now the border with Mexico is problematic. Times have changed.

Jenney: You know climate change has hit Central America really badly. I saw an interview and these people are coming over because they can't grow their own food.

Rail: Fearful of their governments?

Jenney: Well, that too, but they're in a food panic.

Rail: Your art has always referenced nature and historical time in some way. I was reading about this *Earth Art* show you were in at Cornell in 1969, with an interesting lineup of artists including Robert Smithson, Dennis Oppenheim, Hans Haacke, Robert Morris, Richard Long from England, and there's a great conversation in it amongst all of you. In your career you've kind of

gone from working with earth to working with *the Earth* [*Laughter*], in your subject matter. Does it feel as if those early projects that you were doing were from a different era?

Jenney: If you look at a Whitney show held in '69 called *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, everybody in this show was avoiding Pop and Minimal. They were all trying to come up with an alternative vocabulary. You look at Eva Hesse, Keith Sonnier, Robert Lobe, Neil Jenney, John Duff, and it goes on and on. People actively avoided Minimal and Pop. Fortunately, they finished the Whitney Museum right there in '67 or so, and we suddenly had a museum to ourselves, a place to show. We'd never get in the MoMA, we'd never get in the Met. We had a forum.

Rail: And you moved into SoHo around that time.

Jenney: I moved to New York in '66, just after they had torn down Penn Station. The artists were willing to live in a dump. They rented to artists, and we basically saved SoHo. There's a number of us still here. Because of the Loft Law, they couldn't throw 'em out. There was a big issue about that. And the fact that the culture business was big business in New York.

Rail: Was your loft always the whole way through from Wooster to West Broadway?

Jenney: Yes it was. You know it was a real factory.

Rail: Do you know what they made there?

Jenney: Artificial fruit. For window displays.

Rail: Made out of what?

Jenney: Well, they had machines that made it out of toilet paper. Essentially, they rotated in a mold, and you'd get pears and bananas. I had to wait two years to move in. I got it from Ivan Karp. He was downstairs with the gallery, OK Harris, on the West Broadway side. I was upstairs and he was downstairs, and we were basically the center of realism for all of Manhattan. I told Ivan I'm gonna just get a room together and have a show 12 months a year. I figured everybody was gonna do that. I'm the only one that did it. I was originally on the Wooster side, where I had the stained floor. If I wanted to make a sale, I went down to OK Harris on Saturday, and told Ivan, all right, you can send them up. Put them in the elevator. And they'd come up. Whatever he said they bought.

Rail: You know who else had that kind of gallery? Turner.

Jenney: Really?

Rail: He had his studio gallery where he lived and he would entertain clients and collectors. It was a room with fabric on the walls. And he would put his pictures out, some unfinished, and then he would leave visitors to look at the works. He'd go into a back room with a little peephole. [*Laughter*] And he would watch them and see what works they liked, and then he'd come out and sell. That was part of his routine in London.

Jenney: Oh wow.

Rail: Yeah. There's a precedent. [*Laughter*]

Jenney: When the art world moved to SoHo, it was really beautiful.

Rail: It caught up to you.

Jenney: Yeah, it caught up to me. But when I did "Bad Painting," I was doing sculpture and Bellamy loved my sculpture. And when I abandoned the sculpture, he was very upset. I stopped "Bad Painting" in 1970. When I was a "Good" painter.

Rail: But then the "*Bad*" *Painting* show at the New Museum was not until 1978.

Jenney: Marcia Tucker did it, right.

Rail: But were you calling them "Bad Paintings" before that?

Jenney: No. I was calling them "realism."

Rail: It's been taken out of the context that Tucker wanted for it, which was "bad," in quotes, painting. As if to say, this painting isn't bad. But it's considered bad by the art establishment.

Jenney: I think her point was bad painting/good art.

Rail: You look at the list of artists who were in that show now, William Copley, Judith Linhares, William Wegman, Charles Garabedian, and yourself, and the kinds of things that they were doing are the kinds of things that a lot of artists are doing now. You can see where it came from. It seems to me like underground comics. I don't know if you were looking at any of that kind of stuff.

Jenney: No.



Neil Jenney, Modern Africa #1, 2015-16. Oil on canvas, in painted wood artist's frame, 67 x 97 x 3 1/4 inches. © Neil Jenney. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

Rail: So let's talk about the newer work, here, in the gallery. The theme is "Modern Africa."

Jenney: This is all about civilization and Mother Nature. It's as simple as that. It's the same thing we're going through right now. That's why I did them. Because these images are timeless. Could have been 1,000 years ago or 1,000 years in the future!

Rail: Are they numbered in sequence of when you finish them?

Jenney: Yeah.

Rail: There are five right now.

Jenney: This one over here is a moonlight painting, *Modern Africa #1* (2015–16). They felt you had to do moonlight to kind of prove yourself. I'm talking about the Hudson River School. And, you know, all the people that were remotely involved with that, as well as the Western painters.

Rail: Like Frederic Remington?

Jenney: Absolutely, yeah. Well, Remington is from New Rochelle.

Rail: Well, you're from Connecticut and Massachusetts and you're painting Egypt!

Jenney: That's right. You're right. He's a Western painter of course.

Rail: Great moonlight painter.

Jenney: Western sculptor.

Rail: Yeah, but painting is sculpture.

Jenney: It is sculpture!

Rail: It's all connected.

Jenney: It's true.

Rail: *Modern Africa #1* has a high horizon, which is very dark. And there's the extraordinary undulating shadows of all these forms.

Jenney: Moonlight shadows. If you look in the shadow there then you can see footprints, someone's come through. The wind blew this sand in and there's the first guy to walk by. I love the cleanliness of it, and I've done some snow paintings. And I realized I could do sand too.

Rail: So why Egypt as a theme?

Jenney: Well, it's not necessarily Egypt. Over here is Leptis Magna, which is Roman [*Modern Africa #2* (2016–17)]. These are religious elements here. These are purely utilitarian. It's got a staircase and a wagon ramp loader. It's Roman, rather than Egyptian. But it's still Africa.

Rail: *Modern Africa #3* (2016–20) has the column in the sand.



Neil Jenney, Modern Africa #3, 2016-20. Oil on canvas in artist's painted wood frame, 69 3/4 x 84 x 3 inches. © Neil Jenney. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

Jenney: Now, you see that capital?

Rail: Yup.

Jenney: It's not Greek.

Rail: Nope.

Jenney: It's not Roman.

Rail: Nope.

Jenney: It's not Egyptian.

Rail: Nope.

Jenney: What the hell? It's an unknown culture!

Rail: But there's a modern tarp tied to —

Jenney: Well, that's right. It's modern Africa.

Rail: *Modern Africa #5* (2017–21) is the most recent work in the show. How has your technique changed from the impasto works of the '90s to the “refined sophisticated” work of the early 2000s? These are very large scale. *Modern Africa #5* has these two wonderful and beautifully preserved Egyptian-like heads, poking out of the sand.



Neil Jenney, *Modern Africa #5*, 2017-21. Oil on canvas in artist's painted wood frame, 70 1/2 x 95 inches. © Neil Jenney. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian.

Jenney: Just a treasure. They're suddenly being revealed.

Rail: And these are spoons, or footprints?

Jenney: Footprints. I should've erased these lines. They're a little too dark. But I've always liked the lines and they never bothered me.

Rail: How do you conceive of a picture like this? Do you do a sketch first?

Jenney: Yes.

Rail: And then do you blow it up? Or do you eye it?

Jenney: I get all the drawings first. And then it's just a matter of staying inside the lines.

Rail: How big are the drawings?

Jenney: Um, they're about this size. [*Laughs and digs through a small sketchbook full of loose pages that he procures from his overalls back pocket.*]

Rail: There it is. The drawing *12/11/17*. The initial concept, and this is pretty close. So then you just transfer to the larger scale.

Jenney: I go larger to refine it a little bit. But basically, the message is there.

Rail: What material do you imagine these in, these architectural elements, this cornice and the two heads? In a kind of jade color.

Jenney: That's right. It's a jade thing.

Rail: But the amazing thing is, without the footprints, you'd have no idea of the scale. Of these ruins. This is like Ozymandias buried in the sand. But the footprints, assuming they're human [Laughter] give you a sense that they're not actually that big, they're sort of life-size. But they're incredibly well preserved.

Jenney: Well, that's the beauty of it. They had a big sandstorm, I don't know in the '20s or '30s, in Egypt, uncovered a shrine that hadn't been uncovered for 3,000 years, and the paint was completely fresh. And for the first time, they could really see what it used to look like.

Rail: How are you using oils in *Modern Africa #5*? Because it's very thinned out and it's very free brushwork in parts, not in the architectural part, where it almost looks like denim. But in the shadow, and especially in the sand, it's quite beautiful the way it builds up to the top.

Jenney: Well thank you.

Rail: It doesn't look like the "Bad Paintings" period. But it has a kind of freedom that I don't think I've seen in your work since '69, '70.

Jenney: When I went to these "Good Paintings," I basically tried to hide the brushstrokes as much as I could, pretty much, you know what I mean? Like in *North American Aquatica* (2006–07). Well, that is a water painting.

Rail: It's pretty smooth, glassy.

Jenney: That's correct. With "Modern Africa" I said, "I want to go back, but I don't want it to be like 'Bad Painting,' just sloppy." I wanted to make it coherent and effective, to make these brushstrokes more apparent, but really organized and refined. So that was what would separate them. And basically they're chiaroscuro, the same old thing.

Rail: I think they're very beautiful objects, I have to say, this set. And they're well installed here, where you can see them all. Have you ever seen them all together?

Jenney: Never. I've never seen any of my work all together. It's always a new experience.

Rail: You still have all five of these, or some of them are loans?

Jenney: I only own two.

Rail: What's the interest in crocodiles in *Modern Africa #4* (2020–21)?

Jenney: I wanted to have something with the Nile effect. I had to eliminate 12 to 14 vertebrae in the center.

Rail: To get him in the frame.

Jenney: And to make him look threatening. But if you look at these teeth, you know, if he snagged your ankle —

Rail: Trouble —

Jenney: You ain't coming back.

Rail: No, you're done. He's very threatening looking. And the foreshortened forepaw, I love that. What are these? These are drums from columns?

Jenney: These are columns that have been tipped over. This is the base of the column. And it's just like they built the Aswan Dam, and this is what happens.

Rail: These are laborers in the hieroglyphics.

Jenney: And it's like what are they doing? I mean he's holding these forms and they turn into diamonds. What's going on? And he's got a bundle of rope and he's handing it to him, you know it's like, what the hell are they doing?

Rail: And this is like a chainsaw cartouche.

Jenney: Yeah, with little sunbursts. Well, whose cartouche is that? These are like the Hathor elements for women and the ox.

Rail: And what about the frames that you build because I noticed that often the varnish looks like it's still wet, but it stays like that for years and years.

Jenney: That's right. Basically, this references gold leaf.

Rail: Yes, squares and rectangles.

Jenney: And as it works out, it also appears to some people in the Orient as a bamboo-like structure. It became a big hit in South Korea, especially my "Mornings" paintings, because the South Koreans think of themselves as morning people. And so the image and the title and with the kind of bamboo treatment and black lacquer boxes that they know, it just fits into their aesthetic.

Rail: Interesting. You had a show there?

Jenney: They wanted me to have a show there. I did sell them a lot, but it worked out that when a Korean makes a lot of money their dream is to move to Hawaii. And that's where they are. All the "Mornings" went to Hawaii as wedding presents. This treatment on the frames was developed with the "Bad Painting" frames, the first that I framed. I could have made them like a Chevy fender.

Rail: Gleaming.

Jenney: Yeah. But if you give it a nick, you have to redo the whole fender. You know what I mean? Whereas if you get a nick in this, I only have to repair from here to here. It's a practical issue too.

Rail: And it looks sort of like brickwork, bamboo, and gold leaf.

Jenney: It's a two-coat. I use a black matte paint. And then I just varnish it. But it's like gold leaf. And these are seamless frames. You see the miters in there? They're seamless. They all have side seams. One of the reasons I used the side titles is to hide the seams. I call them "marquee titles." In Clarendon Bold, basically. Well, this might be just plain Clarendon but they have bold and extended and condensed.

Rail: I'm wondering about the way that these frames operate because in a picture like *Ozarkia* (2014) it always makes me think of looking out the slot of a World War II concrete bunker.

Jenney: Yes. A lot of people said that about the frames for the "Vegetae" and "Depicteds." The first thing in my mind was to avoid all the other frames in all the museums.

Rail: *Ozarkia* is obviously panoramic, and as in a Dutch 17th century frame, the black concentrates the color and the light of the picture inside of it. It brings it out.

Jenney: It lets your eyes rest so you can see what's going on chromatically in there, because it's a real neutral.

Rail: It fights against the white wall of the gallery, which would not help these paintings if you didn't have the frame.

Jenney: That's true. I realized when they talk about looking through a window, the frame is like the architectural foreground. It's here with you and presents you with it. It's functional, rather than just decorative.

Rail: The ones with the text on the frame like "Vegetae" and "Depicted," remind me of Natural History Museum dioramas with darkened interiors, big frames around them, like the ones on Central Park West and big text below reading "American Grizzly" or whatever. It has that sort of quality of being a display, a bit of a display of a slice of the earth.

Jenney: I agree with you 100 percent. The aesthetic that's universal in Western New England is the Shaker aesthetic. If you ask me what is the source of my instinct in terms of design, I love Shaker. I love clean, sparse, minimal decoration if at all. Shaker was the only real influence I had in terms of architecture and simplicity.

Rail: In this new series, "Modern Africa," you've gone from those prior refulgent works with a lot of vegetation, floral, running water, etc., and full of vivacity and life, to these pictures, which, whether it's Egypt or Rome, or some unknown culture, are about ruins and reclamation, by the sands of time and by the desert and by crocodiles and whatever, despite the footprints. What do you think is behind this kind of shift in theme and scale?

Jenney: A new challenge, you know, an interesting thing. I can make a big painting and move it by myself. These things are on canvas, and I don't have any assistants, you know.

Rail: So that explains the freedom in terms of scaling up a little bit more. But what was the allure of Africa?

Jenney: Well, I'd done North America. Europe is so complicated. To me, the greatest things about Europe are the Gothic cathedrals. They're just fall-down impressive, you know. To me, "Modern Africa" displayed the battle between civilization and Mother Nature better. It was more complete. And I *love* Egyptian art. They've done it for 4,000 years. And they're the best in my mind. I mean, Greece had it for 400 or 800. When it comes to the real shit you can't beat the Egyptians!

Rail: The best at what? What part of it? You mean the drama of it?

Jenney: The awesomeness! The pyramids! I mean, the only ones that compare to them are the Mexicans!

Rail: Here is a painting from 1969 titled *Shape and Form*. I saw that and I thought, wait a second [*Laughter*], he's been thinking about the pyramids for a long time. This is from the "Bad Painting" series. You have a fully formed pyramid and then just kind of a dirt mound.

Jenney: Well, yeah, that's just the shape. [*Laughter*]

Rail: That's it. This feels like the kind of an ur-painting for these kinds of ideas, this aerial view. Have you looked at that recently?

Jenney: No, I haven't seen this in 50 years. [*Laughter*]

Rail: It's a big picture. 58 by 70 inches. I don't know where it is today.

Jenney: I sold this to Al Ordovery. He was very much a collector. Modest financially, but a very nice collection.

Rail: I'd imagine going to the pyramids is quite amazing—to see them in the flesh. I haven't done it myself, yet. I'm interested in the way that you in these paintings are always looking down on something, but not from a great height, as in *Shape and Form*. This is a real aerial view, this one from 1969. But in "Modern Africa" you are just looking down from a normal standing height and looking at details. And so that the majesty of it is in a way limited. Yet the fragment suggests the monumentality and the layering of culture.

Jenney: The variety is not just Egyptian, it's more than just that, you know.

Rail: In the earlier pictures, there is evidence of human intervention. But these bigger ones, it's not really evident, except maybe in some absences. These are a different kind of discussion than the North America pictures. And obviously a different format too. So, what is the goal of this particular exhibit?

Jenney: People ask me why I make art. I tell them it's so I have something to sell. You can't be an art dealer without the art.

Rail: No. But my question is not really about that. Why include the framed patent for inflatable swimwear? Why include the list of quotes?

Jenney: It's creative.

Rail: To show you the fullness of your work?

Jenney: I guess so, yeah.

Rail: But no "Bad Paintings" in this show. And no early sculpture.

Jenney: Annina pointed to Larry and said "This is someone who was possibly going to be something." He was just a kid. Had a small gallery in a mall in LA. So I helped him out a little bit in the beginning, and he's helping me out a little in the end. Did you read my statement? *Notable Quotes on Art* (1966–2021), hanging in the gallery.

Rail: Yes. The list of quotes—I quite like this, although it feels like it's fallen in the frame.

Jenney: The print wasn't big enough. [*Laughter*] I bought the frame and then found out.

Rail: I saw this one, number 21, "LUCKY ARTISTS NEVER TRAVEL."

Jenney: That's right. That's right.

Rail: In what sense? That their subject matter, they don't need to be elsewhere to derive it?

Jenney: That's right. Being an itinerant artist is no fun. It's like being a rock-n-roll musician, living in a suitcase. You know? It's a tough life. But the point is, number 18, "THE ART BUSINESS IS THE LOVE BUSINESS."

Rail: Number 18 also reads, "SOME COLLECT BECAUSE THEY LOVE THE OBJECT / SOME COLLECT BECAUSE THEY LOVE THE ARTIST AND WANT TO BE SUPPORTIVE."

Jenney: Yes. And "SOME COLLECT BECAUSE THEY LOVE THE NAME." But those are real collectors, too, you know.