

HK\$80/US\$10/
C\$14/€7/UK£9

ASIAN ART NEWS

VOLUME 28 NUMBER 1 2018

LYDIA JANSSEN

Pamela Levy * **Songlines:**
Tracking the Seven Sisters
* **India's French Connection** *
Chu Hing-wah * **Reviews**





Lydia Janssen, **Le Jeune Homme et la Mort** (Young Man and Death), 2017, oil, pastel, and charcoal on linen, 100 x 200 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

Coming Together Again

Lydia Janssen's abstract expressionist paintings are dynamic, intimate narratives of disaster and renewal. Her achievement is not one easily obtained: it is hard-won—emotionally, physically, and intellectually. She speaks to passion and to the sensuality of life, as well as to the liberation of the damaged spirit and its rebuilding.

By Ian Findlay-Brown



The vitality in the painting of Singapore-based American artist Lydia Janssen has a tough lyrical ease about it: lively geometry and muted and raw colors make for edgy narratives of painful experiences. Janssen addresses a range of concerns in her work: the fragility of the human body, survival after trauma, personal freedom, violence, intimacy, the symbolism of animals, and the erotic are among the most significant. These themes engage us personally and collectively: our eye is surprised; our imagination is enlivened.

The inspiration for Janssen's art lies in dance: its drama, its theater, and the tragedy of the body falling victim to its physical and emotional demands as well as its pleasures: "Dance," says Janssen, "is ineffable, beyond words."¹

Dance is the soul made manifest in physical movement; it carries one into a realm of the imagination that stretches far beyond the prosaic. Janssen's art allows

us then to dream along with her as we move through her struggle to be whole again through her hard-won transition from dancer to painter and into the abundantly serendipitous world of art making.

Born in 1976 in Lansing, Michigan, Janssen graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in 1998. Although she had her first exhibition of oil paintings—and sold her first work—in 1998, she went to New York City to begin her dance career at the prestigious Merce Cunningham Studio School. She performed successfully with modern dance troupes such as Pam Tanowitz Dance Company and Jordana Toback/POON Dance Company. But a career that seemed set to be ever successful came to an end: completely changing her life.

"From almost the very beginning my body was fighting my talent. It simply wasn't meant for ballet. I had no rotation in my hips, and my body was considered too stocky. I was told, however, that my neck, my face, and my feet were

perfect for it," says Janssen. "Imagine the confusion that goes on in a little girl's brain when told that! I was put on diets, weighed in daily, cast as understudies rather than main roles.

"Entering the modern dance world after a period of rebellion, poetry writing, and weight gain would be a world that embraced me [and] my imperfections. This was the period in which my body and my talent aligned. I was celebrated, my body was celebrated, and I quickly rose through the ranks.

"But the higher I got, the more taxing the work became. I was often told [Merce] Cunningham was the opposite technique for my body. I was fighting again. When my knee subluxed [dislocated], it sounded like a gun going off. I heard the sound before I felt the pain.

"Two years later, it would sublux again, derailing my professional career this time. I did dance again, a few years later, in a less strenuous company but it was unsatisfying. I was a disappointment to myself and [realized] I had checked out years ago."

Her major creative concern then was to find a new medium through which to express herself, one as challenging and creatively rewarding as dance had been. Now she "had to figure a way to dance without dancing." Painting presented the chance to see herself anew and to become whole again.

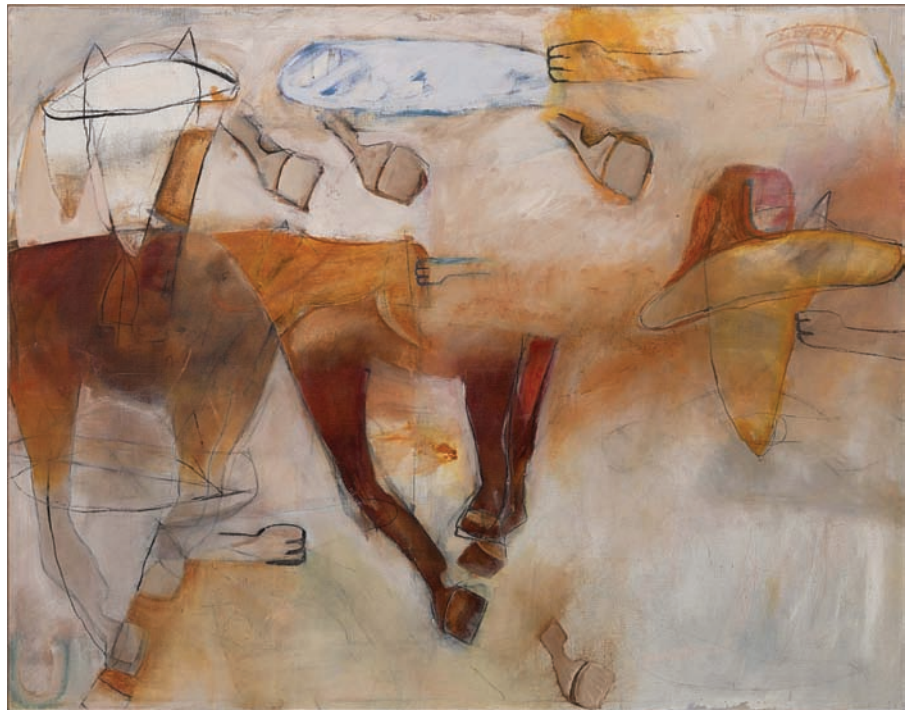
"The end [of my dancing career] was a gradual decline that began emotionally and ended logically," says Janssen. "I simply couldn't go on. My body gave out and then soon my head and heart. But I knew I had to throw all that emotion somewhere. Painting was always there as a support act, [but] it became the only act as soon I realized how gratifying and fulfilling the process was. It is very, very different from dance, but I'm far less self-conscious and far more confident with this medium. My essence is on stage, so to speak, but my body is not."



Lydia Janssen, *Untitled (Bacon)*, 2008, oil on canvas, 60" x 55".

Janssen has never been a person given to surrendering to adversity. She spent a year at the graduate fine arts department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, then returned to New York to study at the Art Students League (2005-2007)—with Ronnie Landfield (b.1947) and Larry Poons (b.1937). In her final year, she won the prestigious Red Dot award for excellence in painting. Larry Poons has been an especially influential in her art. “He taught me to be able to be objective,” says Janssen, “and to put other voices to the side and find my own voice.”

The silence of painting is a far cry from the challenging physicality of professional dance: success requires an essential discipline. Lydia Janssen has this: it informs her stories of distress, pain, and renewal. One senses the breadth of this in her recent mixed-media-on-linen works such as *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort* (2017), *Topsy Turvy* (2017), *The Mover* (2018), and *All the King's Horses* (2018). Here the tangled reality of tragedy is firmly at the center of her vision. The physical is bluntly realized yet intimate in *King and Queen* (2016, see Cover) and *The Mover*; for instance: one winces as if one had just heard the crack of dislocating bones. Here is dance as a metaphor for the wounded human spirit.



Lydia Janssen, *Lameness*, 2014, oil, chalk, pastel, and charcoal on linen, 142 x 178 cm.

Janssen's earlier works such as *Left Leg Down* (2007) and *Triple Threat* (2007) remind me of the spirit of survival and the abstract, rhythmic power of works by Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), Francis Bacon (1909–1992), and Cy Twombly

(1928–2011). Janssen's art has a similar sense of the ancient, timeless, and mythological—all suggested through her choice of muted, even transparent pastoral colors, from fleshy beige to blood red: transparency lends an intriguing three-dimensional quality to her art. The realities



Lydia Janssen, *All the King's Horses*, 2018, oil, chalk, pastel, and charcoal on linen, 178 x 286 cm.

of pain and a poetry of healing are interwoven in her colors and lines that draw us slowly into her art where details such as broken feet, horse's hoofs, fists, and staring eyes emerge from the dark depths of the painting. She allows for space in her painting in which her stories within stories can breathe. To my mind it is such detail and the honesty and strength of her human narratives that attract astute collectors (notably recently Seow Chuan Koh) for here is art that will stand the test of time.

For Janssen, her devotion to dance was all consuming, as painting is now. Losing the physical ability to perform at the top of her profession was devastating at all levels. "The injuries have been many. The deepest perhaps were psychological. The world is cruel to young people in regards to their appearance, add the ballet world on to that and it can be destructive. I am working through that in my paintings. I am celebrating what wasn't celebrated: the distorted; the fleshy; the imperfect. The distortion of the body I find fascinating. Perfect proportions don't appeal to me." While pain quits the mind, memories of the struggles to rebuild inform all her narratives. Dance is not lost to her: it has become a strong foundation.

There is a formality about her most obvious dance works where entangled limbs reach for solid ground or wave as if signaling for help. But here there is also the sensual and the erotic beating at the heart of the narrative that attests to freedom.

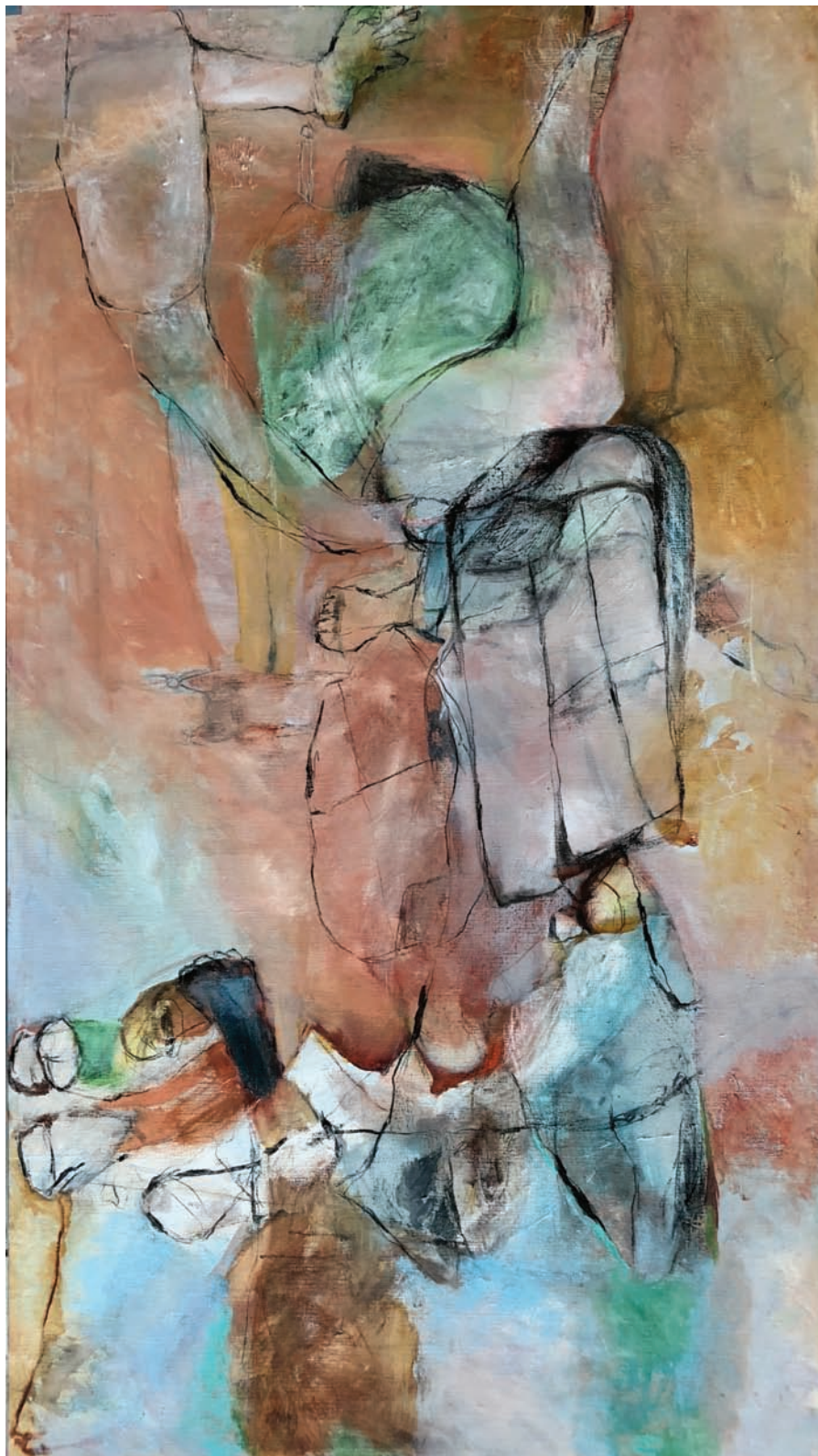
"I think the characters that I paint are now becoming freer, less self-conscious, more confident. I am not painting the erotic to shock, but more to convey strength, rawness, vulnerability, and perhaps to connect us all, exhibitionist and voyeur, rather than painting my autonomous turmoil."

Janssen's perfection lies in realizing her paintings, in replacing the damage of the past, refocusing one's skills, and restoring one's spirit. Unlike Humpty Dumpty, Janssen has come together again, as the singularly lyrical paintings of her recent exhibition entitled *All the King's Horses* clearly show.

The primal changes of the body and an ominous sense of violence in works such as *Untitled (Bacon)* (2008), *Caesar* (2016), *Lay Down Humpty* (2017), *King and Queen*, and *Trumped* (2018), among others, is visceral. These personal visions have been transformed into powerful, coherent abstract-expressionist tales that reveal a confident artist, one willing to take risks and to open her heart as she remakes herself physically, mentally, and spiritually.

At her core is a passionate drive to share with others the notion that one ending ushers in fresh beginnings: but these can only be achieved by putting the shattered self back together, again and again, every time one is knocked down. There is the deep therapeutic quest in all art form: one senses it is here, too.

"Absolutely, as through the making I am discovering new layers, answering some old questions, asking new ones," says Janssen. "It's unusual for most people, I think, to have a recording of time passing. I have a body of work spanning over 15 years that I can reflect on, use as research into my life's journey."



Lydia Janssen, *The Mover*, 2017, oil, chalk, pastel, and charcoal on linen, 163 x 93 cm.



Lydia Janssen, **Topsy Turvy**, 2017, oil, chalk, pastel, and charcoal on linen, 153 x 123 cm.



Above left: Lydia Janssen, *Epona*, 2018, oil, pastel, and charcoal on linen, 200 x 300 cm. **Above right:** Lydia Janssen, *Rabbit Run*, 2017, oil, chalk, and charcoal on linen, 178 x 173 cm.

Each step of Janssen's painting journey has thrown up numerous challenges, from the personal to the professional. She has confronted these head on to make art that combines the intricate physical movement of dance and the spirit of emotions of tragedy. In dispelling the anger, the sadness, and the disappointment of the ending of one's career and the dreams it held and to forge a new creative career one has to remove doubt, a most corrosive elements to any change.

"There were so many [doubts]," says Janssen. "First off, [I asked myself] could I possibly be very good at two different art forms? I've always been a believer in everything feeding everything. Ending dancing was never really an end, as all that I learned through dance has informed my painting: choreography and composition, music and rhythm, form and shape, layers, background/foreground, light, dark, shadow. It's all so similar."

The familiar and the similar have now merged in her art to show us a confident artist, yet one who will always be filled with questions and moments of hesitation. Her narrative and its singular power are driven by questions and her need to answer them. Painting and dance are without words, but Janssen lends speech to them through her actions.

"Dance is ineffable, beyond words, so I wasn't sure how I could possibly translate it into art either," she recalls. "I knew I wanted to paint what I could no longer dance but I wasn't sure where to begin. My very first attempts were figurative; then heavily abstract; then I introduced animals. Now I'm synthesizing them all. How do you paint a feeling?"

Painters are engaged in capturing moments of feeling and action that

live at the edge of humankind's consciousness. Painting stretches out momentary reality in ways that other art forms do not. As Janssen says, "I think I try to capture a fleeting moment within a dance perhaps. There's no such thing as true stagnation in dance, so I try to convey that in my paintings."

Within many of Janssen's works an array of animals highlights her abiding interest in figuration and action, her



Lydia Janssen, The Graffiti Kiss, 2007, oil on canvas, 140 x 114 cm.



Lydia Janssen, Place Your Bets, 2007, oil on canvas, 142 x 203 cm.

connection between the stillness of painting and the power of dance and movement generally. Bright works such as *The Graffiti Kiss* (2007) and *Place Your Bets* (2007) where a mix of different animals is humorous and speaks to a different spirit, one that suggests that the artist is reaching a new freedom within herself. Yet even here, as in *The Graffiti Kiss*, there is the threat of the casual violence in the form of the embedded gun, which appears again in *Trumped*.

"I use animals to convey movement. Each animal represents a different kind of movement," she notes. "The horse, strong, graceful, long; the ram, butting others with its horns; the rabbit, quick and manic. The use of animals is one step removed from my painting the human figure."

Janssen's animals are lively, powerful, and speak to the past and the present as well as being metaphors for the human condition in which, regardless of how firm the body, it is fragile and can let one down disastrously at any moment, draining the spirit from even the strongest. *Lameness* (2014) and *Epona* (2018) are muscular and timeless. *Lameness* is a metaphor for the broken dancer and the body but, at the same time, these works remind one of the primeval forms of cave art and, by extension, the people who made those works. "The simple image combined with the very deep mystery of why these painters painted these images. I like that duality," says Janssen, whose mark-making extends our view of humanity's tenuous condition of breaking and mending, of survival and renewal and of art's timeless role.

Works such as *Blooming Mouth* (2005) and *Lay Down Humpty* (2017) are worlds apart pictorially, but they both represent a poetic quality that is important to

the success of Janssen's art. The bright colors and flow of imagery across the surface of *Blooming Mouth*—which reminds me of some of Arshile Gorky's works—is influenced by the poetry of the American poet Anne Sexton (1928–1974). Sexton, who committed suicide, wrote deeply confessional poetry that embraced every aspect of her private life. Perhaps this work is a metaphor for Janssen's own dark, distressed moments, when life's challenges seemed overwhelming.

Blooming Mouth seems to bleed, seeping into canvas while the line of *Lay Down Humpty* reminds me of the spare poetry of the English poet Stevie Smith (1902–1971). Her gentle, sad poem entitled *Not Waving but Drowning* (1957) seems applicable here, for in either painting there is not a hint of sentimentality. Janssen, like Sexton and Smith, eschews the sentimental reaching instead for the innate honesty that resides within her work.

Janssen's struggle to rebuild her creative life reflects this honesty. It is not only visually strong in line and color it is always compellingly intimate. It is this seductive juxtaposition of the violence inflicted on the body by the body and the intimacy of its



Lydia Janssen, *Blooming Mouth*, 2005, oil on canvas, 132 x 112 cm.

expression that holds the viewer in thrall. As Janssen looks across her *oeuvre* since the mid-2000s, she sees a shift in her art and in her psychology that promises much. She is not afraid to be objective about her art, which is a trait that some artists find difficult to achieve, but it is not always easy.

As she says, “My technique has caught up with my intention. I think I

have become gentler, more thoughtful in my color choice, less reactive. On a basic level, I will always be on the hunt for the perfect shade of flesh.

“There are paintings I can't stand that others love, so it is hard to be truly objective when it all comes from my core. But I do think I can critique my work. With this new body of work I am working towards being less loud, more suggestive, less aggressive. I love the challenge of not making ‘pretty work.’ I am enjoying the challenge of making more provocative work.”

Janssen's uneasy narratives cannot be ignored in a few seconds of looking. There is too much vigor and too much humanity there to contemplate only at a casual glance. While her work is personal, its rawness speaks to our contemporary world in which personal and public violence are but a slip or shot away, arriving when

we least expect it. To capture those moments has been one of Lydia Janssen's great challenges. She has done so with impressive directness. Δ

Note:

1. All quotations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from interviews with the artist on March 10 and 11, 2018, in Singapore.



Above left: Lydia Janssen, *Lay Down Humpty*, 2017, oil, pastel, and charcoal on linen, 41 x 51 cm. **Above right:** Lydia Janssen, *Trumped*, 2018, oil, chalk, pastel, and charcoal on linen, 91 x 81 cm.