

James Jean
Eternal Spiral.

By Shai Baitel

“The dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the psyche, opening into that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness ...”

– Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

What psychoanalyst Carl Jung once wrote about dreams, painter James Jean actualises onto his canvases. Painting primarily with acrylic on canvas, his images are otherworldly dreamscapes populated with anonymous wistful figures. The textures, patterns, influences, and symbols he incorporates are indicative of his international worldview, drawing upon European Renaissance paintings, Japanese woodblock prints, Chinese silk scroll paintings, anime, and comics. Like Jung, Jean borrows from mythology, and draws our attention to tableaux of mysterious scenes. He paints another world, allowing his audiences to escape the mundane reality of waking experience. He allows us to transcend through his own imagination.

Jean’s approach, however, is restrained. The story is not contained in the application of paint or the method of creating images, but the images themselves. This lends itself to a kind of legibility that was disavowed in the western canon with the advent of Dada and Conceptualism where art became increasingly illegible. In creating dream works which audiences of all levels of interest can relate to, he constructs and invites the public into a private fantasy world.

Notably, Jean has been compared to the 18th century Qing dynasty Italian Chinese artist, Lang Shining. Shining combined a European approach to rendering surfaces with the technique of traditional Chinese art. The characters and scenarios, Jean says, can find kindred spirits with those in Dutch masters such as Bosch or Brugle the Elder. Jean’s paintings can be seen in light of these inspirations, as he navigates between a European and an Asian art history. He has said himself how, after moving to the states, American culture “colonized” his mind. The artist’s practice enables him to be constantly working with and against these cultural forces at play in his psyche, bringing the unconscious environment into conscious image.

Jean was born in Taipei, Taiwan in 1979. He moved to the east coast of America when he was three years old and was raised and educated in New Jersey, U.S.A. After high school he went to study at the School for Visual Arts in New York, graduating in 2001. In the same year his career began at lightning speed with a role illustrating covers for both DC and Marvel comics. The work that he completed there was much lauded and brought him to the attention of a significantly wider audience.

We can see how Jean's mythical environments are indicative of the spatial qualities of a traditional Chinese scroll painting, while his figures retain a cartoonish anonymity. There is perhaps a battle for dominance between these two elements in the works. The outlines of the figure are often a smooth black line, do these describe the forms of bodies or do they trap the person inside? Circumscribed, as a cartoon panel might be, Jean captures his unruly imagination and pins it down so it can be shared. Paradoxically, as we approach a reading of the image we are reminded of its fantastical nature and lead further into a contemplative space. Is this Jean's imagination, his thoughts, feelings and experiences? Or are these representations removed from his true nature, painted in such a way to not reveal his true essence as a human?

His most notable ally in the contemporary art world is Takashi Murakami, a provocative force in contemporary art also noted for his referencing of cartoon figures. The two met briefly in the early 2010s and grew closer throughout the years with Murakami curating some of Jean's work for an exhibition in Japan in 2015. Accompanying Jean's 2018 Exhibition 'Azimuth' at Murakami's art space, Kaikai Kiki, in Tokyo, Murakami writes of a 'narrative wave' coming out of the Asian contemporary art scene and describes a binary between east and west, narrative, and abstract art which seems irreconcilable in today's market.

This clashing can be seen in one of his most admired collaborations with the fashion giant Prada. In 2007 he was commissioned to work on developing prints for a collection and an installation at the Prada Epicenter stores in New York and Los Angeles. This moment is emblematic of Jean's career as he exposes the porous lines between genres of creative endeavor. This collaboration, titled 'Trembled Blossoms', has been cited as the "catalyst" for spawning a growing interest in exchange between the fashion and illustration worlds. Jean developed not just prints but wallpaper, interiors and later a haunting animated fashion film setting another early president for animated digital fashion projects of the future. It was a monumental moment for the creative world and reveals Jean's ability to effortlessly transgress artistic boundaries.

Nevertheless, Jean's fashion work caught more attention in America and Europe than his paintings. Murakami identifies the ways in which narrative art is deemed childish, immature by the artistic elite and ultimately not given the respect it deserves. Comics and illustrations in the West were given attention by Roy Lichtenstein and the Pop artists who parodied, cropped, and copied this genre. In Murakami and Jean's work there is a more sincere appreciation and admiration for an illustrative component to fine art which now seems to have become the final frontier for avant-garde taste.

Murakami's written statement reads as a manifesto for Jean's work. Speaking of that work, Murakami states that future generations will "sublimate the childish worldview into an elevated status of thoughts. They will melt away the boundary that now exists." He goes on to describe Jean as "an artist of the narrative world. But he is not an illustrator that embodies his clients' wills in his work. He is an artist who can visually express various languages of thoughts; an artist who is meant to hold center stage going forward."

Murakami's championing of Jean's narrative approach to painting is reflected in the artist's overwhelmingly popular reception across Asia, and can be seen in his collaborations with such figures as BTS. There is a sense that Jean is managing to reconcile not just an experience of two different continents as a child and an adult but also reconciling an inner dream with an outer reality. What we discover is an artist arriving at the very cornerstones of artistic expression. The limits of the imagination, the separation between dreams and reality and historical tradition in conversation with contemporary experience.