

TIBOR DE NAGY

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HYPERALLERGIC

A San Francisco Art Pioneer's Collaged Dream Worlds

With the layers of his collaged “paste-ups,” Jess pulls us into an oneiric world, at once delightful and perplexing, magical and sublime.

By John Yau



Jess, "Game's Up" (1981), jigsaw puzzle, 28 1/2 x 33 1/2 inches (all images courtesy Tibor de Nagy gallery)

In the mid-1990s, I began visiting the reclusive artist Jess in the Victorian house in San Francisco's Mission district that he shared with the poet Robert Duncan. During one of my first visits, Jess showed me two things that I have never forgotten. In a closet in the crowded but orderly parlor room, he showed me completed jigsaw puzzles that he had carefully stacked. The stack was at least six feet high, and each puzzle was identified by a note. That afternoon he also showed me his flat files, drawers full of carefully labeled envelopes holding images he had cut

out and classified for his intricate “paste-ups,” which is what he called his collages. Each paste-up was composed of images — sometimes hundreds — from a wide range of sources.

With the puzzles, Jess assembled a fantastical world made of disparate layers. In addition to these and the paste-ups, he was also a painter, and studied with Clyfford Still and Edward Corbett at the California School of Fine Arts. These memories surfaced when I went to see the exhibition Jess (Collins): Piling Up the Rectangles; Paintings, Paste-Ups and Puzzle Collages at Tibor de Nagy.



Jess, “Crossing And Recrossing The Heart: Translation #28” (1975), oil on canvasboard, 19 11/16 x 19 11/16 inches

Among the exhibition’s 13 works, dated between 1954 and ’93, are several important pieces and a number of standouts. The standouts are three paintings from his series *Translations*, in which he translated mostly 19th-century black and white images into thickly surfaced oil paintings; two of his puzzle collages; a dense still life, “Petals of Paint” (1954), that equates the malleable materiality of thick oil paint with flowers and leaves; and a collage, “Goblin Pye” (1961), composed of a grid of 12 engraved Victorian illustrations embellished with the artist’s interventions of images and text. The collages include one he made for the cover of Norma Cole’s poetry book *Mars* (1994). While these works are unmistakable Jess’s, it is clear that he never wanted to attain a signature style (or what in poetry is called “a voice”). He took what he found and transformed it into an occult world full of signs and esoteric symbols.

The basis of the painting “Mort and Marge: Translation #26” (1971) is a nine-panel grid of illustrations by A.B. Frost, whose successive, illustrated panel works inspired comic strips and comic books. Although Jess did not alter the images, the change in scale and a palette of muted greens and browns in his painted version turn the relationship between the middle-aged man and woman on a beach into something utterly strange. I had to read Jess’s painting a number of times to excavate what I think Frost was depicting — a wife in Victorian dress pinning down her husband’s runaway top hat on a beach with her umbrella, ruining it in the process.



Jess, “Mort And Marge: Translation #26” (1971), oil on canvas mounted on wood, 30 x 20 inches

In one of the panels, the man and woman face away from each other. The caption reads: “This is harder than bezique” (a popular card game that came to England from France). The next panel states: “He spake, neglecting sound and sense.” That phrase is a key to Jess’s work. A lover of puns, fairy tales, and the occult, the artist was not interested in conventional meanings of any kind. He pulls us into an oneiric world, at once delightful and perplexing, magical and sublime.

The source of the puzzle collages is an animating force of each work. Puzzles, which are often associated with childhood games and require us to put things together, become in Jess’s hands a

way to tap into the solitary and unpredictable space of the imagination. In “Game’s Up” (1981), Jess layers parts of different puzzles to assemble a picture of an adolescent boy playing checkers by himself in the lower right-hand corner. Hunting dogs (pointers), sunflowers, and daisies are in the foreground and Alpine mountains are in the background, with a high colonnade running along the right side of the tallest one. To the right of the colonnade, two automobile headlights float in the air, each tilted in a different direction; on the left side of the picture plane, a large candle is nestled in the flowers and brush.

Compositionally, the alignment of dogs, candle, umbrellas, and headlights pulls our attention from left to right, and diagonally into the space. “What dishonest activity has been discovered?,” the image and title seem to ask, withholding the answer.

Jess’s art is both open and impenetrable, like a temple that is full of inexplicable things and whose devotees are unknown to us.



Jess, “Piling Up The Rectangles: Translation #27” (1975), oil on canvasboard, 19 11/16 x 19 11/16 inches



Jess, "Petals of Paint" (1964), oil on plywood, 16 x 12 inches

Jess (Collins): Piling Up the Rectangles; Paintings, Paste-Ups and Puzzle Collages continues at Tibor de Nagy (11 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 13. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.