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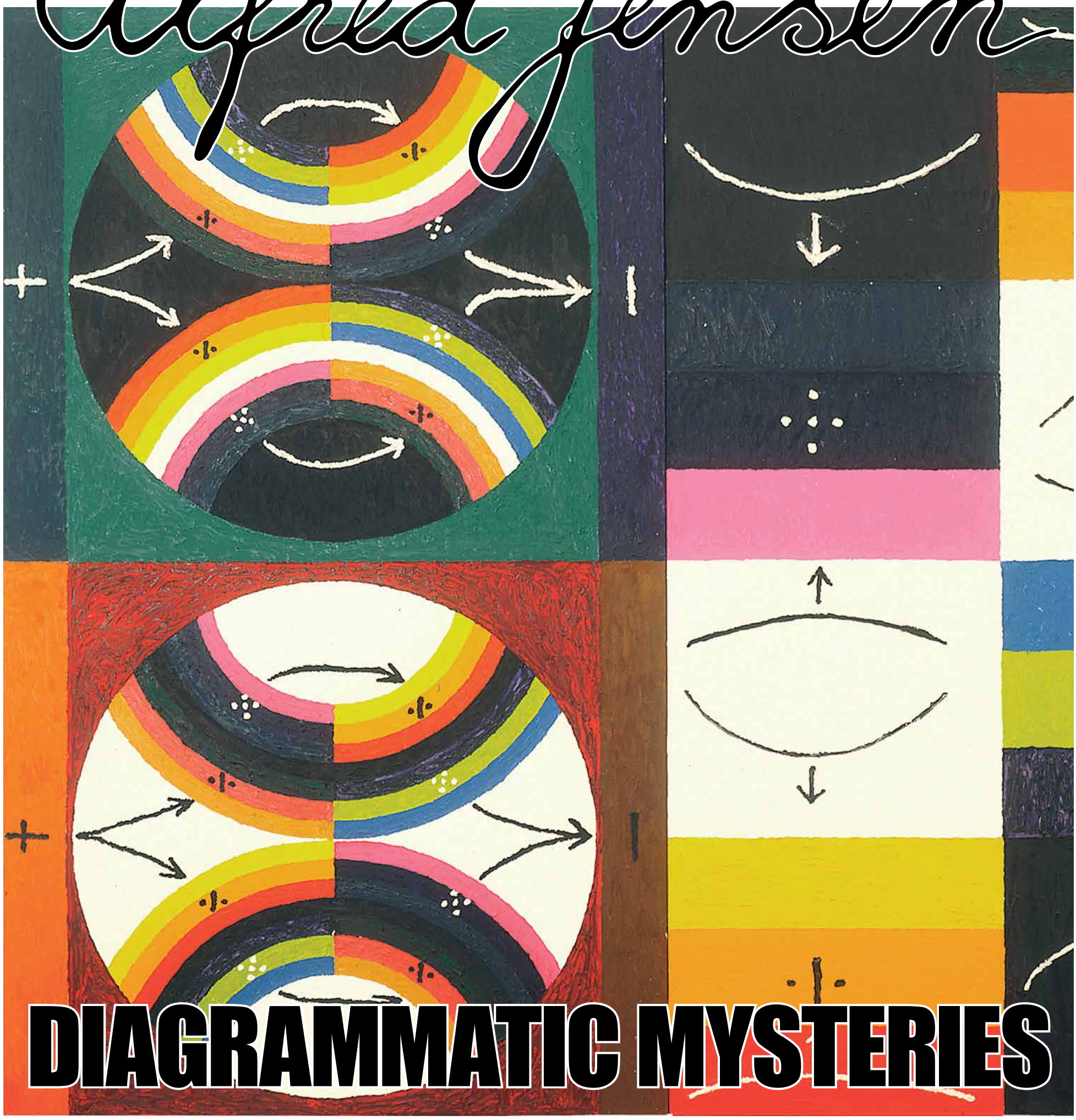
Alfred Jensen



DIAGRAMMATIC MYSTERIES

FREE PRESS

THE WAY I PAINT A PICTURE

ALFRED JENSEN
New York, 1957

Here I sit, alone in my studio. My thoughts travel to Paris. There at the Académie Scandinave, three teachers, all Fauve artists, taught me: Despiau, Friesz and Dufresne.

Despiau's method of teaching sculpture made me look simultaneously at my work in progress and its relation to the model. He would guide my eyes by supporting his sculpture across the model's body, relating it to my sculpture. His gesture made me realize that I had seen as an average, common looking Montparnasse girl could be perceived as an enchanting and a most perfect Greek statue. Despiau, by sheer twist of his hand, vitalized my sense of vision. I began to see in her form something of the rich and the simple that underlie the most chaotic appearances in nature. Despiau, by that penetrating gesture of his little hand, made me aware that my own sculpture had been put together by thousands of details which were unimportant in their meaning.

Friesz taught me the significance of what the Impressionists had attempted to create. He taught me the what, the how and the way Fauve expression as a movement in art had come about. He taught me about Cézanne. Since Friesz had known Pissarro and Renoir personally, I was made cognizant of the language of the French art tradition by my contact with this spokesman and active member.

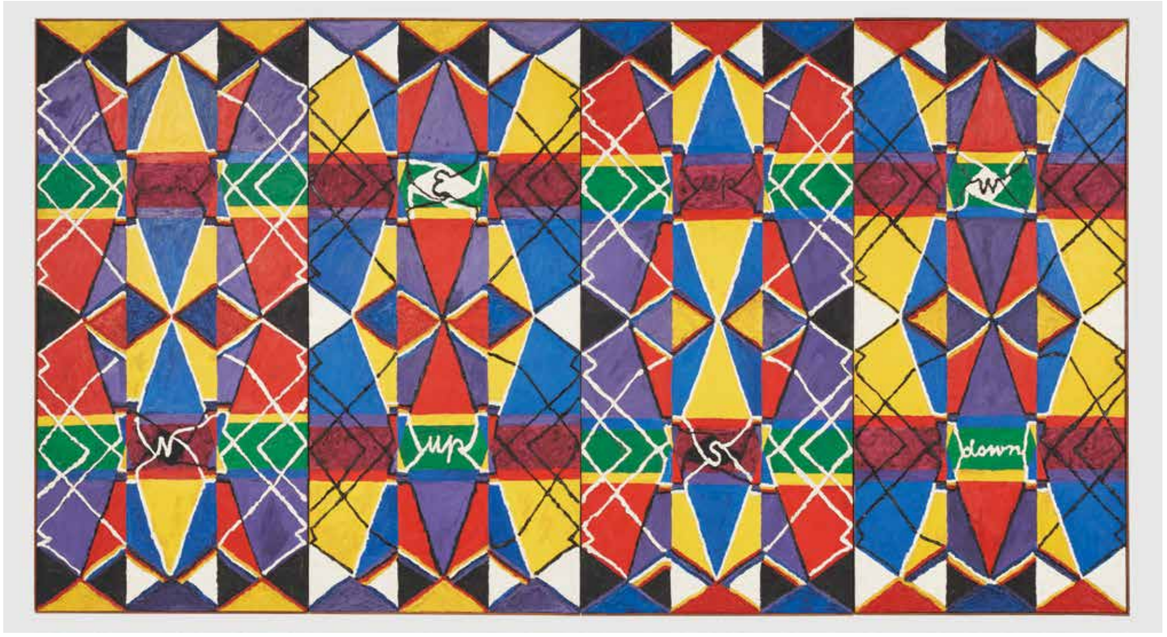
Dufresne stressed the human aspect of an artist's nature. He encouraged me with his most friendly concern, and appealed to my personal suffering in having to face a French tradition of 400 years of painting. As an outsider I needed human warmth to counteract discouragement and clarification, and Dufresne satisfied that need in my adopting me as his painter-disciple son. He gave me the most helpful support.

Each time I paint a picture today, my former teachers' criticisms filter obsessively through my imagery. Each image flows into the other, criticism upon criticism, painting lesson upon painting lesson, creating the living image. Each image in sequence must filter through the importance of my memory before I can paint a picture.

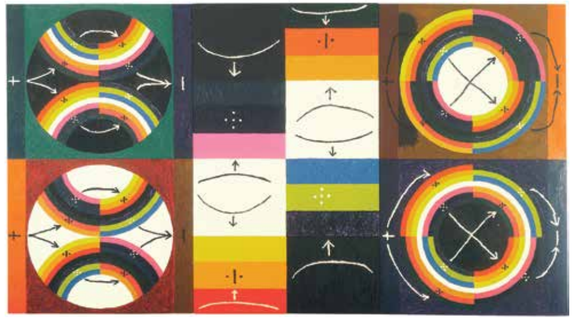
Before Europe, in San Diego, there was my teacher Mr. Schneider's flowing brush stroke. He is way back in my memory. He was a technical master of the Impressionists and French way of applying crude color marks, which he taught to me. He painted on my sketch in front of the most intense green pepper trees that loomed above us. He painted the feathery foliage with fluttered it's delicate and light-filled leaves against the California blue sky. That foliage was supported by massive and snake-like tree trunks, which were covered with loose-textured and warm, orange-tinted, peeling bark which he also made me paint the deep, dark-blue and purple shadows, shadows that Mr. Schneider insisted must be part of my painting. I painted those brush strokes once long ago, and therefore today, before I can begin to conceive a painting, those impressionistic brush crudely conceived color spots filter through my memory.

Then, in their place, the image of the Sahara desert's yellow-ochred sands imposes itself on my memory. That memory of those wind-swept clouds flying above the oasis of Tozeur in Tunisia brings forth images that glitter in the burning desert air. There stand the tall broken-stained, crumbling mud-stone, broad-crowned, dark-green-leaved palms swaying gently, making rustling noise in the quiet. Way above the earth, hanging down in large, heavy bunches, the ripening fruit is turning from yellow to brown, warming their owners that date-harvest time is near. Precious water is flowing from a spring into a stream which moves into the oasis. The water is reflected in the Arab houses and walls, reflecting their earthen brick facades which are constructed in geometric patterns. I find all these images mirrored in my fluid paint, which is developing into my as-yet unrealized work.

My work suggests memories of Madrid, Spain, where I copied Rembrandt's *The Jewish Bride*, and I imagine her in the recess of my past. She was dressed in a white robe that blended into the light, shining out of the picture's depth. Her golden locks surrounded her stubby, fleshy face. She sat in a chair, her generously warm and giving arms resting solidly upon the material wealth spread out on the table in front of her. Titian, Rubens, Velázquez, Tintoretto and Goya — I also copied these masters' works. Two winters long I copied the Prado Museum collection and today every time I paint a picture, I posit layer upon layer of all those memories, and I posit those experiences that I so long ago enjoyed with these great masters, who even though their works were mute, spoke to me with advice. Because their pictures gave me counsel by trial and error, each time I did not do what their intentions had been, their pictures would mutely admonish me for my inability to do what the masters had done and even today those copy lessons help me to establish my form.



A Glorious Circle, 1959. Oil on canvas. Each panel: 6' 6" × 3,' overall: 6' 6" × 12'



Physical Optics, 1975. Oil on canvas. 7' 2" × 12' 9"

Yes, each time I paint a picture, the superpositions of the many years of nude studies goes through each of my paintings' development. While I remain passive, those memories push me, and hour me in, and again move away from me.

In Paris I remember the better models, with their bloated bellies standing on the platform. They were nude, full of bread and wine-stuffed intestines, showing off their rosy-blond or olive-yellow or coarse, ochre skins. The somber, skylighted darkness brought their opaque and textured flesh, their tones luminously contrasted against the variously colored draped backgrounds. The sweet flesh of the Montparnasse girls filled me with desire and disgust, they boldly exhibited their most intimate parts. That kind of sensation even today interferes with the progress of my work.

The buck beer poured into the steins from large-barreled casks standing around in that Munich cellar. Here, the jugendstil pictures hung on the walls of the hall and the American students of Hans Hofmann sat several tables to argue art theory way into the night. I felt them to be too flat, but the flatness because my own leanings were toward French art. That made me feel the German conception of art which still persists in my memory. Traces of Hofmann's repetitive and monotonous style of teaching still block me in my attempt to start a painting.

Here I am desperately trying to destroy these accumulated concepts to get to something that I look for but instead I see those explosive color splashes on my canvas. They remind me of an almost forgotten period of my art studies, when I, along with many others, imitated Soutine's stylizations. As I paint today, I find signs of tinted houses, rolling hills, bleary eyed portraits and those tormented corpses of chickens, characteristic of Soutine's expression, with which I no longer identify and my assumed painter's temperament. Those kinds of references from my past assert their power in my work, hindering me from what I experience now.

As these influences are erased they are immediately replaced by relational factors, the kind that I had learned to work with after my conversations with my friend Mr. Kahnweiler. He interpreted the way Juan Gris chose his emblems. For example, specifying a circle on a white ground, a white ground became a fruit bowl; or, specifying a square with an outline on the same white, it became a book; or, specifying the base of diamonds on the same white, it became a playing card; or, specifying by the use of many parallel lines drawn on the same white, it became a musical composition; or, specifying a printed famous name on the same white, it became a newspaper. That kind of relational concept in painting obsessed me for many years, and in that time I painted thousands of planes until it arrived at their abstract resolution.

Later on I became a friend of André Masson whose paintings stressed literary syntax with his dream and burning allegories of imagined rather than objective representations. He dreamt, he passioned, and he struggled for existence. After my encounter with Masson's art, I also began to let color and plane specify the bizarre, the myth, the dream and the dislocations of time and place. Today, those Surrealist images visit my work in their guise of ghostly apparitions. Those shadows of yesteryear enter my work insistently and since I regard the magic presence as a hindrance to my work's growth, I always see to it that I expel the unwanted images from my picture as fast as I can. It is four edges, and with that clean and freed surface I go ahead and paint, as I am still intent upon finding an image of my own.

However, before I am free to start, I have to remove Constructivist associations. I spent half a year fighting metal, letting metal transform itself by forging it into a poetic image that came to birth suggested by the substance of its own matter. Out of that metal, so hard and unyielding, I forged five cast-iron sculptures now placed in the Baltimore Museum garden. I worked under Naum Gabo's friendly advice, and he found my work good. Today, those metal bands inevitably affirm their presence in my memory and I must expel them in the development of my painting concept. That concept consists of my picture's total identity, composed of its materiality and the self that I am. When those opposing forces meet and become one will, one action and one thought, the involvement between painting and artist produces the future spectator's experience. When the artist steps aside from his canvas, the spectator steps into that vacant place and wishes appreciative response he repeats the sensation that the artist had, becoming one with the picture. An enjoyment that has merit.

Magic Colors, 1959. Oil on canvas. 50 × 20"

The Pythagorean Theorem, 1964. Oil on canvas. 5' 2" × 16' 8"

JENSEN'S DIFFICULTY

PETER SCHJELDAHL

Excerpt from *Jensen's Difficulty*, 1985,
from the Guggenheim retrospective
Alfred Jensen: Paintings and Works on Paper

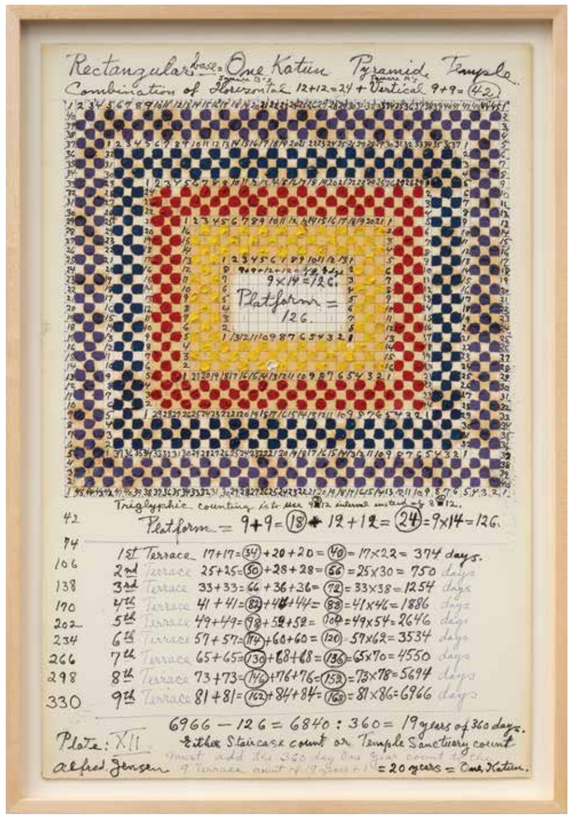
There are all sorts of difficulty in modern art, some of them easier than others. Alfred Jensen's difficulty—a plexus of subject and method remarkably esoteric, gnarled and obscure—is among the easiest of all. It is pure difficulty, in a way. It is generous: perplexity galore. The ultimate coherence, if any, of Jensen's teeming systems has eluded his most informed and patient students. This is not to say that studying those systems is pointless: Pleasure and instruction reward any effort to understand Jensen, and great pleasure and instruction reward a great effort. He could be farfetched, but he was not frivolous. By saying that his difficulty is easy, I mean that it is not in the least bit coercive or overbearing. There is about Jensen's night-journeys into the arcane an ebullience that enchants and reassures. He was the most companionable of sphinxes.

On the occasion of this catalogue, I will make no exegesis of Jensen's difficulty, leaving that to Maria Reidelbach (whose expert guidance through the Jensen labyrinth I gratefully acknowledge). I will be interested in it less as a phenomenon than as a metaphor: difficulty as such, and specifically the difficulty—the ordeal—of the modern mind, of which Jensen's seems to me more and more a paradigmatic case. I am also concerned to confront Jensen's paintings as paintings, as units of sensuous experience. There is a notably awkward gap in Jensen's art between the matter-of-fact physicality of its means and the speculative ethereality of its ends. To leap this gap is to enjoy a sensation practically unique, Jensen's definitive contribution to the range of art's possibilities. But a firm footing in the empirical is required first, if the leap is to be made.

Autodidact and polymath, willful and self-inventing, amateur in the best sense, Jensen's mind simmered for half a century in a rich stew of experience and learning before reaching mature expression in the late fifties. The form of the expression, when it came, had the completely uncalled-for quality of the true—even the absolute—original. Its mixture of quirkiness and erudition suggested the norm of some other era, if not of another planet. In fact, however, Jensen continued and extended several deep themes of modernism. He was, perhaps, the last hero of a tradition that may be approximated by making an intersection of Ezra Pound's Cantos and Vasily Kandinsky's transcendental geometries: the mystique of lost civilizations and the mystique of pure mentality. Ironically, this tradition—generalist, synthetical, grandiose—was being destroyed at the exact moment of Jensen's first public impact, making way for the specialized, analytical, laconic zeitgeist of the sixties. Moribund, the tradition could not assimilate him, and Jensen thus appears far more isolated in history than the facts warrant.

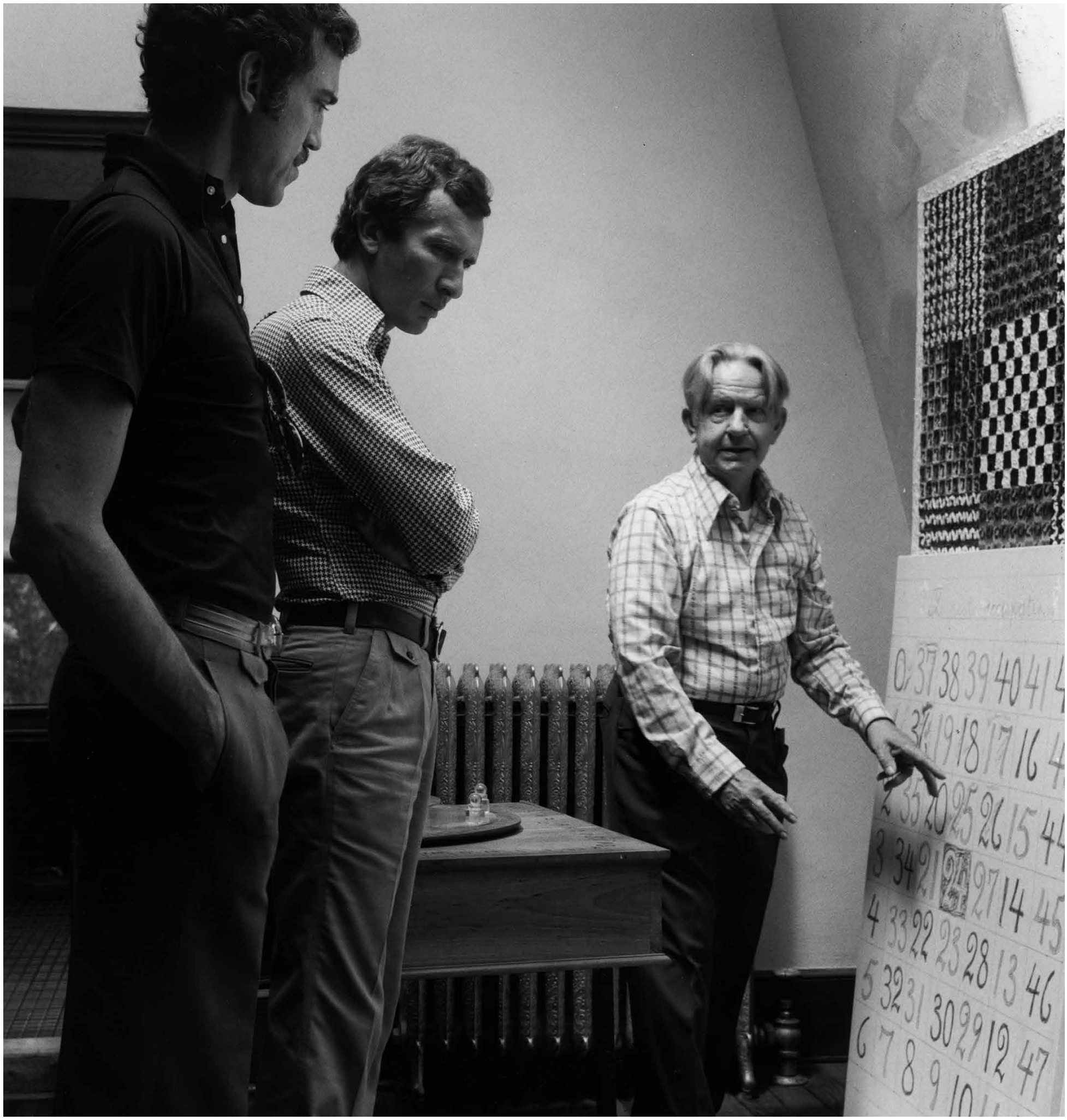
The irony is Jensenesque. To advance a tradition in the moment of its eclipse was the fitting gesture of an artist whose life was a chronicle of paradox and exile, the stuff of modern myth. All writers on Jensen compulsively retell his biography, whether they make anything of it or not. It's irresistible, a great yarn. (By all accounts, Jensen told no more than the truth, but in a way it doesn't matter: his stories function as legends.) There is a dated, even discomfiting aspect to some elements of Jensen's tale, such as the colonial-era exoticism of a Northern European born in steamy Central America and nursed by an Indian woman. And a slight mustiness has clouded the glamour, spattered with Great Names, of Jensen's cosmopolitan travels and associations in the thirties and forties. But the stories retain appeal because they are redeemed by Jensen's mature art, which telescoped the fascinations of a life and certain meanings of the century into a jerrybuilt but brilliant portmanteau. Indeed, it is possible to conceive of the totality of Jensen's art as a modernist portmanteau work, akin to *The Cantos or Finnegans Wake*.

By yet another Jensenesque irony, this one posthumous, Jensen's very quality of lateness and disinheritance guarantees his contemporaneity and makes this exhibition a timely one. Many of his tropes are still freshly relevant. For example, his linkage of himself to Goethe and early Romanticism—a conjunction that brackets the modern era—is a pattern being followed by some of the present's most compelling artists. (Think of Anselm Kiefer and Caspar David Friedrich, and of Francesco Clemente and William Blake.) Few intelligent people today can believe in the kind of magic Jensen ascribed to Mayan counting and the like—the implied patronization of alien cultures makes us uncomfortable, for one thing—and fewer still could support the afflatus of Jensen's claim that he was "engaged in the reestablishment of man's lost ties with the universal laws of nature." Today, forgotten and ignored, these values of former times, now misunderstood, must come back. If, however, we substitute for "universal laws of nature" the phrase "particular truths of history," the statement will meet with plenty of agreement. And the form of it—the metaphor of a yearning—is a template of feelings well known to contemporary hearts. The "difficulty" of Alfred Jensen continues to mirror our civilization. We are nearly all Byzantines now.



Rectangular Base = One Katun Pyramid Temple (Plate XII), c. 1965. Ink and oil on board. 30 × 20"

Hekatompedon, Per 9., 1965. Gouache on board. 50" × 40"



Fred Mueller and Arne Glimcher with Alfred Jensen in his studio, Glen Ridge, New Jersey, 1971.

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Publisher
Arne Glimcher

Editor-in-Chief
Oliver Shultz

Contributing Editors
Kathleen McDonnell
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125 NEWBURY
395 Broadway
New York, NY 10013
+1 (212) 371 5242
info@125newbury.com
125newbury.com

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Physical Optics (detail), 1975.
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