

## Sergej Jensen at Anton Kern

by Matthew Guy Nichols

Although Sergej Jensen titled his first New York solo show "Paintings," there was scarcely any paint to behold in this exhibition. The Danish-born, Berlin-based artist instead presented 16 works made primarily from fabric (all 2005). Stretched onto rectangular braces of various sizes, Jensen's textiles often mimic the appearance of abstract paintings while challenging our expectations of the medium.

Jensen tends to work with canvas, linen, burlap, and other ordinary materials. Their surfaces are often stained, mottled, faded and otherwise suggestive of previous use. In several works, Jensen has sewn numerous swatches of fabric into large, fridlike compositions that evoke the burlap-sack collages that Alberto Burri created in the 1950s. But unlike Burri's distressed and sutured surfaces, which are often associated with physical violation and psychological angst, Jensen's homespun fabric configurations seem decidedly neutral and opaque. They reveal little more than the contrasting tones, textures and conditions of their constituent parts.

The resistance to an expressionist model of painting is especially notable in several works that showcase stains, including *Opera Scene from Star Wars*. This narrow, vertical panel is covered with a light gray wool that bears a large circular stain in the upper right corner. While the bombastic title encourages viewers to read the splotch as an expressive painterly gesture, it is equally likely that Jensen simply stretched a discarded fragment of pre-stained fabric. A similar ambiguity governs *Work VI*, a plain linen panel marked with a delicate skein of dark amber paint and bleach. The calligraphic strokes may be likened to those in paintings by Jackson Pollock or Brice Marden, but the gallery's checklist describes the design as a kind of readymade Jensen merely replicated a pattern of burnt food found on a piece

In a show dominated by muted and rather drab tones, two works stood out for having been knitted from colorful yarns. *United Nations* resembles a large, homemade afghan. Its bright rainbow of horizontal stripes assumes the role of paint by being hung against a linen support. In a smaller, untitled work, a jagged black abstraction is knitted into an orange blanket that is also attached to a blank canvas. Though based on Jensen's own designs both of these works were ultimately outsourced to the artist's mother for fabrication. While such tactics betray a critique of painting as an effective vehicle for self-revelation, they also, more positively, place the onus of interpretation on the spectator. In this respect, Jensen's "paintings" generally remind me of staring at random cracks or stains in a ceiling, a meditative state wherein images and meanings accrue on the receiving end.



Sergej Jensen: *United Nations*, 2005, hand-knit wool on linen, 86 1/2 by 90 1/2 inches; at Anton Kern

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