

WHITNEY MUSEUM  
OF AMERICAN ART

WHITNEY MUSEUM

COLLECTION IN CONTEXT

**NEIL JENNEY**  
**NATURAL RATIONALISM**

SEPTEMBER 16 – DECEMBER 11, 1994

The "Collection in Context" series focuses on one or more works from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum and seeks to place them in a context that sheds new light on the artist or period. In 1983, the Museum acquired Neil Jenney's *North America Abstracted* (1978–80), the first in a group of related works that explores the theme of the North American landscape. Several later works on this theme are assembled here, and together they reveal the artist's passionate commitment and idiosyncratic approach to his subject.

In one sense, Neil Jenney (b. 1945) seems to be a quintessentially American artist. He unashamedly depicts recognizable, representational subject matter, using a highly detailed, crystalline, linear technique often associated with earlier American painting. And he is, for the most part, a self-taught artist whose work bears a relationship to homegrown folk art. The Jenney pieces exhibited here, however, are also tethered to the tradition of nineteenth-century American landscape painting, especially the art of Thomas Cole. Perhaps, most significantly in regard to the tradition of American art, with Jenney's work it seems that what you see is what you get. But it only seems that way. In fact, as David Joselit shows in his essay, Jenney's art takes ordinary subjects and, through the combination of language and image, makes conventional meanings unstable and open to multiple interpretation.

Although his works have straightforward titles, Jenney obfuscates his intentions and purposely disguises his subjects. *Venus from North America*, for example, is not simply an allegorical comment on nature and beauty. The subject, says the artist, is the planet Venus, which appears as an almost microscopic speck in the sky. Even if the precision of Jenney's rendering makes the content seem accessible, we must in fact look carefully, slowly, and attentively to discover what each picture is about.

Adam D. Weinberg  
Curator, Permanent Collection

This exhibition was organized by Elisabeth Sussman, Curator, Whitney Museum of American Art.

## NEIL JENNEY'S REALISM

In December 1968 Neil Jenney made an unconventional decision for a progressive artist of that time—he gave up his environmental or theatrical sculptural installations of the preceding two years for “image” painting. Often referred to as “Bad Painting”—or what Jenney has termed his “Unconcerned Style”—because of its purposefully simplified and sometimes crude imagery and its ostensibly careless handling of paint, Jenney’s extraordinary production of 1969 and 1970 nevertheless maintained a real link with the conceptual traditions he seemed to leave behind. At the heart of these works is Jenney’s concept of content: as he declares in the statement that follows, “The Prime Dynamic of Rationalism is that ‘Content is King!’” In his early paintings, as well as the more recent landscapes included in this exhibition, Jenney introduces what appear to be simple scenes—ordinary “content”—only to de-familiarize them. It is through the conjunction of language and image that content is highlighted as well as transformed. In the Bad Paintings, understated tragicomic titles like “Saw and Sawed,” “Them and Us,” “Threat and Sanctuary,” and “Here and There” are prominently inscribed on crisp black frames. In Jenney’s recent landscape paintings, allusive titles like “Acid Story” or “North America Divided” assume even greater prominence on even larger and more intricate architectural frames. These titles are not mere adjuncts, but fundamental components of the work: “if a work of art contains ‘Written Expression’ it’s only Rational that each must resolve the complexities of Calligraphy, as well as address the references of the entire Literary World.” For Jenney the conjunction of image and language points to the paradox of “content”: its unsuspected instability and its susceptibility to multiple interpretation or abstraction.

The titles in the Bad Paintings of 1969 and 1970 are all characterized

by two nouns joined by a conjunction: namely the simple word “and” whose ostensible function is to bring things together. Jenney is able to draw a wide range of connotations from the repetition of this basic semantic formula. In paintings like *Girl and Doll*, in which a crying child is juxtaposed to a broken doll, a causal and sentimental link is suggested allegorically; in *Saw and Sawed*, in which a log lies next to boards presumably



*Saw and Sawed*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 58 1/2 x 70 3/8 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Philip Johnson 77.65

made from it, a temporal and economic or ecological connection is established; in *Them and Us*, the coexistence of American and Soviet warplanes makes a political statement, while in *Threat and Sanctuary*, the image of a lifeboat on a body of water seems to partake of the traditional conventions of allegory. The list could be enumerated further, but these few examples suffice to demonstrate the richness and variety Jenney achieves from his ostensibly naive textual and visual paradigm. Nor are the messages generated through his poetics of combination unambiguous, as is clear in an important statement he made in 1978:

I was more concerned with approaching the viewer with relationships—for instance, a crying girl and a broken vase, birds and jets, or trees and lumber. I'm not interested in a narrative; I'm interested in showing objects existing with and relating to other objects because I think that is what realism deals with—objects relating to other objects.

This text contains two important declarations: first, a disavowal of narrative, and second, a definition of realism. For as much as Jenney's use of the conjunction "and" suggests a narrative connection—say a situation in which a little girl suffers the loss of her broken toy—the issue is not one of horror or any other particular narrative interpretation. On the contrary, the ground is quite literally empty: like the word "and" which separates the two things it joins, the gesturally painted green field brings two objects in proximity only by isolating them in the engulfing blankness of the canvas. Jenney's allusive images may suggest causal, temporal, or allegorical links between things, but their paradoxical effect is precisely to extract objects from such deterministic relationships. This is perhaps most eloquently demonstrated in the 1970 painting *Here and There*, in which a green field is divided by a white fence. The fence, like the "and" of the title, is at once that which joins and that which divides "here" from "there."

As the text quoted above implies, the rejection of narrative is Jenney's precondition for a realism he defines as "objects relating to other objects." In order for the relationships between things to become visible—and malleable as a subject for art—they must be de-familiarized, de-narrativized. A fascination with what Jenney calls the *identity* of things emerges repeatedly in his published comments on his art. In a statement of 1970 he proposes an opposition between mimetic representation, and what he considers the actual identity of objects:

The choice of a group of items in a piece is made solely by their identity and not their form. They are composed spatially for two reasons: so that they can retain their identity, and to relate to each other's identity. I think every realist painting that's ever been successful has resolved all the problems that every abstract artist must resolve in order to make successful work.



*Acid Story*, 1983–84

As in his sculptural works, which were typically composed of tableaux or accretions of ordinary objects, and often titled with a friend's or an acquaintance's name, the material *identity* of an object in Jenney's paintings is more important than its formal aesthetic qualities. It is not mimetic representation which is realist, but the calculus of relationships between things. This is why Jenney can speak so convincingly of synthesizing abstraction and realism. For although a painting like *Girl and Doll*, or even more aptly *Here and There*, might be composed of mimetically accurate, or at least recognizable components—a girl, a doll, a fence—these components are *relationally* abstract, being divorced from any firm narrative mooring. The juxtaposition of girl and doll suggests at least as many psychic and situational permutations as a passage of red paint might generate against a passage of blue paint in a completely abstract canvas. And yet, as Jenney puts it, realism has an additional "expressive potential because after you have resolved the essential harmonies that you're dealing with, then you have the precise relationships identity-wise rather than spatially."

Jenney's relational realism is therefore characterized as much by the gaps and disjunctions between things as by their connections. This seems apparent in an important transitional painting of 1971–72, *The Modern Era*, which marks a shift in Jenney's formal techniques from the gesturally exuberant Bad Paintings of 1969 and 1970 to the high-finish virtuoso effects of his subsequent landscapes. *The Modern Era*—whose title makes an allegorical reading all but inevitable—includes an ordinary office chair suspended in air before a white wall, and firmly tied to its distinct shadow like a Siamese twin. At the foot of the small canvas is an electrical cord running along a narrow strip of gray carpet and plugged into an outlet in the adjacent wall. In its implied dynamic of unplugging and plugging—of liberating a chair from gravity, while linking an invisible appliance to its source of power—Jenney makes the ordinary strange and the banal disorienting. Although the individual objects which compose *The Modern Era* are "real," their relationships to one another are abstract: under the utilitarian veneer of modernity lies a disturbing incoherence.

It is just such a paradox that informs Jenney's embrace of landscape—and particularly the American landscape—beginning in the mid-1970s and



**VENUS** FROM **N.A.**

*Venus from North America. 1979-86*



*North America Divided, 1991/93*

continuing to the present. For although these more recent paintings evoke the nationalist ideologies of the Hudson River School and Luminist artists of the mid-nineteenth century who believed in the special sanctity of the American landscape as an image of the rightness of our national destiny, Jenney's sublime is an unmistakably post-industrial one. For him the landscape is encrypted within massive black frames; its spectacular aerial effects are not so much derived from the majesty of God's universe, as from the possible fallout from nuclear disaster. But despite their apocalyptic overtones, Jenney's landscape paintings have none of the curt fascination with dichotomies that lends the Bad Paintings their humor. If they partake of the same ambiguity as these works, they do so in an entirely different manner.

The realism of the Bad Paintings depends upon dissolving the interconnecting tissue of narrative detail which conventionally links one object to another. The "landscape" in these works is radically abbreviated into a virtually undifferentiated monochromatic field of similar brushstrokes. But in Jenney's subsequent works it is precisely this connective environment—the landscape—which is enriched and developed, leading one to suppose that the artist has reversed himself, indulging in a form of realism which is about plenitude rather than poverty—which is "good" rather than "bad." But this suspicion of an aesthetic change of heart only lends a special piquancy to Jenney's continuing poetics of disjunction. For if the Bad Paintings separated objects semantically, simultaneously joining and dividing two things by means of an empty ground or the conjunction "and," his landscapes accomplish a similar disorientation kinesthetically. In a painting like *Biosphere #4* of 1971–76, for instance, the very elongated horizontal format of the painting sutures together two dramatically incompatible points of view. Approximately

three-fifths of the right of the painting is filled with an extremely close view of a massive stone (a glacial erratic of Central Park) in front of which wave a few delicate leafy twigs. The left two-fifths of the canvas, by contrast, represents a glowing yellow sky whose vista of receding geometricized clouds gives the impression of a vast, empty recession into space. The painting thus generates an exhilarating sense of vertigo, as though one's right eye were an inch away from some massive rock, examining it minutely, and one's left were lost in the contemplation of an infinite expanse of sky. The body of the viewer is ecstatically divided, no longer occupying a stable place. This, I think, is the larger significance of Jenney's recent theme of *North America Divided*. In one painting of this title, a barbed wire fence, echoing that of *Here and There*, is the minutely observed pivot within a vast, horizonless world. Without horizon there is no gravity—the chair of *The Modern Era* takes to the sky, so the viewer of Neil Jenney's paintings feels uprooted, unmoored in the landscape.

Complementary to Jenney's effect of kinesthetic disorientation is the productive disjunction achieved through the geometric reorderings characteristic of his landscape paintings. This is a crucial component of what Jenney has called "Natural Rationalism [which] is Rationalism characterized by idiosyncratic primitivism." In *North America Abstracted*, for instance, a continent is abbreviated as a series of stylized outcroppings beneath a sky transected by two lines of parallelogram clouds. In this work, as in the later painting of *North America Divided*, he evokes two contradictory movements at once: a chaotic geological upheaval and a balancing process of rationalization through geometry.

Despite Jenney's more explicitly political references to acid rain, the threat of nuclear war, and the national boundaries that serve to divide a continuous natural environment, it is the kinesthetic message of his paintings—



*North America Abstracted*, 1978–80

their paradox of lifting one out of, and pouring one back into, the landscape — which seems to have the most resonance as a commentary on contemporary life. For Jenney, as he repeatedly states, has been preoccupied in his art with both the identity and the alienation of objects. In the *Bad Paintings*, this pointed strategy of juxtaposition sometimes approached a wry criticism of the commodity world, when for instance, birds were linked ironically to jets, or living trees, less lightheartedly identified with the commodity they would become—lumber. But in his most recent work, these messages are both more subtle and more haunting. Jenney's magnificent, eccentrically shaped canvases use scale, color, and light to demonstrate our always difficult relationship to the natural world—characterized both by our desire to enter into it, and the great barrier to this access which arises through our careless and destructive squandering of its resources.

David Joselit

Rationalism is the term!

Rationalism accepts the fact that "Idealism is Unavoidable" and that the essence of Philosophical and Technical advancement is derived by a simple, logical, step by step, trial and error process which is continually Transmutational. The Prime Dynamic of Rationalism is that "Content is King!"

Secondly, line is studied and idealized and color is atmospheric and adheres to chromatic and textural perspectives.

Rational logic also dictates that Rationalism extends to the Sculptural Realm, because paintings are also objects, so hence, must survive in sculptural terms.

Finally—if a work of art contains "Written Expression" it's only Rational that each must resolve the complexities of Calligraphy, as well as address the references of the entire Literary World.

Natural Rationalism is Rationalism characterized by idiosyncratic primitivism.

Neil Jenney

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width precedes depth.

*North America Abstracted*, 1978–80

Oil on wood, 38 x 85 1/4 x 5 1/4

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Burroughs Wellcome Purchase Fund, the Wilfred P. and Rose J. Cohen Purchase Fund, and the Painting and Sculpture Committee 83.19

*Venus from North America*, 1979–86

Oil on wood, 85 x 53 x 3 1/2

Collection of the artist

*Acid Story*, 1983–84

Oil on wood, 32 1/2 x 140

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Steve Martin

*North America Divided*, 1990–94

Oil on wood, 61 x 60 x 5 1/2

Collection of the artist

*North America Divided*, 1991–92

Oil on wood, 25 1/2 x 113 x 3

Collection of the artist

*North America Divided*, 1991/93

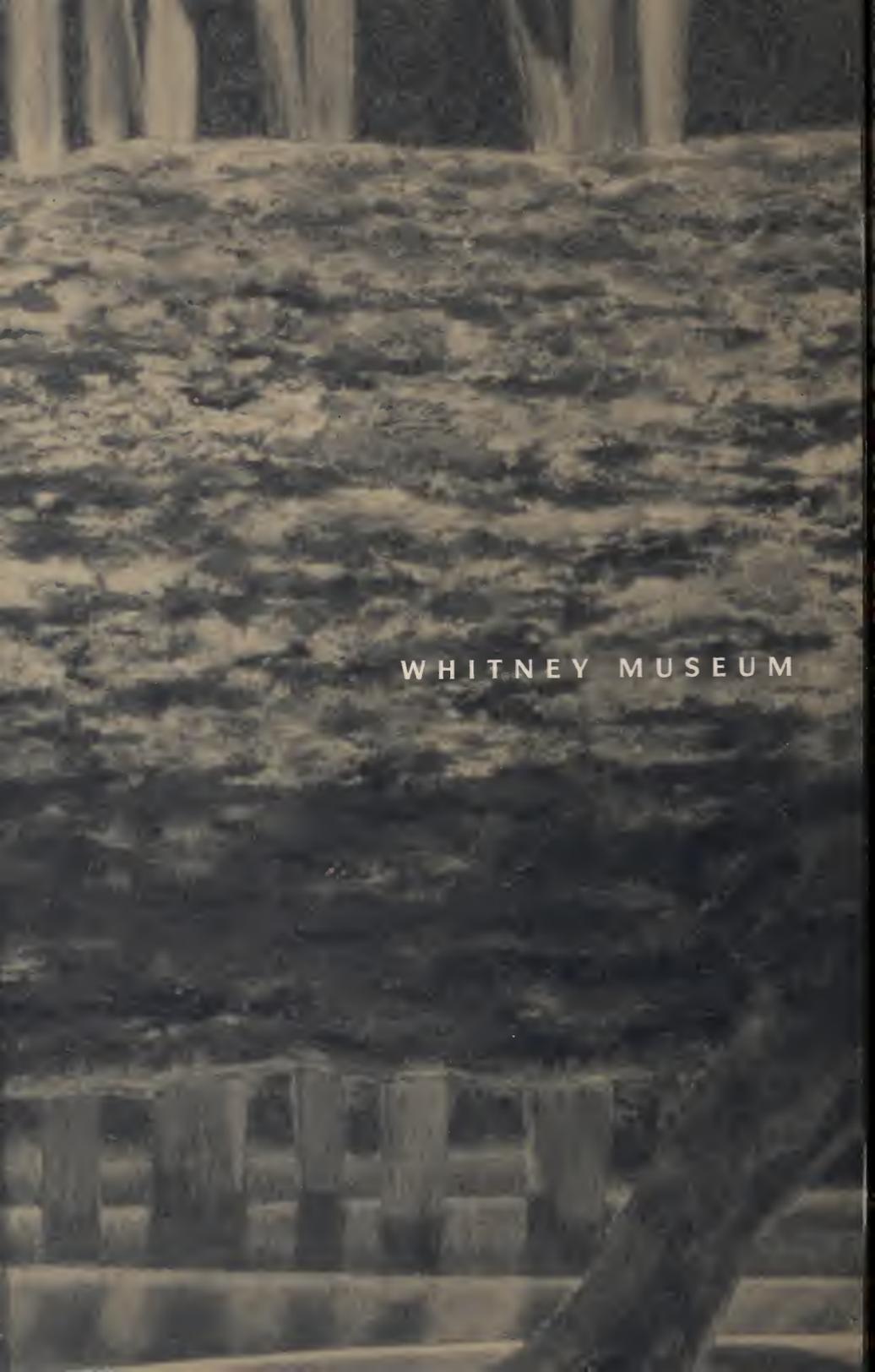
Oil on wood, 18 x 32 x 3 1/2

Collection of the artist

The exhibition is supported by the Lobby Gallery Associates of the Whitney Museum and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Photograph credits: *Saw and Sawed* and *North America Abstracted* by Geoffrey Clements; *North America Divided*, 1991/93, and *Venus from North America* by Jerry L. Thompson

Cover: Detail of *Venus from North America*, 1979–86

A black and white photograph of a grassy field. In the foreground, there is a wooden fence made of vertical posts. The middle ground is a large, open field of grass. In the background, there are several tall, thin trees. The text "WHITNEY MUSEUM" is centered in the middle of the image.

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