



Jess, *Mystic Writing XI*, 1955, wax crayon on paper, 10 3/4 × 9 3/4".

greens, and autumnal reds—indicates. Jess painted the Böcklinesque *Mary Butts Landscape*, 1953, after reading the titular writer's 1928 novel, *Armed with Madness*, a vaguely Arthurian horror story that has been frequently described as her version of T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem "The Waste Land." According to a 2004 article about Jess for this magazine, critic Michael Auping said that "[Butts] wrote stories that interwove ancient myth and ritual with a deeply felt spirituality that invariably verged on the surreal and supernatural." She was apparently an inspiration of sorts—dare one say an ancestral muse?—and perhaps emblematic of Jess's chthonic, more female side.

*Stillbourne*, ca. 1951, is a Cimmerian matrix of rippling, membranous forms in brown, black, white, and a particularly dour emerald. The painting, like the violent abstraction *Sea Cove*, 1952, is a darkly metaphysical work of what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called "creative flux"—that is, elemental and inescapable process. A trio of wax-crayon-on-paper drawings, *Mystic Writing VII, XI, and XII*, all 1955, are odd collisions of inexplicable sigils, decorative patterning, and winsome Matissean forms. Their sign language seems indebted to Paul Klee, or even to Aleister Crowley, revealing Jess's catholic tastes and eccentric approach to picture making.

Although Jess's art appears indebted to pataphysics—an "imaginary science" of "games governing the special occurrence of a sporadic accident," as poet Christian Bök has written—the artist didn't play around. He was a highly educated person, a sophisticated intellectual with a wide-ranging and virtually encyclopedic knowledge of culture, whether of the high avant-garde or the most guttural strains of pop. And he is implicitly the protagonist of the oil painting *Hero Reenters the Cave*, 1950. But is this lugubrious space Plato's dark cave of ignorance? Jess had seen the intellectual light, obviously, but was he trapped in the emotional dark at the time of this work's making? Sometimes the life of the mind prevents one from searching deep within the soul.

The painting *A Wish in the Form of a Landscape*, 1954, called to mind Richard Dadd's canvas *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke*, 1855–64, a mad masterpiece of Victorian anxiety and English folklore that

Dadd made while incarcerated in a criminal mental asylum after murdering his father. Jess didn't murder his father, but he severed ties with his kin—Duncan became Jess's family. And as the artist acknowledged, he owed much of his creativity to Duncan's poetry. The pair were myth-obsessed and more than a little mad themselves. But this marvelous insanity, steeped in love, is what makes Jess's art so great.

—Donald Kuspit

## William Scott

### ORTUZAR PROJECTS

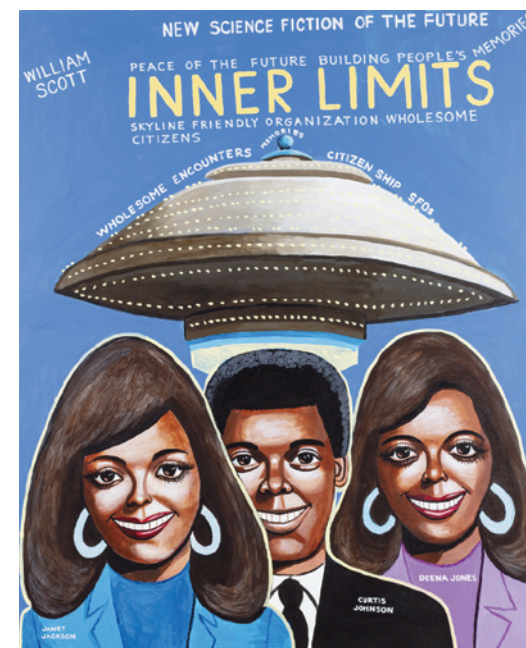
A segment from a 1972 episode of *Sesame Street* features a very youthful Jesse Jackson engaging in a call-and-response with a racially diverse group of kids. Jackson recites a piece based on a poem by William Holmes Borders Sr. titled "I Am—Somebody," a stirring anthem of Black pride that Borders, a civil rights activist and Baptist minister from Georgia, famously read in 1943 for a radio broadcast. Jackson's choir repeats after him with gusto: "I may be poor, but I am—somebody. . . . I may be small, but I am—somebody. . . . My clothes are different, my face is different, my hair is different, but I am—somebody. . . . I am black, brown, white. . . . I must be respected, protected, never rejected. . . . I am God's child. I am—somebody." When they finish, Jackson instructs his enthusiastic charges to give themselves a well-deserved round of applause. It is a deeply affecting television moment, especially now, in light of the lethal racism, xenophobia, and Christian bigotry of Donald Trump's America. This excerpt, almost fifty years old, feels like a transmission from an alternate and much better universe.

William Scott might be a benevolent emissary from this sunnier reality, on par with other bighearted Black visionaries such as extraterrestrial jazz maestro Sun Ra or pop music fabulist Mingering Mike, "the soul superstar you've never heard of." The self-taught artist's exhibition at Ortuzar Projects, "It's a Beautiful Day Outside," was a radiant blast of faith, hope, and sci-fi weirdness. Across eighteen acrylic paintings on canvas and paper, a trio of papier-mâché sculptures, and

William Scott, *Untitled*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 48".

a short video (the only titled work here), Scott marvelously exteriorized his rich interior world.

Among the first pieces one encountered upon entering the main gallery was a 2020 acrylic portrait of a Brobdingnagian lady—who bears a striking resemblance to disco enchantress Donna Summer—rocking a studded cerulean blazer and matching skirt. This grande dame dwarfs the lit-up skyscrapers behind her and the silhouetted throng at her feet. She is surrounded by six hovering UFOs, some of which have neatly rendered block-letter messages swirling around them—e.g., WHOLESOME ENCOUNTERS, CITIZENS MEMORIES, HEAVEN AND EARTH OLDIES AND FUTURE—statements, surely, of the unifying powers of pop music and the soothing, palliative effect of nostalgia. Perched atop her glistening



mane of ebony hair like an imperial headdress is a special announcement: GOD WOMAN IS DIVAEMPIRE. *Got it?*

On an adjacent wall was a 2014 canvas: a triple portrait featuring, per Scott, an idealized version of singer Janet Jackson; a mystery man named Curtis Johnson; and one “Deena Jones,” who may or may not be the character based on Diana Ross from the 1981 musical *Dreamgirls*. Above them is an enormous Spielbergian spaceship from the SFO—the Skyline Friendly Organization, an interplanetary goodwill alliance. According to the artist, the three are cosmic ambassadors of a sort, enlightened beings from an advanced civilization consigned to earth in order to make our stupid, circumambulating ball of dung less—ugh—dung-like.

Some of the best pieces in this show are self-portraits. In one from 2019, the artist is a peewee basketball player, lookin’ sharp in his purple-and-gold LA Lakers uniform. To the right of his resplendent Afro is written 1976 REBORN OF BILLY THE KID ANOTHER LIFE. ONE DAY IN THE NEW LIFE . . . LORD OF JESUS CHRIST. Elsewhere is a before-and-after picture from 2012. On one side, a grimacing Scott reveals a large and painful-looking scar on his chest. Opposite this is another version of the artist, but renewed and sans wound—beaming, confident. But perhaps the best self-portrait here is *Beautiful Peace on Earth*, 2013—the exhibition’s lone video—in which the artist walks the streets of Oakland, California, dressed as a happy Darth Vader who communes with birds and cheers up perplexed passersby. Bless you, Mr. Scott, with your humor, generosity, and sweet spirit. Now, please, *beam me up!*

—Alex Jovanovich

## Lauretta Vinciarelli

TOTAH

*Solace*. That’s the word that kept coming to mind as I looked at Lauretta Vinciarelli’s exacting watercolor-and-ink studies of light, space, and reflection, after not having seen art in person for six months due to the Covid-19 closures. This exquisite exhibition focused on the artist and architect’s mature production between 1984 and 2002, before her untimely death in 2011 at age sixty-eight. It seemed to pick up right where the last Vinciarelli show—at New York’s Judd Foundation in 2019—left off. That presentation surveyed her output from the years 1976 to 1986, when she was romantically involved with the foundation’s namesake. Unfortunately, the offering, as Ida Panicelli wrote in these pages, left “unaddressed the circuitous path” that Vinciarelli “took to become an extraordinary artist.” Not so here.

Vinciarelli was raised in Rome, where her father was an organist at Saint Peter’s Basilica (she later likened the numbering of works in her

various series to notes on a musical scale). She studied architecture at Sapienza Università di Roma before emigrating in 1969 to the United States, where she taught for many years at several institutions. In 1987, she commenced her transcendent spatial experiments in watercolor and ink, which were never meant to be plans for actual buildings. “The architectural space I have painted since 1987 does not portray solutions to specific demands of use,” she once noted. Her engagement with luminous watercolor on sturdy sheets of Fabriano paper, typically thirty by twenty-two inches, allowed her to exemplify what it means to “not portray,” to abandon utility in the service of unbridled imagination, as other well-known and mostly male avant-garde architects of the era—such as Walter Pichler and Lebbeus Woods—did. Now Vinciarelli is finally receiving her due, though at a time when Minimalism has become the dominant neoliberal lifestyle aesthetic. Those new to her might mistake her paintings’ rigorous elegance as “classy” and “sleek,” as if it’s something you can readily buy at Design Within Reach. Vinciarelli’s sublime pictures are indeed beautiful, but her brand of elegance is hard won, ruthless—her pristine tableaux are never sullied by the presence of humans, and recognizable architectural elements are frequently pared down to impossible-looking Apollonian forms.

Vinciarelli’s art began with identifiable figuration and slowly transformed into something much more expansive. The show at Totah opened with 1988’s “Subway Series,” paintings that resemble idealized and vacant places for transportation—think Giorgio de Chirico or the visionary drawings of Massimo Scolari—and the “Texas Remembered” series, also from 1988, which were executed in a similar style and influenced by her days in Marfa with Judd. Also included in the first room was *Vineyard*, 1984, a typological study of gardens, and *Night Five*, from a magnificent 1996 series, titled “Night,” of elegiac paintings that evoke memorials in reflecting pools.

Around a corner in the second room, the art shifted from representational to abstract, and the mood from somber to meditative with *Orange Silence* from 2000, the “Intimate Distances” series from 2002, and the “Suspended in Blue” series from 2007. All of these offer multiple vanishing points in an illusory, disorienting space and feature subtle variations in color that suggest the movement of light, which spreads across the surface of each composition before it is contained by networks of orthogonal lines, creating deep spatial recessions. Vinciarelli summons a remote sense of intimacy that describes our current situation perfectly: all together yet all alone. Given her interests in Zen and the elements of negation, I thought of these works as full of nothingness, per the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of *Śūnyatā*. “Form is empty; emptiness is form,” to quote the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*, the Heart Sutra, which discusses human attachments to self and consequently to suffering. Vinciarelli’s acceptance of selflessness near the end of her life is admirable—an embrace of everything and nothing, all at once.

—Lauren O’Neill-Butler

## James Luna

GARTH GREENAN GALLERY

James Luna first performed *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* in 1991 at the Whitney Museum of American Art’s branch at Federal Reserve Plaza in New York’s Financial District. In the piece, Luna presents himself as if seen through the eyes of a tourist cruising past a reservation on one of America’s byways. The artist delivers a monologue in three parts while attired three different ways: First, he wears only a breechcloth and moccasins, offering himself up as a kind of noble savage; next, typical American street clothes: slacks and a black crew-neck tee; and finally a stereotypical war-dance getup, which includes a headdress, silver arm

Lauretta Vinciarelli, *Orange Silence*, 2000, three watercolor-on-paper works, each 22 × 15”.

