

ARTISTS SPACE



JORDAN KANTOR
RECENT PAINTINGS
09.14–10.28.2006
PROJECT SPACE



[fig. 1]

Untitled (hands with glasses), 2004
Oil on canvas
16 x 30 in.

Jordan Kantor: Recent Paintings

Artists Space // September 14 — October 28, 2006 // New York

Curated by Christian Rattemeyer

Essay by Matt Saunders

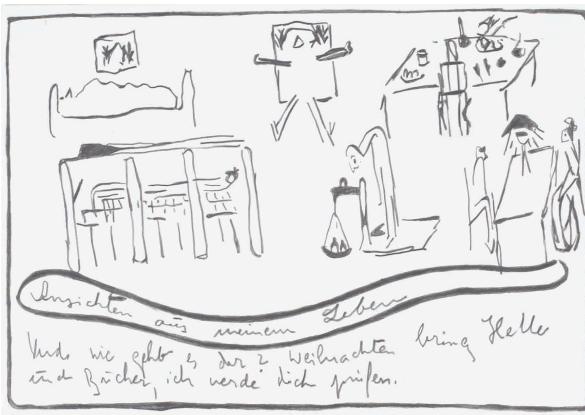
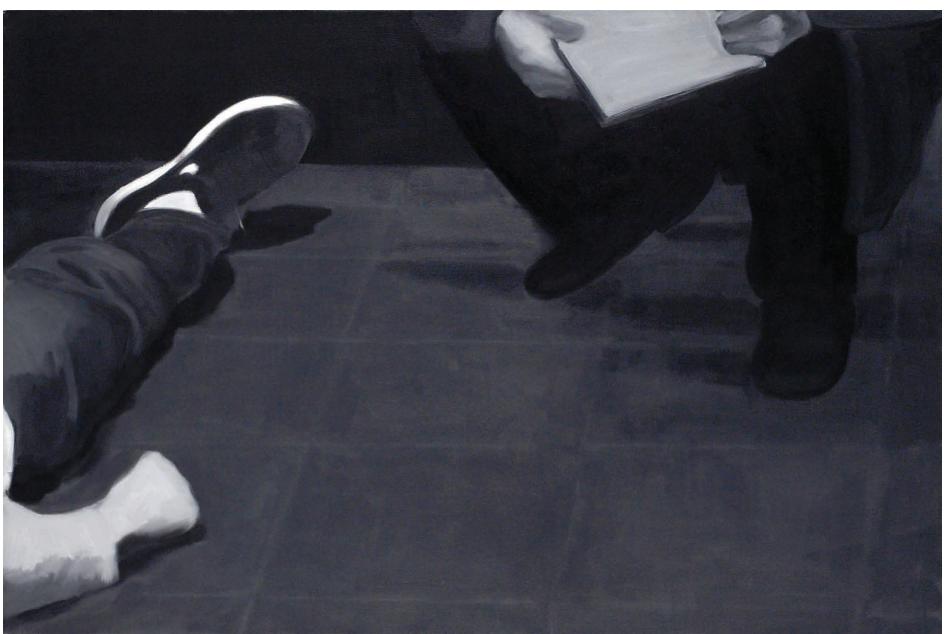
[fig. 2]

Untitled, 2004
Oil on canvas
32 x 34 in.,
collection of
Diane Wallace,
New York



[fig. 3]

Untitled
(forensic scene), 2004
Oil on canvas
32 x 48 in.,
collection of
the artist



[fig. 4] figure lies in bed, gazes out a window, sits at a table, and so on. Below, someone has written in German cursive *Ansichten aus meinem Leben* ("scenes from my life"), and added a friendly note about visiting at Christmas. From the way

Kantor has rendered the scenes—flat and uninflected, clearly scaled-up—we understand right away that something is being mediated or borrowed. And, of course, I've spilled the beans. The scenes are from Kafka's life, and the drawing is Kantor's "copy" of a postcard Kafka sent to a friend (and one in a series of works on paper drawn from Kafka's marginalia). The drawing's sophistication is how it works by not working: while citing a whole range of contemporary strategies, its different registers—sketches, a caption from a slippery narrator, a greeting—never quite cohere as we expect. This drawing may seem an odd place to start an essay about the paintings of Jordan Kantor, but through its rich compressions of a whole range of contemporary strategies, *Ansichten* succinctly points to the live-wires in Kantor's paintings. Here, as in those paintings, there are figures of anxiety; there is a straightforwardness of means, coupled with an interest in frame shifts; there are appropriated images, bracketed and generalized, mediated and ventriloquized; there is a fascination with oblique self-portrayal, as well as with meaning that unfolds slowly, across a series of works.

I connect the sort of disjointed life we glimpse in *Ansichten* to the anonymous figures—often workers, investigators, technicians—who inhabit so many of Kantor's works on canvas, for example *Untitled (forensic scene)*, 2004 [fig. 3]. The title immediately tips us off that the supine figure to the left is a body, but we glean little else, as the edge of the canvas cuts off almost all but a balled fist and the white trim of a shoe, which point, like parallel arrows across a gray floor to a second, squatting figure (probably a detective), whose hands and notebook hover at the top edge of the canvas, emphasizing the sense that at any moment he could



[fig. 5]

Untitled (informers), 2006
Oil on linen
38 x 52 in.



[fig. 6]

Untitled (pool corner), 2006
Oil on linen
36 x 40 in.

stand up and walk out of the otherwise still scene. Just as we may allegorize the relationship between these two figures as a parallel to the painter and “model,” we also see Kantor thinking about the ways images are observed and recorded.

Kantor often works from photographs, which he scans, crops, transfers to canvas, and paints. In this, he’s very much of his time; in fact, if anything, this approach to making a painting is everywhere. It is to Kantor’s own words that I turn for a description of the symptoms. In an essay written for *Artforum* (“The Tuymans Effect,” November 2004), he picked apart these strategies: pictorial ambiguity, radical cropping, a reduction of pictorial incident, a limited palette, speedy execution, and an “inherent and necessary incompleteness.” These techniques (which he identifies as the legacy of the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans) are, above all, a group of strategies to lead the representation of extant images back to some sort of syntactical traction. In other words, they light one path, among many, by which artists may gain a philosophical—and painterly—hold on the stream of already-represented images that make up our world. Considering Kantor’s own paintings, it’s clear that he is guilty as charged, or, rather, a co-traveler on this path, and, given this, we have to ask where he departs.

Tuymans and others famously link their paintings through changing themes and ideas which organize and carry meaning into various bodies of work. It is here, in the “extra-painterly,” that Kantor’s voice emerges (and departs from the Tuymans lineage), for though his formats vary from painting to photography, to video, prints, text works, and writing, his themes are insistent in their continuity. One of his central preoccupations is the body: in extremis, in free fall, imperiled. Or else, the body inert—uninscribed with culture, psychology or sexuality—the body as the blunt smudge on the canvas, the blankest face of our subjectivity. And when there is no literal body, we usually get observers or surrogates: a baboon leaping backwards: *Untitled (Baboon)*, 2004, [fig. 8]; two monochrome canvases, standing on easels like figures, lifeless and drained of color: *Untitled (Two Monochromes)*, 2006, [fig. 9]. Unlike the protean, semi-anonymous painting-mind that seems to narrate Tuymans’ work, Kantor’s repeated integration of his ideas seems to ask that we link all the work into a seamless and urgent whole, with a subjective center. This center holds strongly in a painting like *Untitled (Pasolini)*, 2004, [fig. 11]. A full figure lies crumpled, face down on a vast field of gray, yet this evocative scene is almost upstaged by a huge white arrow tilting in from the bottom left. Is this arrow on the paving of the street on which the body appears to lie? From its disposition, it appears to be a forensic notation—something of the photographic document, but not of the photographed scene. Does the arrow identify? Accuse? Direct our attention?

[fig. 7]

Untitled, 2004
Oil on canvas
24 x 26 in.



[fig. 8]

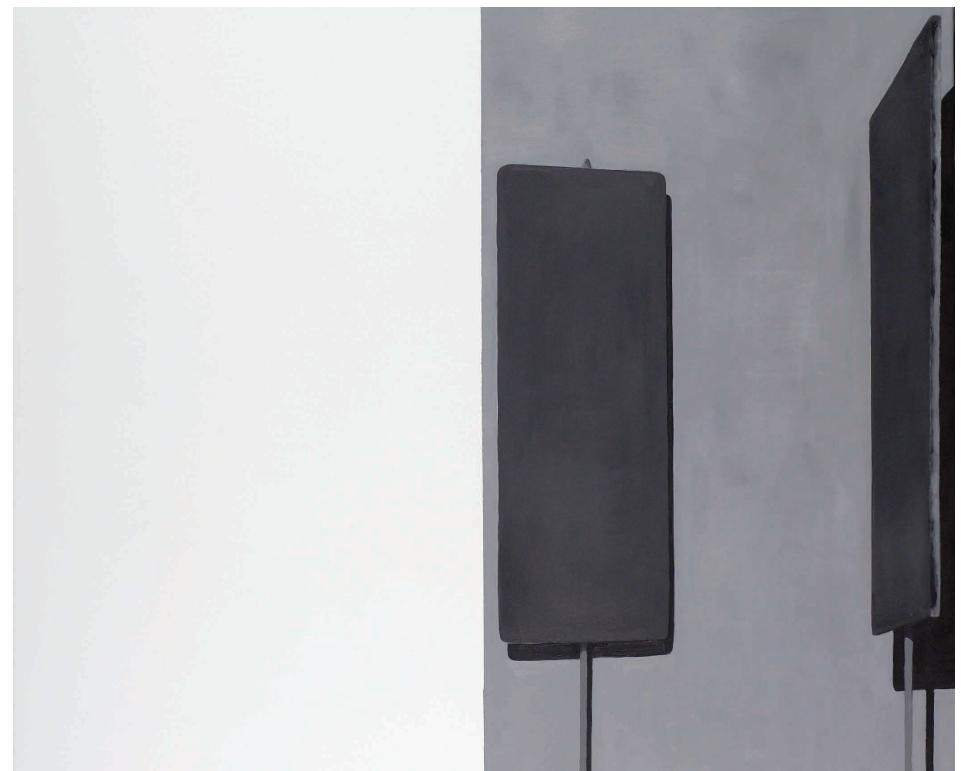
Untitled (baboon), 2004
Oil on canvas
38 x 68 in.





[fig. 9]

Untitled (two monochromes), 2006
Oil on canvas
38 x 46 in.



[fig. 10]

Untitled (three monochromes), 2006
Oil on canvas
38 x 46 in.



[fig. 11]

Untitled (Pasolini), 2004
Oil on canvas
64 x 96 in.

[fig. 12]

Untitled (woman's torso), 2006
Oil and graphite on canvas
20 x 30 in.,
collection of
Barnaby Furnas,
New York



[fig. 13]

Untitled (loading Kittinger), 2004-06
Oil on canvas
34 x 46 in.



Stand in for the artist? By painting it, Kantor flirts with all these readings, uncovering a meta-narrative that was always implicit in the work. The second “body” in the painting is the artist’s. Though this second “body” is literally outside of the frame of the paintings, Kantor indicates it with a variety of subtle means. Just as the paintings reveal a consistent thematic connection, they also very often reveal aspects of Kantor’s own studio process, deliberation, and happenstance. This parallel narrative need not always be clearly articulated. Indeed, it can be allegorical, as in paintings based on still-lives set up by the Cezanne museum to recreate that artist’s atelier (*Untitled (Cezanne’s Studio)*, 2006), or obliquely literal, as with two seemingly abstract pictures that turn out to be portraits of a piece of paper Kantor was using to crop his sources in *Untitled*, 2004-05, and *Untitled*, 2006. He has even made a painting based on the bleed-through on the back of one of his maquettes *Untitled (ghost image)*, 2006, [fig. 16]. While this practice is aggressively self-critical, it is hardly arid. It speaks to a lived experience that passes between the source image and the painting.

Nowhere is this approach more succinct than in a small canvas from earlier this year *Untitled (Woman’s torso)*, 2006, [fig. 12]. The painting looks like a taped-off drawing, with a dark, grisaille image of a woman’s torso, bending forward at the waist, palm pressed against her thigh, a rectangle floating off center on a generous white “page.” Indeed it could be a painted picture of a illustration from a book, including the margins, except that the extreme, dynamic cropping is somehow too insistent to have been merely found, and the white of the margins is not just white. On the left is a grey wash, like under-toning or erasure, and, overall, we see the drawing of a grid—the sort used to transfer images to canvas—and a rudimentary, larger sketch of the girl. So, Kantor planned the painting on a larger scale, reconsidered, and left the smaller format as an inset in the framework of the old? Perhaps. The “finished” image relates beautifully to the abandoned drawing (note the continuing line of the leg) and the “smudging” is awfully harmonious. Instead of being clear, the painting opens a range of ambiguities, all concerning how and where the photograph enters the painting. Do we see traces of an actual process, or a painting depicting the conceptual space of a sketchbook? Kantor allows himself loose brushstrokes and delicate line work but all in the guise of a throwaway sketch, while the “finished” image is dense and mute. Meanwhile, the picture is doubled, not laterally across the canvas, but rather front to back, as the sketch projects towards us, out from the image. Thus, the main subject of the painting reveals itself to be nothing other than Kantor’s shifting, restless mind, a record of his groping towards a painted form, which is, of course, a form of meaning.



[fig. 14]

Kittinger's Balloon, 2006
Oil on canvas
64 x 96 in.



[fig. 15]

Untitled, 2004
Oil on canvas
26 x 24 in.



[fig. 16]

Untitled (*ghost image*), 2006
Oil on canvas
26 x 24 in.

[fig. 17]

Untitled (perspective skulls), 2005
Oil on canvas
34 x 17 in.



[fig. 18]

Untitled (three paintings), 2005
Oil on canvas
24 x 30 in.



This slight waver, this purported glimpse behind the curtain, is Kantor's voice at its most robust. The sureness and heavy seriousness of his thematic threads slip to reveal an equally serious project, essentially self-conscious and anxious. One could easily unpack Kantor's bodily iconography along the lines of armchair spectacle (or is it rubbernecking?): Modern man, living a mostly non-dangerous life, finds his adrenaline stirred, his fascinations fed and confounded by his only glimpses of peril—jpegs on the internet, pictures in the paper. But to just treat this mediation academically misses its main quality and psychological hazard—the uncanny gear shift of connection with the flat image. Kantor's task is to "live" these images in his studio practice. "Scenes from my life," indeed.

In *Kittinger's Balloon*, 2006, [fig. 14], this tension between embodied experience and a self-conscious relation to imagery, as well as to art historical hindsight, coalesces. A row of faceless technicians in white jump suits carry a large red cloth towards a military-style vehicle, preparing—we surmise from the title—for some flight mission. Kantor retains the appeal of the source photograph, as well as the resonance of moving to the margin of the heroic, potentially dangerous, event. At the same time, without the demonstrative self-consciousness of the "sketchbook" painting, he manages to encode a painterly story, willfully employing various modes of representation, from the rendering of the truck tires to the extreme simplification of the shadows on figures and cloth. The deflated, bright-red balloon, channeling a Lichtenstein brushstroke-painting, steals the show, while the deferential workers gently guide this contour—a play of flatness and edge—diagonally across the painting.

As the photograph's drama yields to painterly drama, the chief and real "peril" in Kantor's paintings seems to be art history. But unlike a more recent artistic tendency to treat the past as booty for sampling—a field of cultural referents to be replayed, rehashed, critiqued and hot-linked—Kantor dwells on an earlier model, the anxiety of lineage, a la Eliot or Bloom. For example, when he bastardizes Edouard Manet's *Dead Toreador* (1863-64) with his modern media stand-ins (as he most overtly does in *Untitled (forensic scene)* and *Untitled (Pasolini)*), he takes an artistic stance that, while thoroughly romantic, is neither escapist nor naïve. Painting is a limited form, and one with great baggage, but it need not endlessly rehearse its own depletion. It is also a platform for the staging of manners, styles, form, history, confidence, panic, anxiety and earnestness, not to mention the index and the tongue in cheek. Kafka, with love, never destroyed the literary form he undermined and neuroticized. It came back polluted and stronger.

Matt Saunders

Jordan Kantor
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Education
PhD, History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2003
BA, History and Studio Art, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 1995
Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholar, Hochschule der Künste, Berlin, Germany, 1993-1994

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1998
Galeria de Arte Silvia Ortiz, Denia, Spain
1997
Fotouhi-Cramer Gallery, New York, NY

Selected Group Exhibitions

2006
Liquid Paper, Ratio 3, San Francisco, CA
2005
CCA Faculty New Work, Oliver Art Center, California College of the Arts, Oakland, CA
2002
Friends and Family, Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York, NY
1996
Natural Immersion, Boston Center for the Arts, Boston, MA

[fig. 19]

Greenhouse, 2006
Oil on canvas
44 x 56 in.



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Matt Saunders is an artist living in Berlin, Germany.

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[cover]

Untitled (searcher), 2004
Acrylic on canvas
46 x 34 in.

