



Ernst Yohji Jaeger, *Untitled 11*, 2020, oil on canvas, 39 3/8 × 31 1/4".

## Ernst Yohji Jaeger

15 ORIENT

The recent oil paintings of Ernst Yohji Jaeger—dreamlike, sensual, and restrained—convey a powerful sense of solitude. Even in the rare works depicting multiple figures, his characters seem cocooned within their own internal worlds. In *Untitled 5*, 2019, a head swathed in velvet shadows watches an apricot sailboat drift across a surreal expanse of jade. In *Untitled 6*, 2019, a young man with feline features looks down at his hand, stretching what might be a dew-strung spiderweb, or pearlescent strands of semen, between his thumb and forefinger. Darkness suffuses the hazy landscape behind him: horizontal bands of amethyst, blue, and emerald punctuated by a single tree. Jaeger has a talent for twilight scenes, for creating colors at once rich and subdued, and these subtly layered works glowed like sunsets seen through smoke, or as miniature Mark Rothkos might in a darkened room. Like a privately enjoyed candle, each small incandescent canvas at 15

Orient burned with an intimate warmth best savored alone. Jaeger's enigmatic visions recall those of Odilon Redon, the French Symbolist known for spooky lithographic odes to Edgar Allan Poe and radiant pastels partly based on classical mythology, who once declared that his own drawings "place us, just as music does, in the ambiguous world of the indeterminate." But Jaeger transports us to this realm without his forebear's winged horses, grinning spiders, and cyclopean balloons. Rather, the German-born, Vienna-based artist populates his reveries with turtleneck sweaters, an apple, a brick wall. These contemporary elements do not burden the paintings but rather give them ballast.

Windows figured in a number of canvases on view here, contributing to the works' pervasive sense of bell-jar stillness. In *Untitled 2*, 2019, a svelte young man fingers a gossamer curtain while gazing out at the empty street, field, and sky beyond. A diaphanous ice-blue butterfly hovers by his ear, a winged metaphor suggesting transience and fragility. The woman with dark bobbed hair in *Untitled 12*, 2020, faces us, coyly covering one eye with a ruby-red fruit, her gesture evoking the odd little antics we invent to amuse ourselves and thwart monotony. The diagonal shadows of slender mullions slant across her face and the wanly lit wall behind her; their angle suggests that the sun is in transit and that its rays might soon leave the room. Less subtly, a numberless clock underscores time's impersonal progress. Jaeger's musings on ephemerality found complements in the dilapidated, domestic space of the gallery—a repurposed Brooklyn living room with cracked crown moldings and peeling paint. Dead flowers and lotus pods resting on the marble mantelpiece and dangling from spindly wires reinforced, perhaps unnecessarily, the autumnal atmosphere of the paintings. Of course, the mournful hush of these interior scenes, created before the Covid-19 crisis, felt even more relevant viewed online, as those of us able to heed quarantine orders stayed at home.

Despite the strength of Jaeger's interiors, two of the best paintings in the show were set against vast, expansive backdrops, where pensive moments became all the more potent. In *Untitled 11*, 2020, two men stand on a balcony hemmed in by angular railings and bare branches that cut the wintry void behind them into a mosaic of white and purple polygons. One man looks cold, his fingers clenched and limbs bent as though he is stamping from side to side for warmth. His breath wafts down in wispy tendrils just like those rising from the steaming drink held by his friend. The other man smiles softly, as though reflecting on

the thermodynamic parity between his companion and his coffee cup. In *Untitled 9*, 2020, a lone figure is hunched over an open book. He perches on a steep hill above a lake in which a pair of blue-green mountains find their reflection in the fading light. Dusky shades of indigo, saffron, burnt umber, and sienna describe the grassy landscape. The pages are blank, but the reader seems intent on their content, either seeing something we cannot or searching out a message that isn't there.

We all crave meaning. Sometimes, when we find it, Jaeger suggests, it's in the most unlikely places—ones that are secret, invisible, and impossible to explain.

—Zoë Lescaze

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