

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

INTERVIEW BY ALISSA BENNETT

Robert Janitz (b. 1962 in Aisfeld, DE) lives and works in Mexico City and New York. He has had recent solo exhibitions at KÖNIG, Berlin; San Carlo Cremona, Cremona; Museo Diego Rivera Anahuacalli, Mexico City; Canada, New York; Casa Gilardi, Mexico City; Sevil Dolmadci Gallery, Istanbul, among others. Janitz's work has also been included in a number of recent important group exhibitions at the Anorepacific Museum of Art in Seoul, MAZ Museo Guadalupe in Mexico, and Kunstmuseum Winterthur in Switzerland. From 1982 until 1988, he studied Ethnology, Comparative Religion, Indology, and Art History at Philipps University Marburg in Germany. Janitz's works are held in private and institutional collections worldwide and his practice has been the subject of numerous reviews and features in various international art publications. For *Numéro Berlin*, he speaks with Alissa Bennett about sandwiches, Erik Satie and how our planet will look in 600 years.

Alissa Bennett Hi, Robert.

Robert Janitz Alissa, I'm really thrilled to see you.

AB Do you remember the first time we met? Was it ten years ago? Can you believe it?

RJ I do. It was at my studio, and you came wearing a really bulky coat.

AB I still wear it. It's probably 2004 Margiela, and you said, "Is your coat Martin Margiela?" I said

yes, and you told me that you'd recently had a job making sandwiches at the atelier!

RJ Exactly right. And that's how we immediately became friends.

AB Can you tell me about the sandwich-making job?

RJ Well, I was living in Paris, making no money, and I was painting, and I had a German friend who

was working as a salesperson for the showroom, so I begin preparing the sandwiches. There was

cream cheese, there was also lox and some fake caviar, mayonnaise, and pickles, of course.

AB I love discussing the past, but I understand that this issue of the magazine is about the future,

so maybe we can talk about both. I'm moving apartments at the moment, and one of the issues

that I'm having is that everything from the past that I don't want to deal with is resurfacing.

RJ I'm also going through my New York apartment because we are going to rent it out, so I'm facing

that part of it now, these experiences that you think are just in your memory, but that still exist.

AB Do you save physical objects, or are you more of an emotional hoarder?

RJ I think I hide all my emotional attachments in books.

AB Packing books is horrible because you think you have no feeling for some of them and then a

picture of your boyfriend from 1997 falls out.

RJ Exactly. Don't open the books.

AB When I think about your work, I think a lot about time. Knowing you as I do, what occurs to me is

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Robert Janitz, *Series: Entrance to the Making, 2023* Photo: Nina K. Program

that your work is very connected to the moment it's being made in; it's not the past, it's not the future, it's right now. What do you think about when you're making your work in terms of temporality?

RJ Very good question.
AB I don't want to call the work sad or meditative or any of those words that people don't like, but I do think that there is something about presence, about the body, about the experiential, about the connection of the gesture between your hands, the medium, and the canvas.

RJ Let's say, in my best state of mind, I think I am sort of knitting. I'm knitting with my destiny. I can take things out of the unknown because they have no past. I think, in a way, I'm leaning into the future. I think Turkovsky at some point played a definite influential role, but I cannot really talk about time in that way.

AB Why?
RJ Because I think it makes it too linear, and the experience I have in my clearer state of studio practice is not a linear experience at all. Past, present and future happen all together.
AB As a writer, I feel relatively divorced from the present because I only think about the past and the future. It's either anticipation or longing, which I guess indicates a lack of satisfaction.

RJ In your case, you have the lettering that appears as you write. I have different anchors, maybe. I always see it more as a membrane. I don't really think about the past, present or future as such. I think more of a membrane between my consciousness, my not knowing, and the whole rest of the universe. And somewhere in the middle, there's something that maybe could be me.

AB It's interesting you say that, because it literally becomes that through the viscosity of your medium, which is a membrane on the canvas.

RJ Bravo.

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AB Was it horrible for making work? Because your new work seems to have a quality that I haven't seen before, it has a different kind of light in it.

RJ I think the initial years in New York give you a lot of energy. If you can absorb it, it gives you even more.

AB We were just in Maine for three weeks with my parents, and when we drove back, I saw that skyline that you and I are looking at right now and I thought, "I can't believe I live in that dump."

RJ I know, it looks depressing. It looks like a graveyard.
AB There are no trees. Driving in, I was like, "Where are the fucking trees?" You're right, it looks like a graveyard. It's like tombstones.

RJ I mean, that thought struck me earlier, "This looks like a graveyard."

AB When did you come to New York?
RJ I got here maybe a week ago.

AB No, I mean originally.
RJ In the future?

AB No, in the past. We're talking about the past now, not the future.
RJ I moved here in 2009, and it was great. You know, easy living.

AB And you worked in Bushwick?
RJ Yes, I actually worked for somebody for three months.

AB What did you do?
RJ I worked for this old wacky choreographer, Elaine Summers, and she had these fantasies about the internet.

AB Fantasies about what was going to happen in the future?
RJ Yes. And how great it was going to be.

AB What she was thinking was going to happen? Did she think she would be able to trade her old body for a new one?

RJ I don't know, but she did some great dance work.
AB What was the longest you've ever held a job?

RJ I think my longest job was Margiela, and that was for 6 months.

AB You know what's cool about you – and it shows in your work – is this kind of uncompromising position. I feel like it's a philosophical stance where there are innumerable possibilities and variations. Do you ever make a work and think, "I've made that before?" Because I never look at your work and think I've seen it before.

"I THINK THE INITIAL YEARS IN NEW YORK GIVE YOU A LOT OF ENERGY. IF YOU CAN ABSORB IT, IT GIVES YOU EVEN MORE."

AB Bravo to you! Do you listen to music or podcasts when you're in the studio?

RJ If anything, then music. I usually cannot have voices.
AB So, no talking.

RJ No singing. But then, I love Turkish music.
AB You're so full of surprises that when I hear them, I'm not really surprised. Of course Robert Junick loves Turkish music.

RJ Zeki Müren is one of my favorites; his singing is very touching. I don't understand what he sings, but I love the way he sings his words.

AB Do you imagine what he's saying through the delivery?
RJ Yes, of course. I seem to have an intuitive understanding of it, and imagine somebody on some elaborate stage defending himself from being killed.

There was a Netflix series called "The Club" basically around him, as a character and his mystery. I think Turkish music. The term they use for what he does is "art singing" and "art music." At some point, he was threatened by an angry mob and he said, "Let me at least sing a song for you on stage and you can decide if you want to kill me afterwards."

AB You know what I think you would do if you were threatened by a mob? I feel like you'd say, "Let me at least sing a song for you. And then you can decide after if you want to kill me or not."

RJ Exactly.
AB So you're living in Mexico City now, which is a big change from the days I knew you here in horrible New York.

RJ At some point, I decided it was time to leave.

RJ I sometimes repeat the work, but it feels like I'm at... what's it called? The Stairway to Heaven, and then I just repeat that same step three times.

AB Only three?
RJ I don't really do more.

AB I always feel in my work I can write the same story in a thousand different ways, but it's always the same story, and it's kind of always about a fantasy of the future. I write about running away a lot, and there are a million different ways to do it.

RJ I think I moved to Mexico to save my connection to what it is to be an artist and making work; I think New York was taking that away from me.

AB What's the difference?
RJ There is a future for me in Mexico.

AB Let's talk about what Mexico City is like. What's the difference? I've never been to Mexico, so you really have to spell it out for me.

RJ In the future – it will be great.
AB That's the thing about the future. In the future, you can be whatever you want to be. You can be a great pianist.

RJ I even found in painting that there's a lot of acting involved.

AB Okay, let's rewind back to the past when you became a painter. Had you ever painted before? We know that you studied calligraphy and you made sandwiches...

RJ Exactly, and then I acted. I'm just going to be this artist person.

AB So, you make this conscious decision to assume this role and do this thing.

RJ Let's say that's how it was.

AB Okay. Let's go past the past. When you were 25 years old, what were you doing?
RJ Oh, then I was studying Sanskrit quite seriously.

AB Why?

RJ I was interested in astrology as a late teenager.



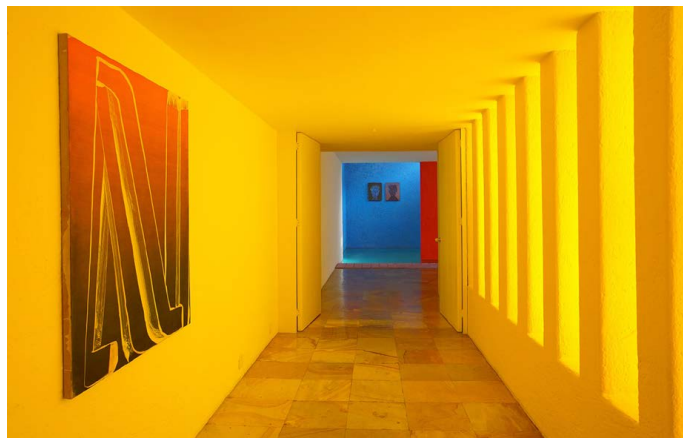
The Labyrinth, 2021, Sevil Dolmaci Gallery, Istanbul, Turkey



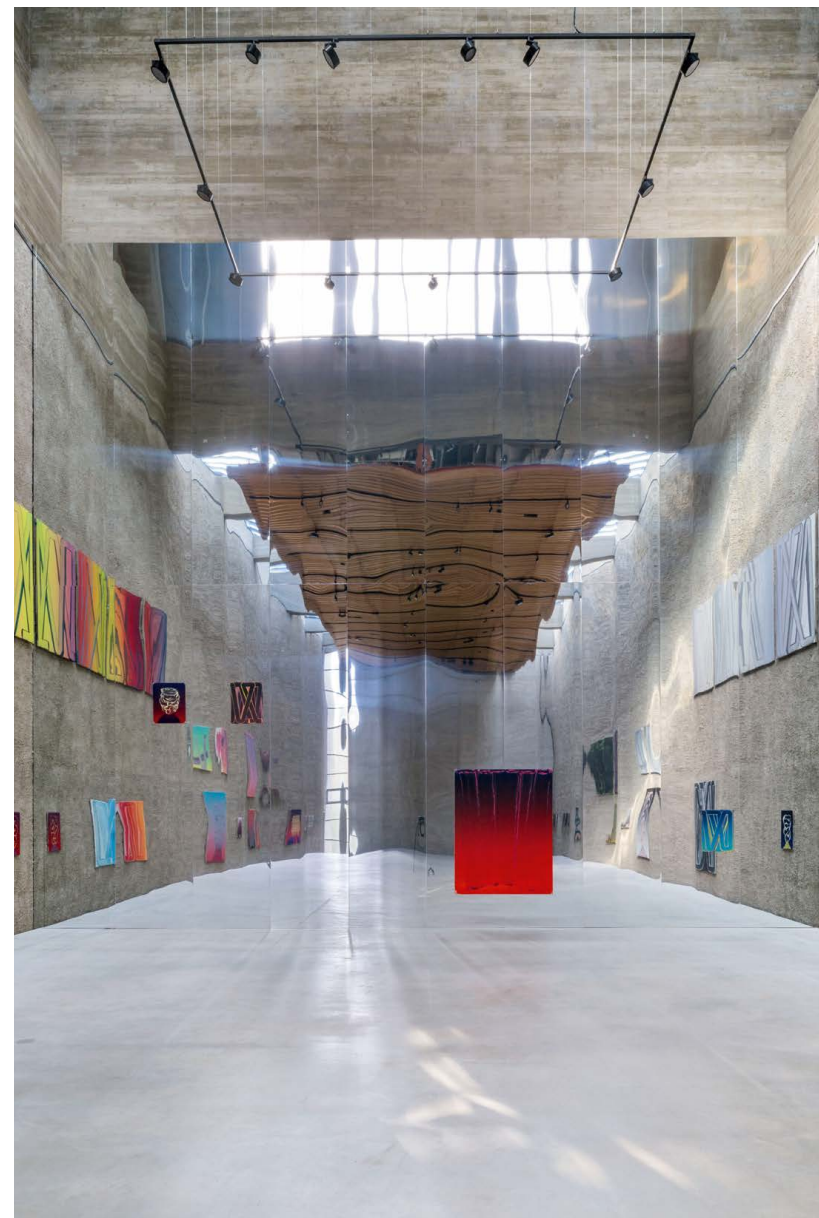
AB What sign are you?
RJ I'm a Scorpio.
AB Perfect.
RJ Super Scorpio in five planets: sun, moon, rising, Neptune, Venus.
AB You know, I'm a Scorpio moon. That's why we've been friends for a decade. I understand your sadness. Tell me about your house in Mexico. What does it look like?
RJ It's a yellow house. It has a church's window. There's a black marble fireplace and a sitting room with couches and a dining room that goes into my little music room.
AB You know something that I really have always loved about you? I feel like the word "drifter" has a bad connotation, but I always feel like a drifter myself, and I feel like you're kind of a drifter, too. Having this kind of mentality is also about the future because the question is always, "Where will I go?" Maybe this is what I was talking about earlier when I asked you if you're always thinking about the immediate present; there is a particular physicality about your paintings that is meditative and it's about the moment, but it's also about chance. There's a little bit of chance in those works because of the medium that you work in, which is flour and wax. You can't totally control it and you can't change it.
RJ Right.
AB And the material you work in means that your paintings are very rooted to the physical gesture of applying the medium to the canvas and the fantasy of what could happen. There is this thing that's about what's going to happen, this anticipation and kind of looking forward. And I love that because I feel like I have a lot of that in myself, too. I always kind of trust in the future.
RJ Somehow, Mexico is just the beginning of the Latin American drift.
AB Where else do you want to drift? You look exactly the same as the day I met you. It's so crazy.
RJ Brazil maybe.
AB Part of why I've never been to Mexico is that I'm afraid that someone will cut my head off. Do you worry about that?
RJ No. (laughs)
AB Do you think that if you have the thought and the worry, then the thing is more likely to happen? Do you think I can never go to Mexico? Cause I'm afraid someone will cut my head off?
RJ When there's a Gladiatore opening in Mexico, it'll be soon, you'll see.
AB What is your daily life in Mexico? You wake up in the yellow house with the black marble fireplace, with the music room.

RJ With the rooftop.
AB And your partner, Ana, is there with you. How long have you guys been together?
RJ A long time.
AB Like how long?
RJ 30 years.
AB 30 years past, present, future.
RJ Yeah, who would have thought?
AB So you wake up and then what?
RJ I love looking at my garden on the rooftop and I have lots of flowers like oleander and jasmine.
AB Gardens are about the future, right?
RJ Yes, I can't wait for the next flower to bloom. Then I try to play the piano in the morning. That's the best.
AB What are you playing?
RJ I'm into Erik Satie. It's very spacious.
AB What do you mean, spacious?
RJ It's slow and I can play it. I can't play Rachmaninoff or something like that. I always think about this movie scene in *Diva*. It's this French movie about an opera singer and the mailman who steals her robe. Do you remember that movie?
AB No, I've never seen it.
RJ He steals it and then they have this kind of love affair and they walk through Paris, and there's this sentimental melody playing in the early morning hours in the Jardin de Luxembourg. There's also parallel worlds where there is no future. It's just a parallel world. It is not about the past or future. It's just a different imagination.
AB You strike me as someone who never worried about what was going to happen to you. And that's why your life became what it is, because you weren't concerned about it.
RJ Thank you.
AB Was there a moment when you were worried about the future?
RJ There is one major worry in the future: My life will end. I think that actually keeps me a little nervous. And I keep thinking about it.
AB Did you always worry about dying?
RJ No, I thought I wouldn't die. But then, I realized.
AB When you are young, it somehow never occurs to you, right?

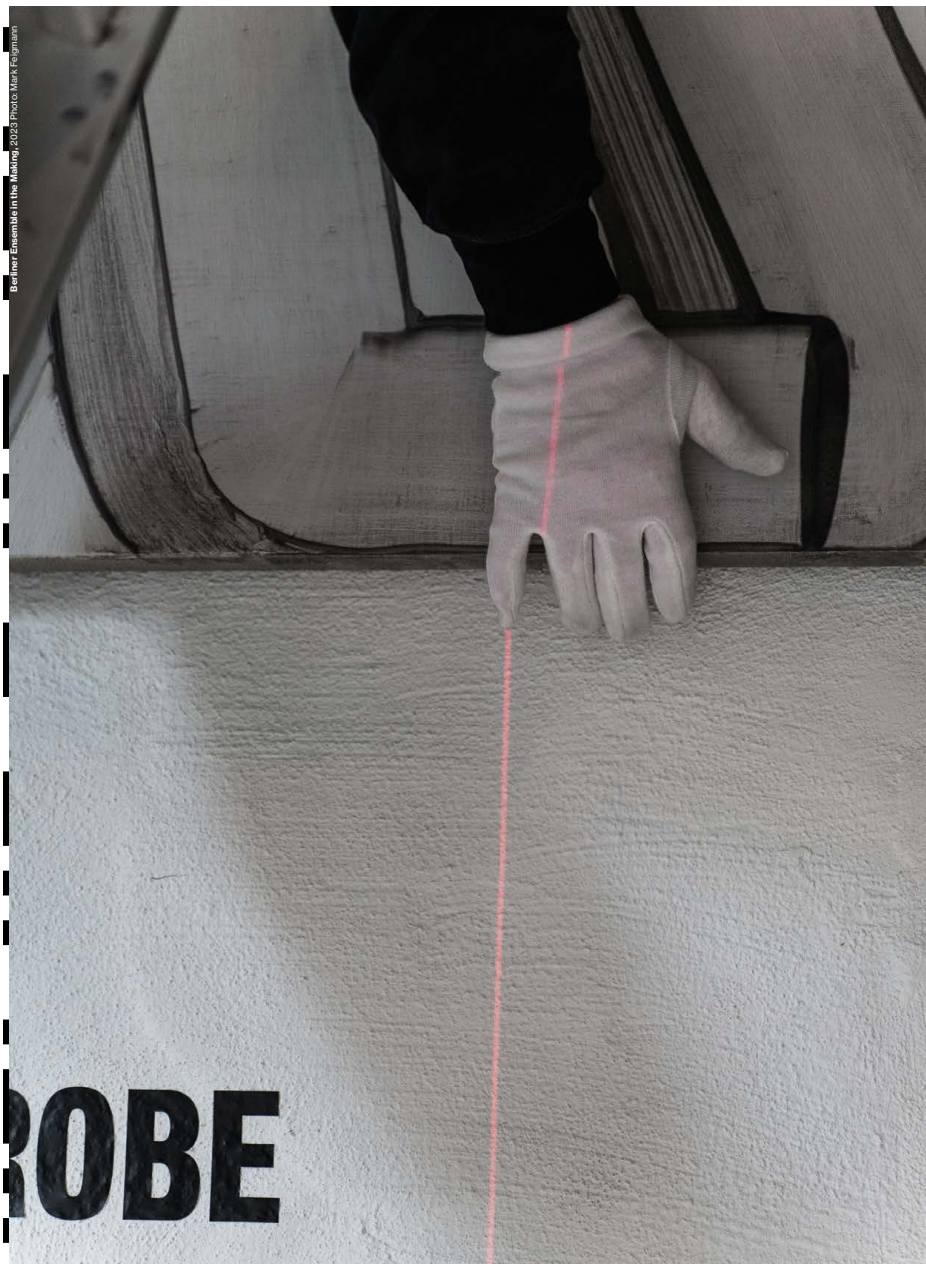
"THAT'S THE THING ABOUT THE FUTURE. IN THE FUTURE, YOU CAN BE WHATEVER YOU WANT TO BE."



Best of All Worlds, 2021, installation view, Casa Giliardi, Mexico City



SPRING 2023, installation view, NO LONG OUT HERE, Berlin, Photo: Norman Marez



Bremer, Eisenberg in the Making, 2022 Photo: Max K. Eggen

RJ There's something which is beyond my imagination. There's a physical side.
AB Cremation or burial? I always think cremation because you can't trust people to take care of your grave plot for the rest of time. What about you?
RJ Probably embalming.
AB Embalming is the permanent now.
RJ Exactly.
AB At night. But you're probably never going to die.
RJ Yeah, that's true. I was looking into Cryogenic Conservation. They found worms from Siberia that were frozen in the permafrost for 46 thousand years.
AB There is kind of a frosty element to your work...
RJ Yes, that is the four. Maybe I'm already channeling my possible conservation.
AB If you could live forever - but you wouldn't be in the condition that you're in now, you would get incrementally older forever - would you?
RJ Is there anybody else who would live forever?
AB Yeah, Ana lives forever.
RJ You would live forever, too.
AB Well, I'm going to live to at least 600 years. 600 is good.
RJ That's good. I think there should be a limit, because even now, I find that I would probably not recognize how the planet is ten years in the future.
AB Yes, it's scary.
RJ And how relationships will be different. It will be so different. I think people will communicate with artificial intelligence. They won't interact in person anymore.
AB I think that kind of already started. Do you think that a computer could make what you make?
RJ No, I don't think so.
AB Do you think that you are in every painting that you make? Because I feel like that about you.
RJ That would be a compliment. Thank you. I'm not sure that artificial intelligence can really make the same future moves that I would.
AB You mean a computer can't anticipate what you're going to make?
RJ I don't think so, because I don't think I can even calculate. I don't know it yet.

"I THINK PEOPLE WILL COMMUNICATE WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. THEY WON'T INTERACT IN PERSON ANYMORE."

AB Do you think that a computer could write like Erik Satie?
RJ Yeah, I'm sure, but it will never sound like the real Satie.
AB Because there's no touch. Do you remember when you made those sculptures? The metal plants? Are they Robert Rauschenberg's only sculptures except for the sandwiches?
RJ In Mexico, I've been making super heavy volcanic rock sculptures that weigh four tons and are ten feet high. They need an infrastructure to put them up. And they are informed by how I perceive the painted heads. I used a different tool, almost like sculpting into the paint instead of painting the paint. Mexico has been a really good move, in a way. What I am afraid of is, I think New York has this kind of nostalgic draw and one never gets over it.
AB What do you mean? You never get over what?
RJ You'll always love it. But it will never really love you back. So you're alone with it. I think New York changes so quickly that it doesn't really care about you.
AB It's like all future all the time.
RJ Yes.

