

EMERGE



ART ON DEMAND 8.4

JESSE
KLASSEN

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Jesse Klassen is an emerging artist based in the Fraser Valley, whose work primarily focuses on his attempts to reconcile his own religious and spiritual identity with the demands of the modern world. Through a variety of media, Klassen explores these aspects of his own identity to try to encourage collaborative and connective dialogue with viewers, in ways that will resonate with their own personal cultural identities. Klassen invites audience participation with his artworks, in the hopes that differing cultural and religious expressions will interact harmoniously and voluntarily, even in a way that they may be unified by their differences. While for Klassen, these struggles are tied to his own Christian faith, the issues and ideas he touches on in his work transcend any one religion, and he invites visitors from all backgrounds to reflect on the significance of these ideas towards their own experiences.

The recent works by Klassen that are presented in the current exhibition consist of three wall-mounted, interactive assemblages and a singular, large-scale, mixed-media painting. While the interactive assemblages prompt viewers to directly engage with the exhibition's materials and concepts, the sole, large-scale painting is intended to provide a meditative space that offers a sense of solace in contrast to the assemblages and their focus on tension and struggle.

One of three wall-mounted assemblages, titled *Do You Still Read My Letters?* (2022), is composed of a variety of found and crafted mixed media materials: cardboard, a small magnifying glass, and a recreated statue of Michelangelo's David make up the interior of the assemblage's two movable panels.



Cover: Jesse Klassen, *A Safe Space to Pray*, 2021, acrylic and gold leaf on sheetrock panel, 96 x 81 in.

Inside: Jesse Klassen, *Do You Still Read My Letters?*, 2022, mixed media, 17 x 46 x 11 in.

These panels can be pulled together and unified, or pulled apart and divided as the viewer sees fit. A central panel remains fixed in place, and when all three are overlaid together, the magnifying glass focuses our gaze onto a film negative taken by Klassen, giving viewers a glimpse of a personally significant landscape. Yet even when pieced together, *Do You Still Read My Letters?* remains fragmented, always containing within it the potential for future division. For Klassen, this suggests the continuous nature of maintaining an identity of religious devotion in the modern age; even when rendered whole—with a modern, religious

identity temporarily stabilized—the pieces can always be separated again, and the cycle can begin anew.

The maintenance and development of religious (or secular) spirituality is a highly individual endeavour, involving the continual integration of one's spiritual beliefs into the ongoing processes of personal growth and change. There often exists an ultimate value, which may be religious in nature—such as a union with a god—or one that may be simply focused on personal well-being. Religion and spirituality, being so closely integrated with the self and its corresponding internal

beliefs, has the ability to influence the day to day lives of its practitioners through their faith. These internal beliefs and practices also connect to an institutional, global community of those that share the same faith, and therefore act as cultural signifiers that represent socially shared global convictions. While these shared beliefs automatically connect those within these global communities, they also have the capacity to unite those from other religious or spiritual groups, through their shared experiences and pursuit of an ultimate value.

While Klassen's works function as a way for him to physically manifest his own religious spirituality, they also encourage and promote dialogue that encourages cultural pluralism through interactivity. By asking the viewer to interact physically with the work, thereby making them an active part of the artistic process, viewers are prompted to reflect on the questions posed by two of his interactive works, *Do You Still Read My Letters?* (2022) and *Why is this Home a House but not of Worship?* (2022), and to search for answers within their own values and cultures.

While to Klassen the assemblages exist as a manifestation of the struggle of sustaining a religious identity, the painting in the exhibition, titled *A Safe Space to Pray* (2021), functions as a place of rest and an opportunity for calm introspection. Presented on its own wall, at a distance from the assemblages, the painting exists physically separate from their suggestion of tension and struggle. The sheer size of the painting can instigate a sense of

awe, and its abstract nature enables viewers to focus on incorporeal concepts and emotional states rather than material objects. While an instantaneous reaction may be felt from the scale of the painting, a meditative state of mind can be gained through a process in which a viewer continuously examines the work, readjusting their classifications of the painting and meditating within the ambiguities they find. On an initial examination, viewers may primarily regard the painting as being representative of a particular object or feeling. Upon further meditation, with new aspects of the painting revealing themselves, one may then see the work in an utterly new light, reclassifying it entirely. The rich colours and layered shapes evoke an abstract realm where the viewer can place themselves within the painting, able to meditate inside the twisting shapes and circles of gold foil.

Evoking both the monumental and the abstract, artist Jesse Klassen's works explore the connection between art, religion, and the self. Within both his abstract assemblages and paintings, Klassen's work offers us a pluralistic utopia through its abstract and inquisitive

nature. While focusing primarily on his own religious identity, Klassen's body of work opens dialogue for diverse participation, promoting the concept of a unified ideal, one where positive engagement and interaction emerges out of our cultural and personal differences.

Aaron Scobbie
Emerge Curator

JESSE KLASSEN

Jesse Klassen is an emerging artist currently based in Abbotsford. Working in a wide array of visual media, he explores the visual representation of religious spirituality and how they are influenced by the (largely) secular conditions of the modern world. Klassen studied at the University of the Fraser Valley, where he earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2018, and he just recently completed his Master of Fine Art at the University of Calgary.



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