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Looking at Bruno Jakob's canvases and works on paper can be a bemusing and puzzling experience. For one thing, there is often not much to see. The usual arsenal of pictorial devices and media are conspicuously absent: There is frequently no paint in his paintings, no signs of recognizable composition or imagery, no contrasting relationships of colors and tonalities or the spatial illusions that they engender. While his canvases are sometimes primed in standard colors, more often they are simply a blank white. Occasionally, he will present a canvas that is encased in plastic, as if displaying a store-bought item yet to be unwrapped. Other works, upon close inspection, reveal barely perceptible and indeterminate signs of some kind of mark-making. Or the paper of a drawing might be wrinkled in ways that indicate some prior, otherwise traceless activity. And then there are those works that appear stained or a bit grubby around the edges, as if they had been left out in the rain—which, in fact, usually proves to be the case, as we learn when perusing the information included in the wall label or exhibition checklist.

The mystification we may initially feel when encountering works that withhold just about everything we expect to find in a picture is alleviated, to some degree at least, when we consult those accompanying labels or checklists and discover Jakob's materials. BREATH (2010-11), a suite of canvases made for the 54th Venice Biennale, where they were primarily exhibited outdoors, was later shown with a label enumerating the following media: Invisible Painting / Rain Water / Light / Touch / Air / Brainwaves and different unknown technics on canvas. The list of materials for a small blank "painting" titled WEISSES LÄCHELN (White Smile, also 2010-11) reads like a prose poem:

Over a period of time. Months. Energy and brainwaves still continuing. Visible and invisible. Thoughts of painted images. Thousands free and bloodied. Color as well as black and white. Silently captured and released. Surrounded in elegance. Breathing paper immersed in air and light. Invisible but maybe containing many ingredients.

There are many possible reactions we might have upon reading such descriptions, including wondering whether the artist is really in earnest about materials such as "brainwaves," and if so, whether he might be seriously delusional; or, on the other hand, if he's simply pulling our collective leg. But in citing materials such as rainwater and light, his labels offer a clue as to how the artist created the weathered and delicately filigreed surface of his paintings. Water, in fact, along with some of the less tangible materials mentioned above, has been the artist's principal medium for painting and drawing since he presented his first public gallery exhibition, titled "Invisible Painting," in 1988 in New York. (And even before then: His earliest compositions made with a brush and water date back to 1969 when he was a teenager living in the Swiss countryside.)

Over the course of his career, Jakob has developed several methods of making invisible paintings. Besides using water to draw images that evaporate or exposing his support media to rain and sun, he has used canvas and paper to record the faint trails left by snails and insects. He has created environmentally scaled works in parks and fields by using a brush to draw images across dew-soaked blades of grass. One of his "major" installations (admittedly, an odd adjective to use for work that is so materially insubstantial),

HAPPY NOTHING-STILL COLLECTING (1990-98), comprises four glass-encased tables displaying thirty-one works on paper made with water and “thoughts of color.” Delicately transformed by the water’s evaporation, the paper ripples, and curls, creating an almost sculptural surface dappled with muted shadows; when illuminated by light from the side, faint brush marks can be discerned, but only if one looks carefully and with patience. Jakob has also produced works without solid supports, including a series of rolled canvas or fabric pieces that are presented lying on the floor or hanging from the ceiling by a wire (as he sometimes chooses to show his paintings so that the back of the stretcher is also visible).



On occasion, Jakob documents his unusual production techniques in black-and-white photographs. One of the most popularly reproduced images shows the artist standing in a field while holding a small blank canvas in front of a horse, whose head is pointed toward its surface almost as if the horse were looking at its reflection in a mirror. Jakob’s utterly deadpan demeanor calls to mind the expression of a scientist conducting an experiment—or perhaps closer to the point, a

nineteenth-century photographer exposing a light-sensitive plate.

The documented action represents one of the artist’s recurring means for producing “pictures”: using the canvas as if it were an ethereal type of photographic paper that can record traces of the unseen energy or atmosphere of the animal, person, or environment before it. Jakob employed this same approach to create a portrait of his terminally ill mother as he sat by her sickbed.

The apparent preposterousness of Jakob’s enterprise is partially offset by his work’s self-effacing and elusive presence; it is outrageous, but quietly so. Of course, it also belongs to a long tradition that contests the idea that visibility is a prerequisite for artworks. In the late 1960s, Michael Asher made several sculptures from columns of compressed air, and Robert Barry experimented with a range of materials from inert gases to radio waves to telepathically transmitted thoughts. One might also be tempted to recall Robert Rauschenberg’s uninflected “White Paintings” (1951), made while he was living at Black Mountain College, which were wonderfully described by fellow resident John Cage as “airports for particles of dust and shadows that are in the environment”—and which inspired Cage to compose a musical equivalent, *4 ’3 3* (1952), for which a pianist sits quietly at the keyboard, allowing the audience to focus on the incidental noises in the performance environment.

But Jakob’s canvases are landing strips for impalpable energies rather than environmental ambience, and thus the “White Paintings” are probably a less relevant antecedent than the invisible works that Yves Klein first exhibited in a back room in 1957 at Galerie Collette Allendy in Paris. In a silent black-and-white film documenting the exhibition, Klein gestures toward the room’s blank walls as if they were hung with paintings, then regards them with a studied, appraising gaze, seemingly admiring his latest creations. As with his famous exhibition “Le Vide,” held at the Iris Clert gallery the following year, Klein’s stated practice involved “impregnating” an object—whether individual canvases or the entire gallery space—with his mental energy. Underlying these works was a belief that our perception of art does not depend on vision or any other physical sense but on what Klein called *sensibilité*, a term that conjures realms of imagination and emotion.



Jakob's use of the canvas as a kind of psychic recording device strikes a more egalitarian note, however; he employs it to capture not only his own thoughts and projected energy but also those of other beings or even environmental ambience. But what truly separates Jakob's invisible paintings from Klein's is the central role of language. Our relationship to his paintings is activated by their evocative titles and lists of eccentric media, both tangible and intangible. The title of a 1996 canvas, BRAIN AMERICA: RACE TO THE IMAGE OVERLOOK (INVISIBLE PAINTING) and that of a recent installation, FRAGILE IMAGES. SKY CELLS. VEGETATIVE STATE. FLOOD OF THOUGHT. SOMEWHERE NOW. UNTOUCHABLES. (2011-13), are typical examples of

how Jakob primes the reception of his work through provocatively paradoxical or enigmatic textual elements. In this way, they echo Marcel Duchamp's famous remark that "titles add a new dimension; they are like new or added colors."² Jakob's titles, though, often seem to suggest entirely new works in and of themselves, as in his occasional use of double titles—FROLICKING DEER/ BRAIN (1990-98), for example—to indicate his practice of painting one image while simultaneously envisioning another image in his mind, which he mentally projects onto the canvas. In addition, Jakob's lists of materials, including elements such as "Zurich snow water on primed green canvas," "morning dew," and "brain on primed canvas," conjure mental pictures and sensations. If his works can appear formally or materially reductive, their accompanying descriptions serve to open up expansive and indeterminate mental vistas.

Jakob's work regularly asks us to imagine seemingly impossible things: unseen colors and images, invisible bodily or psychic energies. But regardless of whether we believe the artist can actually project images from his mind onto canvas, we can accept his project as an exploration of what is "unrepresentable." His work ingeniously marks out a space not only for what is lost, evaporated, or faded from view but also for all those aspects of the world that escape or elude our systems for recording and depicting.

At the same time, Jakob prompts us to reimagine what engaging with a work of art entails. While many of his paintings and drawings entice us to scrutinize the ephemeral traces that they present, they also remind us that looking is invariably connected to other activities. We apprehend works of art through our emotions as well as our senses and intellect, and Jakob's work provokes us to consider how these different types of response can be conflated in unpredictable ways. Functioning as landing strips for our own thoughts, feelings, and mental projections, his art foregrounds a process of reception that is profoundly open-ended, even as it invites us to observe the ways in which our acts of visual perception are shaped, and limited, by what we "learn" through language. It reminds us, in other words, that our interpretation and experience of an artwork is often contingent on information that exists apart from the object itself—that "content is something that can't be seen," as Barry LeVa once put it.

Jakob's art does not propose, however, that we should stop paying attention to the perceptible world. Instead, it simply suggests that we should learn to "see" in other ways. Not incidentally, his paintings derail our prevailing notion of beauty as an agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder (as Dave Hickey, among others has argued). Jakob mischievously reveals that such pleasures are never singularly visual. And while his art does not explicitly address social issues, it gently wreaks havoc with our cultural imperative to make everything visible. It disrupts the complacency of our compulsive looking while offering a tonic for the spectacle and media overexposure that define our daily environment. Above all, perhaps, Jakob's work reminds us that art is a collaborative undertaking between artist and viewer, bringing together the visible and the invisible, and only ever fully realized in our imaginations