

Art in America

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Jon Gregg: *Heads, Hands and Leaves*, 2004, oil on canvas, eight panels, 9 by 19 feet overall; at 55 Mercer.

Jon Gregg at 55 Mercer

Jon Gregg's new paintings, mostly 52 inches square or 48 by 56 inches, can be read alternatively as handsome decorations, metaphysical games or restrained expressions of dark feeling. They derive their forms for the most part from large, confidently inscribed arcs that delineate vases, leaves, heads and hands. These emphatic, emblematic, personal images might well have been deduced from the abstractly-conceived curves that become their contours.

The leaves shift about directionally, overlapping one another with slight variations of shape and size but without the specificity of still life done from observation. The vases vary in shape and evoke Giorgio

Morandi's subtle avowals and Marsden Hartley's blunt declarations.

The sublimation inherent in Gregg's weathered classicism hints at some emotional undertow. These generalized representations could be commemorative elegies whose formal character expresses restraint in the face of a great loss. What at first viewing appear to be straightforward, if deliberately off-kilter, arrangements, give rise to psychologically compelling, associative readings.

Gregg's previous shows have featured anonymous, somewhat frightening figures crowding shallow spaces. The new paintings sustain the feel of those larger canvases while being both more compact in their design and more ambiguous in their references. At times Gregg allows some erratic

impulse to disrupt the overall equilibrium of his normal procedure. Masklike forms floating across the scruffy, amorphous red ground in *Red* recall James Ensor. The introduction of off-beat color and rough, painterly improvisation in *Prayer* implies what is kept under wraps in the more decorous members of this "Heads, Hands, Leaves" series. The tension between the formal aplomb of these paintings and their anxious, edgy poetry accounts in part for their arresting power.

Also on view were facsimile portfolios, one containing fluent studies of Venetian masters and the other a series of expressionistic, dense figure groupings. The former attest to the facility of Gregg's draftsmanship, the latter to his darker imaginings.

-Robert Berling