

An Interview with the Artist:

Jay Sagen

BY JEFF LEFEVER

"Interaction with the moment": Pure ... Raw ... Honest.

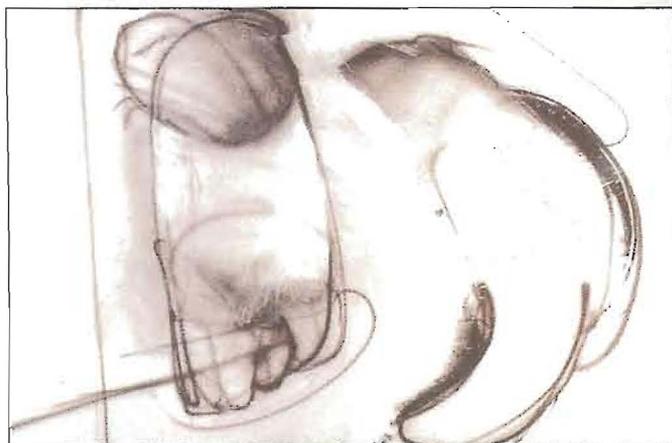
This is the environment of California artist Jay Sagen's paintings. Like the abstract expressionists before him, he favors the moment of impulse over narrative content. Abstract expression (aka, action painting, the New York School) of the mid-1940s through the '50s was concerned with the spontaneous assertions of the individual through the act of painting. It was characterized more by the concept behind the art than by a specific look (of which many styles abounded). Of those styles, two major tendencies have been noted: action painters, to whom the gesture was primary, and the color-field painters, who unified color and shape to give their works impact. Abstract expressionism itself developed from a synthesis of expressionism, abstraction, cubism, color-field painting, organic forms and surrealism. In its fierce attachment to psychic self expression, it closely paralleled postwar existential philosophy's championing of individual action as the key to salvation.

Jay Sagen's lineage to the abstract expressionists is specifically the area of autonomous calligraphic gesture. The idea behind automatism is to relinquish rational control by prompting the subconscious impulse—a method first suggested by the surrealists to tap the psychological unconscious dream, and later greatly developed by the abstract expressionists to eliminate the narrative content of painting in favor of capturing an art of emotional immediacy and non-premeditation. Although Jay and I never entered deeply into discussing existentialism, we did discuss the importance of being in the flow of the creative moment, which Jay terms the "zone."

Jay Sagen is an established teacher, teaching at several colleges, including the University of Southern California, and is currently the subject specialist to the art department of Coastline College. He earned his BFA in sculpture from the San Francisco Art Institute and his MFA in studio art from the University of California, Irvine. His work can be found in many collections, including the University of California, Irvine; California State University, San Jose; and the University of Illinois.

Jay is a gentle man with a low and even voice. He is very involved with teaching and is a staunch advocate for the knowledge and maintenance of airbrush history, specifically for awareness of those past artists responsible for new and original stylistic directions that advanced airbrushed imagery. Jay is also outspoken about developing a strong community among airbrush artists, especially in the fine arts.

We met in the morning at his studio/classroom at Coastline College, his art-in-progress laying flat upon several large tables . . .



Untitled, 1993, 40 by 26 1/2 inches

Jeff LeFever: I notice that your work is very tied into automatic writing, the autonomous method of calligraphic abstract expressionism. Tell me about your process, Jay, and what do you achieve through it?

Jay Sagen: I believe it is a process and that, in a sense, I am serving that process, and it's almost as if I were not doing the paintings. At the optimum time when I'm riding the wave, when I'm in the "zone"—whatever you want to call it—it's almost as if someone else is doing it.

JL: Like becoming an instrument; there is a strength gained from being "there," being "present," in the moment of process?

JS: Yes, and I suppose it gets into Jungian archetypal psychology and all of those kinds of considerations. I've talked about this and thought about it with other people, and I think that in a sense, if you talk too much about it and try to analyze it too much, then you lose the strength of it.

JL: The strength of it coming from the subconscious, avoiding premeditation and descriptive analysis . . .

JS: Right. To spend a whole lot of time being preoccupied with defining it somehow weakens your position. It's an odd kind of thing, and I see some people who are involved in this, maybe not in terms of painting, but in writing or whatever. We're essentially doing the same thing; we tend to be more specific, tend to want to identify what's going on, and they seem to be hitting walls a lot more than I do.

JL: So in the true sense of action painting, the point is to be in the process itself until one intuitively feels the painting is finished . . . and then stop?

JS: I feel like these [paintings] are all snapshots of a continuing process—we are looking at moments.

The process with these paintings is that they are painted over and over; they're painted many times. What you see here is the stopping at a certain point and saying, "OK, I'm willing to accept what I have at this point." I should mention that along with that stream of consciousness, the *collective consciousness* if you will, there's also another element that's working when I'm painting, and that's, I suppose, in a sense, some aesthetic decision-making that's going on that is quite formal, and it's based on my past training experience.

JL: Your aesthetic process being more intuitive than it is conscious?

JS: It's intuitive, but also there's a conscious level.

JL: And the conscious level is that you're stepping back at points of the painting to assess the image?

JS: Oh yes, I may spend quite a bit of time looking, stopping and looking at it, going off doing something else. I don't do one painting at a time. I'm usually painting four or five paintings, not necessarily on Masonite or a large form, but on paper I may have a dozen that I'm working on.

JL: Do you find that when you're working simultaneously on several paintings, that you automatically work elements from one painting to another? Do those paintings elementarily interlock one with another synergistically?

JS: I don't think it's . . . conscious. I find myself in a momentum, being in this "zone." At that point I may make an effort to bounce back and forth as much as I can. The main thing is not to get too preoccupied with the structure of things, perceiving analytically how the painting should be going. To get too interested in saving a successful element of a painting while

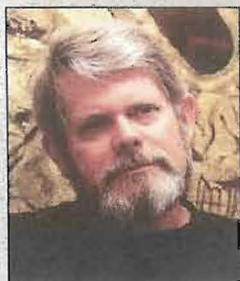
the rest of the painting is basically crap, is a deadly preoccupation that interferes with the process. You have to guard yourself against that.

JL: What's the advantage of working this way? For you to step out of conscious "picture making"?

JS: I think the advantage is that it allows me to plug into this wind that's blowing, whatever this thing is—and I'm not even sure what it is—but there's a thing going on and to plug into that, to get to that place, seems to me a really good place to be. This becomes an issue of psychology and cosmology—and I don't necessarily want to describe it as a 'spiritual state', because I'm not sure what that means. It's very hard to define that place—even to describe how you get to that place, just by that definitive act—disallows the possibility of getting to it.

JL: A lot of people aren't into abstract work, they're into realistically rendered imagery that they somehow can relate to, tangible material elements that they're familiar with in life. Why would anybody be interested whatsoever in abstract painting?

JS: Many aren't. Curiously enough, there's a number of people that actually really like it [abstract



art] who have no art background at all . . . they respond to it on emotional levels for the most part. Particularly this kind of work that's very gestural. They tend to look upon it as a sensory experience; an emotional experience. So oddly enough, it does tend to appeal to people if they can put away their thoughts of trying to see and relate to the typical kind of representational imagery. One of the things that I suggest to people is to just sit down and spend some time really looking at the work. Don't do anything else but just sit there and look at it.

JL: I am sure you have heard, "My kid can do it; what's so great about it?"

JS: Well, I have, and actually I think that their kids could do it. The terrible thing that happens in schools is that in about the second grade, somebody comes and tells you, "That doesn't look like a cow." When that happens there's this whole system that kicks into place, and from that point on, most of these

people will bail out. They simply won't do art anymore because they just don't feel they have the talent necessary to paint the cow as expected. Well, that technical judgment is really not true at all, nor is the belief that the cow must be rendered to "be" a cow. I believe that anybody can paint the cow. If you look at preschool art, some of it is tremendous. Some of the best art I've seen is done by 3-year-olds. In a sense, maybe I'm trying to be that 3-year-old and strip myself of all kinds of conventions. I've been around a long time, I've had a lot of training, I have lots of degrees, I have all this experience, I do all this stuff and yet, where I want to be is where that 3-year-old is.

JL: Picasso once said that he was painting like Rembrandt at the age of 12—from there he spent his whole life trying to paint like a child. Would you say, Jay, that it's kind of an attempt to return to innocence by finding the honesty of unpretentious expression?

JS: Maybe it is. I think it's also a question of, again, trying to plug into that universal . . . whatever that is . . . wherever those images are. And I think that they're pretty universal. They seem to be very constant. A lot of this stuff will crop up in places you never expect to see it.

JL: For example . . .

JS: Well, the Chumash Indians of Santa Barbara County. Some of the cave paintings that they were doing long, long ago are remarkably like my work. There are a lot of similarities. They did a lot of figurative things and animal things, but you also see very pure abstraction, and it is mostly totemic signs and ritual things—but very abstract imagery. A lot of it is very much like the

imagery in my work. There are a lot of similarities, and there's certainly no connection in any other way than the fact that these signs seem to be universal.

JL: Why do you choose to work primarily in monochromatic schemes?

JS: Originally, as I said, I wanted to do a large volume of work, and I felt that the quickest way to do that is to stay within black and white. I was also very much interested for a long period of time in Oriental painting, with a particular interest in the Japanese Zen painters and in the Chinese eccentric painters. And of course all of their work is black and white. It's easy to get away from some things with color where it is much harder in black and white. Everything has got to stand in black and white. You can't get away with things. Color is so sensuous; you can get lost in the color, and you can also resolve issues with color in a way that doesn't force you to deal with what I think I need to deal with. Although I must say right now I'm working in color. It's not that I didn't work in color. There were periods of time about two years into this sequence when I did a series of color paintings for about a year and then stopped again and switched to black and white. Now you see me switching back to color again, and I thought it would be nice to just get back and do it. Not that I'm going to abandon black and white, but I just wanted to start getting back into burnt sienna, burnt ochre, yellow ochre and raw ochre.

JL: There's an honesty in black and white, since there's no optional content coming from color. Color adds an emotional element into the expression. Your works are movement and space. They are energetic. I



Untitled, 1993, 40 by 26 1/2 inches

mean it's, excuse the pun, black and white; there they are . . .

JS: Yeah, and they're very formal in a kind of curious way. For material like this, you would think you would want to have color because you're getting into emotional states and so forth . . .

JL: But that's tricky, to come into it with color and still retain the honesty of the expressive gesture. It becomes tricky . . .

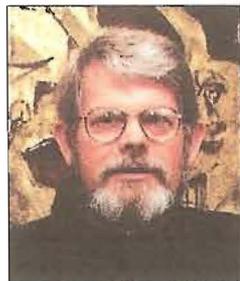
JS: Very difficult.

JL: Your paintings have a lot of depth and open space. There's a lot of room to breathe within the picture plane; one can travel in and out of them. The paintings where you have applied color work in that the color does not dominate your expression.

JS: It's suggested in it.

JL: You have accomplished a great volume of work, Jay. Your current work is on four-by-four-foot sheets of Masonite; however, your previous work was on paper . . .

JS: Yes, it was on paper for about three or four years. I was working strictly



on paper just because it was cheap and I had a lot of it. I wanted to go through a lot of material and work my way through a lot of stuff. I restricted myself to a specific format: basically black and white. So, I just worked my way through a whole process and it went very rapidly. My original intention was to do 100 works on paper, to give myself a sense of a place; to go with it. I started that in 1988, and I have gone way past the 100 mark since then.

JL: And this process of working on paper allowed you to be unconcerned with the practical side of art-making as in the material costs versus the waste often associated with experimental creativity?

JS: Yes, that's it.

JL: Yeah, removing practical considerations is lib-

erating. You mentioned that you originally were doing your paintings in a more painterly fashion, a more traditional abstract expressionist fashion. In the last couple of years, with the suggestion from other people, you actually brought airbrush into it. How did the inclusion of airbrush change the style of your work?

JS: My work became much more linear. Everything began to define itself. The size, if you will, became much more defined. It became very calligraphic. If you look at the more recent work, it's moved kind of away from that calligraphic work. I think that my work is moving to different levels of sophistication. In some ways it's beginning to look like the print-making I was doing back in the mid-1970s.

JL: A dovetail of styles—it is very interesting when a dovetail of one's personal style begets a hybrid and becomes an honest totality of one's creative being apart from one's education and stylistic role models.

JS: I think that one of the keys to all of this is to be honest. You've got to be who you are and what you are and to express that. I see a lot of people not doing that.

JL: A person first has to want to seek that honesty. A lot of people think they're being honest when, in fact, they are living someone else's life.

JS: Yes. I think a lot of people have become preoccupied with attitudes and positions that are not their own. They find themselves involved with devices and systems that really are not them at all. They have assumed this mantle of what is generally "correct" to do.

JL: Do you have a representational motivation in mind or is this purely psychic self-expression?

JS: I have probably no representational thought about what I am doing. Although, there are certainly references to landscapes that at times emerge from the work. I have had a life-long interest in landscape. I don't think that there is really landscape there *per se*, but there are references to it. It varies from image to image. In terms of horizon, [there are] occasionally almost "kinds" of masses. But I don't think it's very obvious; it's not an issue that I am thinking about. It does seem to appear from time to time. Maybe I'm not reading it, I think, in the mix of this kind of imagery that there are things that pop out. I think that there's a lot of sexual imagery in some of it.

JL: How much of this isn't just like a Rorschach* test, where one sees what one projects?

JS: For some people, I think that's what it is. Some people spend a lot of time looking at these paintings trying to identify images that they can recognize.

JL: Do you find that many people are not able to accept that you have no representational motive for your work and insist on finding imagery on which they can identify contextual meaning?

JS: Absolutely! That's OK. People can make up what they will. I am not upset by any reaction I hear.

JL: How about the tendency for people to view biomorphic images as psychosexual?

JS: I think that in my case, there is some psychosexual stuff going on here. And it's more prevalent in some work than others. It's not a conscious thing. I think that stuff is down there [subconscious]. I think that the stuff emerges along with the other stuff; that's just the way it is. I have no problem with it.



Untitled, 1990, 26½ by 40 inches

* Rorschach test (ror shakx, -shaKHx) noun: Psychology: A projective test in which a subject's interpretations of 10 standard inkblots are analyzed as a measure of emotional and intellectual functioning and integration. [After Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922), Swiss psychiatrist.]

JL: Nor should you have any problem with that.

JS: No.

JL: How were you trained to airbrush?

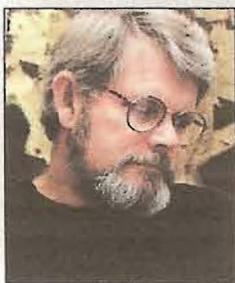
JS: I think a lot of it was self-training—being exposed early on to a system that was actually kind of different than the system that I'm teaching now. The system that I'm teaching now is a very standardized curriculum that you'll find being used almost everywhere . . .

JL: You mean illustration board, frisket paper, hard line, hard edge, tonal transitions . . .

JS: Right, liquid frisket, etc. Based on very traditional rendering.

JL: That should always be the departure point anyway. One has to know the rules before one can break them if the art is to have any solidity.

JS: I think it helps to have at least certain levels of skill that allow you to begin to explore stuff that's off the map. I pretty much insist that everybody go through the standard curriculum. Now I use it as a freehand drawing device as opposed to making masks and shooting. My training was in using masks and gradations. It may have been unconventional compared to what I am teaching



now. But I think most people who are doing airbrush now want to render realistically however they arrive at that. There are a number of ways of arriving at that, and, of course, one of them being freehand, which is what we see in the T-shirt industry for the most part. But obviously my use of it is considerably different from what they are doing. I just like the freedom of being able to draw with the airbrush.

JL: How difficult is it to get your paintings to the level where you feel they work? What constitutes when a painting of yours works, in its finished essence, as opposed to one that doesn't?

JS: Well it's very difficult. I find painting very difficult, and I find it to be a struggle. I hate to use a cliché like that, but it's a struggle. It's something you have really got to work at. In order to succeed, I think it requires that effort. You may at times find yourself generating images that work, but I think

you have to go beyond that; just because they work isn't necessarily the truth of the situation. Many times I will find myself being happy with a painting, and it works to some extent one way or another, and that's again a subjective intuitive sense. I was trained in a situation where you did have to make those kind of choices, but again it's on a subjective level. It's not something that's easy to teach. Some of it is on a subconscious level; some of it is on a conscious level; some of it is in between. It's a very gray, very subjective area. At the same time, if you have enough experiential and academic background, that is, if you have seen enough of this kind of stuff, and you've been told early on what works and what doesn't work, then you can begin to make these kinds of decision. I am in the process; not only is the subconscious stuff going on, but I'm also in a decision-making process all of the time that is a fairly wide spectrum of choices and decisions and so on and so forth.

Ultimately it comes down to bringing all of this to bear in an intuitive, subjective, critical way to whether something works or doesn't. Again, it's a balancing act; you're working on a tight-rope. It's certainly not easy by any stretch. And I paint flat. In a sense, I don't know what I've got until I put the paintings upright against the wall and view them.

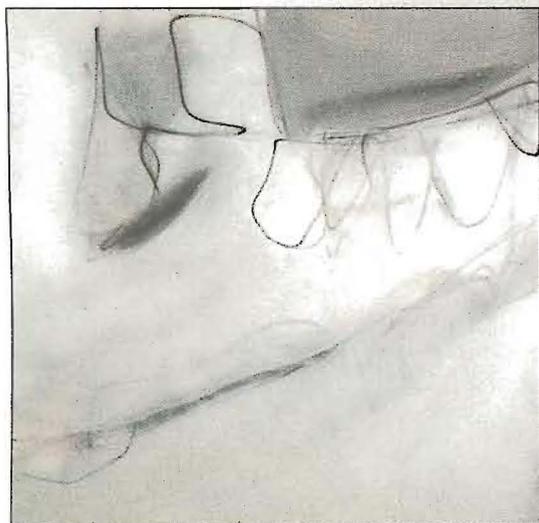
JL: For the abstract expressionists in the '40s, working large was a method of non-premeditation, a way of removing one's self from critical picture-making, allowing for the action of the process to be captured within the moment of execution. As far as what they were doing, because they could not see to judge their gestures unless they stepped away from their canvas, the

art defines itself.

JS: Oh yeah. It defines itself. It's an odd thing. It's a difficult esoteric skill to stop it, to recognize it and to stop it. It's sort of a different issue and yet it's a part of it, and it's a very difficult thing to do.

JL: Oh yeah. One of the big difficulties of coming to a clarity of essence in abstraction is to get away from the restrictions that are involved with painting no matter what methodology an artist may choose. The actual process of painting itself, if too valued, can hinder "the essential moment." At some point it becomes a painting that loses its essence. As you said, taking the color out and working tonally in black and white is a way of getting in there without getting lost in colorist decisions—sharpening your focus by simplifying your decisions. Some people are very eloquent with their words and can very succinctly articulate truth with minimal delivery. Whereas somebody else using the same idea might struggle with the words—use the wrong words, too many words, different words—and somehow the clarity of that essence of what's being expressed is lost in the medium itself.

JS: I think this is true. I think that there are a lot of people who are quite good as painters who don't ever touch on that truth. They are too preoccupied with whether this color is just right with that kind of color, and that's all nice, but you lose yourself in technicality. I think that that's what many of the people I see have done. They never get through all of that. I think that is true of airbrush too. I think the airbrush tends to be kind of technical. I think that in a sense, one can emerge from that and use the airbrush to reach a truth, and that is what I am about.



Untitled, 1995, 48 by 48 inches