The Stephane Janssen
Collection of Contemporary
American and European Art:
In Memory of R. Michael Johns

Pierre Alechinsky. Ciel en circuit fermé. acrylic on paper on canvas. 1985. 78.75 × 78.75 inches

January 22 through February 26, 1995
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art
The University of Oklahoma, Norman
This Exhibition is an Homage
to
R. Michael Johns
(1958–1993)

I had the great privilege to share the last 12 years of Michael's life. He was my companion and my best friend. He was an accomplished ceramist with a Master’s degree from Otis Parsons School of Art in Los Angeles. The miracle was that we had similar taste in art and we collected with a passion. Together we acquired over 1,500 paintings, sculptures, Native American art, contemporary ceramics and antiques. All those works of art remind me daily of his love. I am very thankful for the humor, courage and dignity he showed dealing with AIDS. He would be very proud of this show.

Stephane Janssen

From January 22 to February 26, 1995, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art has the unique opportunity of presenting 75 American and European contemporary works of art by thirty artists from the extraordinary collection of renowned Belgian philanthropist Stephane Janssen. Janssen's commitment to art comes from his mother's influence, who with her husband, began collecting after meeting the artists Eluard, Miro, Tzara and Breton, and developing a love for impressionism and cubism. At a public auction of “Degenerate Art” sold by Adolf Hitler in 1937, they bought a 1906 Toulouse Lautrec and the famous Picasso “Acrobat and Young Harlequin,” which Stephane sold for over 38 million dollars in 1988.

I approached Stephane this past summer at his Santa Fe home about curating this exhibition and this November I traveled to his home and warehouse in Carefree, Arizona, to select the works to be borrowed. This incredible 11,000 sq. ft. home, as seen in the January issue of Art News Magazine, reflects Stephane’s passionate interest in art through every facet of the house. Stephane's vast collection is composed of 4,000 works of art including over 1,500 paintings, 500 sculptures, 900 ceramics and 200 Native American art pieces.

The works selected for the exhibition, "THE STEPHANE JANSSEN COLLECTION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN ART: In Memory of R. Michael Johns”, include some of the famous CoBRA artists of the 1950’s such as Alechinsky, Appel, Reinhold and Dominguez, in addition to current works by Berlant, Hayunga, Larson, McGraw, Pruneda, Rabell, and Steve Tobin. Stephane has chosen this exhibition to serve as an homage to his late friend, R. Michael Johns, an artist who shared his taste and passion in the more than 1,500 works of art they selected together. The exhibition originates at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art which is the only U.S. venue. It will tour in Europe in 1996–1997.

I want to acknowledge with sincere appreciation Stephane Janssen's generous spirit in sharing these works of art from his collection, and recognize with my thanks, Ann Sanchez, curator of the Janssen Collection, whose friendly and professional support was a tremendous assistance to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art staff in the preparation of this exhibition.

Thomas R. Toporzer
Director
The following remarks are excerpts from a taped conversation with the collector during my November visit.

COLLECTING

T: I have very much enjoyed the past two days, having the opportunity to peruse your collection and select this exhibition. Do you think there is a common element that holds your collection together?

S: There is a definite line, I think, in what I collect. It's sort of tough; sometimes violent. It's never a bouquet of flowers. It's challenging; it's something that I can look at for 30 years and not be tired. When I had my gallery, I think, like a lot of people who have galleries, the commercial side of art became too important for me. And when I closed my gallery, I stopped collecting for about, oh, I would say five or six years; "I washed my eyes in museums." I went back to art for art and not, you know, how much is it worth? And I didn't really buy anything between 1976 and 1981.

Then when I met Michael, he had a very fresh approach to that kind of art because he had never seen some of the European art, and it was better for him to start living with that art because he said it was so challenging that it made him feel so small compared to those people. But then he sort of pushed me to look at people like Berlant, Wiley, Joe Fay, when I was sort of reluctant at the beginning because I didn't want to get into American art. I was very satisfied with what I had of European art.

And then an extraordinary thing happened that each time we would go to a show we would like the same paintings. It made life very easy. And he really . . . rejuvenated my desire to collect. And then in 1981 we started collecting a lot. In 1988 of course I had a stroke of luck by selling a painting at Christi's from my father's estate and that gave me the means to collect a lot. And we went through a sort of frenzy of collecting. I mean we never bought one painting, we bought like two, three, four, five at shows, and it was fun and nice and new and . . .

T: Before that time did you already establish the habit of buying several paintings by the same artist?

S: When I had a gallery, I bought entire shows that didn't sell, because nobody wanted them, and I got stuck with wonderful things.

T: That was when you were dealing with what's known as the CoBrA artists?

S: Yes, and also Gillet and Bram Van Velde. I always bought, you know, substantial amount of works, when I really liked the artist. All of the artists I showed, I liked and all of the artist I collected, I liked.

You know when people say to me "strange painting," I say, yes, "strange painting." But I think one other very important thing also is that all the people that I collected, except Dubuffet, were my friends, or at least I had a friendly relationship with them.

T: Is that important to you?

S: That was very important . . . certain of them, like Gillet, I've known for almost 40 years. But they all have become . . . you know . . . I have friendship with them. And some of them were friends of Michael . . . I like the human side of art.

I have a wonderful rapport with artists, and you know, I just gave a Roberto Marquez painting to
the Hirshhorn. And it makes me so happy for the artist that the museum wanted it. I mean, they chose it, I didn’t call them and say would you take it... and it’s a little bit like if you have a child and he does well. You know, it makes me happy for them, that they are successful.

T: When the person a number of years ago made the comment that you’ve bought the same painting 1,500 times, what do you think they meant by that?

S: That there is a very definite link between all those paintings. They are violent. They are tough. They have a message. And they are not something easy. Ann [Sanchez, collection curator] and I had great difficulty finding 25 paintings to loan to the Mayo Clinic, because they couldn’t have violence; they couldn’t have animals with teeth; they couldn’t have crosses in cemeteries. Of course, skulls were totally out. And it was very, very difficult. I mean, we went through 1,500 and we found 25. I mean, it’s challenging art.

And I also am convinced that an artist is generally five years ahead of everybody else. Then there is a group of people who sort of start understanding between three and five years, and then there is another group of people who it takes them between ten and fifteen years, and then the crowds wait generally fifty to a hundred years to appreciate the art and artists. And then, when you see the crowds waiting outside of the Grand Palais for the Picasso show, and you think, “What was the reaction of the same category of people in 1906?” You couldn’t give away a Picasso to those people, and now they go because it’s become a media event.

It has always been like that. There has always been an official painting. Who was “in” at the end of the nineteenth century, was Bouguereau and Alma Tadema and all those people—the Orientalists and all that. And then there were the Impressionists. And today the reason people don’t recognize it—it’s because the official art is minimal or conceptual.

Every museum in the world, every great gallery, promotes the same art. If you go to Copenhagen, or you go to Brussels, or you go to Paris, or you go to New York, or to Los Angeles, you see the same people who are promoted.

And one day (I think that is what happened recently in 1990) people wake up, and they think, “What do you mean I paid $300,000 for five spots on a canvas? Something is wrong.” And when they wake up, it’s a tragedy because they have put a lot of money on something that was not worth anything. I don’t mean that painting must be worth something, but it’s nice if you don’t lose money. I think... it’s a big investment for people to buy a painting. If it’s a $500 painting or if it’s a $5,000,000 painting—it’s a lot of money. And it should not be garbage. And there is a lot of that around. And I’m horrified when I go to Santa Fe or to Scottsdale, and I see people selling those repetitive Remingtons... not Remingtons, of course, because Remington is great—but all those second, third and fourth generation artists who do the same thing. It’s... pathetic.

T: Do you remember what your first purchase was?

S: It’s a little Oscar Dominguez. A bowl with a fish. It was in 1952, and I was at a lunch with Paul Eduard with Tristan Tzara. He was a famous poet, I think. My mother said to him, “Oh, I thought you were dead.” Paul Eduard was a great poet in France, who wrote the poem about freedom. He was very, very
famous. And, I mean it was a great lunch, and everybody was drinking and I was drinking. I was 16 years old and I went to that show, and I saw that little painting. I asked my mother if she would lend me the money; she did and it was the first. And through Dominguez, I met Chagall, Prezert and Miro, people like that, but I never became friendly with them. When I knew them, they were kind of old. Dali—I met him when I was 15 years old.

But... I think, maybe because I was a lonely child, it [the painting] really became my friend—when my father sent me in exile for two years to South America, Central America and the United States, because I had flunked college, and he wanted to make me a businessman and a man. I had to be two years on my own and I took a picture of a painting by Gillet. I didn’t take a picture of my mother or my father because... and I had that painting—in my bedroom anticipating that I [would] live alone—that was always in my bedroom. And that painting became the thing that I would cling to if I was depressed. I would say, “Well, when I go back to my house, I will have that painting.”

I mean it’s strange, but... I was timid in school. I was not a good student. I was very shy. I think the fact that I was gay didn’t make things easy either. I thought I was the only one in the world. And, really, being surrounded by paintings, was my cocoon. And it helped me.

It’s very strange... but I saw a woman in Santa Fe. She was an Indian woman. She was a psychic and she said, “You collect colors?” And I said, “Yes.” And she said, “It’s a very good therapy for you. It helps you.” And it does help me. I mean its amazing. I don’t deny that I have wonderful friends. I mean, I have wonderful friends and I’m very thankful for that. It’s one of the most important things in my life. But paintings are my first friends.

My hope is always that children, and when I talk about children, it goes up to twenty-five, thirty—will be touched one day by one painting. And that it will change their lives. They will realize that there are other things than money and success in life. And that a painting can give you much more in life than a few shares of IBM. Because when people say, “Oh, but it’s such a great investment,” I say, “If I really wanted to invest money, I would put it in blue chips and sleep on it.” Those paintings cost me a fortune. I had to store them. I mean it’s a lot of, you know, expenses. But it’s worth it, it’s really worth it.

I also say, “Why is that painting worth $50,000, when a pile of nothing is worth $300,000?” It’s unfair, because [as an artist] is a great craftsman, and he knows how to paint, and he loves painting, I think on the long term... in a hundred years, people will understand those paintings—and they won’t understand a lot of other things that are in fashion now.

ARTISTS

One other story that always fascinated me in my life. At one time France changed money, physically. And they made the first thousand frank note. In Europe, we had the filigrane. You know what a filigrane is? It’s a little transparent thing where you can see face in bank notes?

Kanweiller, who was Picasso’s dealer, paid a dinner bill with a new thousand dollar bill. And Picasso, his dinner guest, said, “Oh, give it to me.” And he took it, and in the filigrane, drew a bullfight. He gave it back to Kanweiller and said, “You’d better choose another currency—another note than that.” And Kanweiller later on sold that for about 20 times the value of the note. And what fascinated me was that Picasso was capable just with his hand, to multiply money. I mean it’s absolutely amazing.
Also one thing that I wanted to say is that when we moved to the Southwest, we started collecting Southwest artists. And that's why we had Fritz Scholder, Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, Barela, Kevin Berry. Because I think they represent what I like in the Southwest. It's not the typical Southwestern art.

**ART**

T: In reviewing your collection it becomes clear that you are attracted to a certain kind of style of working . . .

S: Painting.

T: Painting!

S: Painting!!

T: And the way the artists use paint . . . most of the artists you have purchased, paint in a very physical and aggressive way.

S: Yes. Appel is a perfect example; he uses what he calls his mayonnaise.

T: Mayonnaise?

S: Yes, it's done with oil and eggs and pigment.

I think a very important thing for me is the work in a painting. I mean, what I really cannot stand is art that seems to not have been worked on. I think the craft part is very important, and that's why I'm so happy now that suddenly when I went to Paris I realized that painting was back. I got this morning, a fax from Paris of an article praising "Gillet, the 70-year-old master who paints those extraordinary ship wrecks . . ." Paris is in love with painting again.

It's real work, contrary to certain people who just throw things and wait for it to happen . . . I think that real artists, first, don't know in the morning what they are going to do when they're in front of their easel—if they have an easel. I think it comes from a place within them; and it's a storm inside, it has to come out. If not, they become sick and crazy and whatever. But, the real art is something which comes from a very, very, very deep place inside people.

An art which is not commercial. And even in some portraits that painters have made. Like Gillet made my portrait twice. He made Michael's portrait once. Even Roberto Marquez who made our portrait, and he made different little portraits of Michael. In a hundred years—who cares who I am and who Michael was? But people will go in the museum and say, that's a good painting.

The problem with Haftka is that his father and his mother are survivors of the Holocaust. And as a little Jewish boy, all he heard all his life were stories of the Holocaust. And it comes out in his paintings. He is a very happy man. But what he paints is very dark. I mean Deloss McGraw, who has wonderful colors, has a lot of very deep thoughts in his paintings. So does Joe Fay. Especially the one when he was at the hospital, when he was having some personal problems—there is a knife going to his heart. I mean they look very colorful and very pleasant, but they are very deep.
You know, it's like when you see... the portrait by Van Gogh of the postmaster with his beard. Nobody knows who he was; what was his life; if he was married; if he had children; if he was a nice person or a drunk, or whatever. But, it's an extraordinary painting and that is what is important. It's not a commission. It's a painting that happened to be somebody that you know. I think that's the only way you can look at art.

... It's like people who paint about events in the world. Guernica is an extraordinary painting. I'm sure that 95 percent of the people, a lot of people in America, don't know what Guernica is all about—an event in history—but, if they see the painting, it's still an extraordinary painting about war and suffering, you can know that. And that's very, very, very rare. Many people do political paintings which don't last more than the political crisis.

And I know Gillet very well, and I know Alechinsky, and I know Appel. They sit in front of their canvases, or their canvases are on the floor. They don't know what they are going to do, and it comes... a sort of messenger comes. Gillet is a man who has been anguished for 50 years, because he doesn't know what he is going to do next. And that's what I like. He has doubts, he has anguish. I mean he was a nervous wreck before the F.I.A.C. in Paris. And yet he was the biggest success that they had in years. Because it comes from the soul, and that's what I'm looking for basically. Gillet has never given a damn about the fact of whether he was going to sell a painting or not. For Alechinsky it comes afterwards. I mean he certainly makes a painting hoping it is going to sell. But they paint because they have to and I think that's the main link... And even Barela, who was a total drunk... who couldn't even write his name except to sign. He would peddle his sculptures around the streets of Taos. He had to do it... and he died because of it. He fell asleep in a mountain of wood chips, and he burned.

T: I think you've hit upon it. You've really summed it up. You are attracted to passionate artists who must make art, and their passion captures you and you must collect this passion.

S: Yes, and I would go even further than that. When Michael was sick, and after that when he died, I think for Michael, paintings were his friends. I mean, he looked at the paintings; he loved the paintings; and although they were violent, they were a friendly presence. And for me after he died, my paintings were among my best friends.

You cannot always cry on the shoulder of people because, you know, it becomes too much, at a certain point. But I would sit in front of certain paintings and talk to them. And say it's so sad that we lost Michael and both of us chose you—the painting. And they don't talk back to you, they don't tell you that you are boring. The paintings are really my friends. Every morning when I come in this room, and I go to the kitchen—I mean, I look at those two Gillet and that Poliakosf and I think—God that's good painting! It's incredible how good it is.
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The Stephane Janssen
Collection of Contemporary American and European Art:
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Checklist of the Exhibition

Pierre Alechinsky. Belgium. 1927–
_Ciel en circuit ferme_, 1985
acrylic on paper on canvas. 78\(\frac{3}{4}\)" × 78\(\frac{3}{4}\)"

_Terre verte_, 1985
acrylic on paper on canvas. 76\(\frac{3}{4}\)" × 76\(\frac{3}{4}\)"

Karel Appel. The Netherlands. 1925–
The Indian Chief, 1986
oil on canvas. 96" × 76"

_The Prairie_, 1986
oil on canvas. 96" × 76"

Robert Arneson. U.S. 1930–
_Peace_, 1983
mixed media on paper. 42" × 62"

Patrocinio Barela. U.S. 1908–1964
_Untitled_
carved wood. 19" × 6" × 7\(\frac{3}{4}\)"

_Untitled_
carved wood. 23\(\frac{3}{4}\)" × 5" × 6\(\frac{3}{4}\)"

_Untitled_
carved wood. 15\(\frac{1}{2}\)" × 11" × 5\(\frac{3}{4}\)"

_Untitled_
carved wood. 16\(\frac{1}{2}\)" × 4\(\frac{3}{4}\)" × 4"

_Untitled_
carved wood. 14\(\frac{1}{2}\)" × 5\(\frac{3}{4}\)" × 5"

_Untitled_
carved wood. 19\(\frac{1}{2}\)" × 10" × 5"

Tony Berlant. U.S. 1941–
_Untitled: Romance (house)_ , 1984
found metal collage on plywood with steel brads. 10\(\frac{3}{4}\)" × 11" × 8\(\frac{3}{4}\)"

_Alice (House)_ , 1985
found metal collage on plywood with steel brads. 11" × 10" × 8"

_Hold-up S.M._ , 1992
collage of found tin on plywood with steel brads. 39\(\frac{1}{4}\)" × 28\(\frac{3}{4}\)"

Kevin Berry. U.S. 1961–
The Gathcer, 1988
cast bronze, forged steel and river rock. 68" × 72" × 20"

Chema Cobo. Spain. 1952–
_juan de la Cruz III_, 1986
oil on canvas. 98" × 78"

Ford Crull. U.S. 1952–
_Evocation II_, 1987
oil and oilstic on canvas. 70" × 92"

Roy De Forest. U.S. 1930–
_Tom Druid in Hartzville_, 1981
polymer on canvas. 74" × 92"

Stefan De Jaeger. Belgium. 1957–
_Souvenir de la maison de Lago Vista Drive_, 1987–1988 (Michael)
Polaroid collage. 36" × 47"

_Souvenir de la maison de Lago Vista Drive_, 1987–1988, (Stephane)
Polaroid collage. 36" × 47"

Eddie Dominguez. U.S. 1957–
_Neighborhood Door_, 1989
mixed media; free standing; two sided work. 83" × 36" × 2"

Etienne-Martin. France. 1913–
_Demeure X (Petite Demeure)_ , 1965
cast bronze in four pieces. 15\(\frac{1}{4}\)" × 19\(\frac{1}{4}\)" × 19\(\frac{1}{4}\)"

Joe Fay. U.S. 1950–
_Emily S. Meghan_, 1986
acrylic on polyurethane foam on plywood. 56" × 48" × 8"

_High Sierra_, 1986
acrylic and polyurethane on plywood. 56" × 48"

R. E. Gillet. France. 1924–
_Grandes vagues_, 1993
oil on canvas. 32" × 39\(\frac{1}{2}\)"

_Untitled from the series 'Bateau Ivre',_ 1994
oil on canvas. 59" × 98\(\frac{1}{4}\)"

_Untitled from the series 'Bateau Ivre',_ 1994
oil on canvas. 35" × 51"

Lawrence Gipe. U.S. 1962–
_Blessed_, 1987
oil on sheet metal on plywood. 72\(\frac{1}{8}\)" × 48\(\frac{3}{8}\)"

Michael Haftka. U.S. 1953–
_Father and Son_, 1984
oil on canvas. 78" × 62"

Grant Hayunga. U.S. 1970–
The Walk, 1991
mixed media on paper. 48" × 36"

White Myth, 1991
mixed media on paper. 48" × 36"

Luis Jimenez. U.S. 1940–
_Drawing for Progress I_, 1973
crayon on paper. 26" × 40"

_Popo and Isle_, 1982
crayon on paper. 33\(\frac{1}{4}\)" × 33\(\frac{1}{4}\)"
Framing the Genius, 1991
oil on canvas with aluminum sides. 93" × 192"

Leslie Lerner. U.S. 1949–
El Reino del Dios, 1986
oil, tempera and polymer on canvas. 50" × 66"

Joya Caja, 1986
oil, tempera and polymer on canvas. 50" × 60"

Roberto Marquez. Mexico. 1959–
Mira Malandrino, 1989
oil on canvas. 60" × 78"

Portrait of Stephane and Michael, 1989
oil on canvas. 72" × 60"

W.D. Attempts to Save Cock Robin, 1982
watercolor on paper. 22" × 291/2"*

Mont Blanc, 1984
watercolor on paper. 291/2" × 41"*

The Travels of A Young Man at 40, 1985
watercolor and gouache on paper. 22" × 291/2"*

Turning Off Rock-and-Roll and Then Listening to Bach’s St. Matthew’s Passion, and Thinking About All the Individuals Who Have Had the Courage to Change Their Lives, 1987–88
gouache and pastel on paper. 94" × 42"

Leaving Home, 1992
acrylic and collage on canvas. 102" × 139"

Nathan Oliveira. U.S. 1928–
Painter I, 1987
oil on canvas. 84" × 63"*

Max Pruneda. U.S. 1948–
Spirit House of Snakes, 1991
mixed media on paper. 72" × 60"

Hooded Apparition, 1991
acrylic on paper. 31" × 39"*

Arnaldo Roche Rabell. Puerto Rico. 1955–
Essence, 1989
oil on canvas. 84" × 60"*

The Pain and Despair, 1990
oil on canvas. 96" × 96"

Preacher’s Scarecrow, 1991
oil on canvas. 84" × 60"

Reinhold. Belgium. 1928–
Chichimèque, 1985
tin (unique). 131/4" × 11" × 81/4"

Petit leurre, 1985
tin (unique). 151/4" × 101/2" × 81/2"

Padibonde, 1985
tin (unique). 161/2" × 11" × 101/4"

Ave Caesar, 1986
tin (unique). 111/4" × 6" × 6"*

Guignard, 1986
tin (unique). 121/4" × 81/4" × 51/4"

Frais Emoulu, 1987
tin (unique). 171/2" × 13" × 71/4"

Loir de Délphennes, 1987
tin (unique). 181/4" × 131/2" × 101/4"

La nouveau, 1985
tin (unique). 161/2" × 71/4" × 9"

Fritz Scholder. U.S. 1937–
Indian Before Remington, 1976
oil on canvas. 80" × 68"

Study: White Buffalo, 1976
oil on canvas. 20" × 16"

Snake Dancers and Shadows, 1977
oil on canvas. 68" × 80"

Another Possession, 1989
bronze. 45"

Jaune Quick-To-See Smith. U.S. 1940–
The Spaniard, 1988–89
oil and mixed media on canvas. 66" × 55"

Antler, 1991
mixed media on paper. 15" × 15"

Ripple, 1991
mixed media on paper. 15" × 15"

Xeriscape, 1991
mixed media on paper. 15" × 15"

Steve Tobin. U.S. 1957–
Untitled (Battleship in skull), 1994
bronze. 10" × 171/4" × 5"

Untitled (House on column), 1994
bronze. 14" × 101/2" × 41/2"

Untitled (Wood with sea-turtle), 1994
bronze. 171/4" × 11" × 10"

Untitled (tank with spoon), 1994
bronze. 101/2" × 8" × 31/2"

Untitled (Battleship with egg bird), 1994
bronze. 15" × 6" × 6"

William T. Wiley. U.S. 1937–
Making Tracks For Australia, 1980
pencil and acrylic on canvas. 891/2" × 1171/2"

Who Waves—The Flag, 1985
acrylic and pencil on canvas. 78" × 1261/2"*

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