



PROFILES

# Ernst Yohji Jaeger

## Exposing the wonderment of the world

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The lights are dimmed, the blackened sky visible through old factory-casement windows. Candles illuminate an ad hoc dinner table set low to the ground; guests sit on oriental rugs covering a wooden floor. A diverse array of exhibition catalogs and artist books line the windowsills, with an equally diverse array of artworks hung in a single line along the walls. Under the warm light of a floor lamp, the 22 cards of the tarot's Major Arcana sit atop a plywood table. This could be a scene in a timeless, ethereal painting by the artist Ernst Yohji Jaeger, but it is, in fact, the setting for what Jaeger called the "Fools Banquet," a dinner and one-night-only exhibition at his Vienna studio marking the culmination of a course he taught at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Brno University of Technology in the Czech Republic. Each tarot card on display corresponds to an artwork on the wall, offering a floor plan and conceptual orientation to the pieces; memes. Importantly, among these influences, there is no hierarchy. A painter he discovers on a blog is just as important as careful studies of Paul Cézanne, Helene Schjerfbeck, or Felice Casorati. His early memory of standing under the legs of a Louise Bourgeois Maman is regarded on the same plane as his days spent playing Final Fantasy. The work *Untitled 1917 (Study for an Angel / Tear Through Time)* (2024), for example, depicts an androgynous figure laying in a lakeside field reading a book. At first glance, it's an unassuming scene, reveling in the beauty of a quiet moment to oneself. Yet on second glance and with inference from the title, the viewer might notice that one page of the book features a reproduction of Francis Picabia's drawing *Untitled* (1917) and another references Leonardo Da Vinci's drawing *Head of a Young Woman (Study for the Angel of the Virgin of the Rocks)* (1483–85). At the same time, a somewhat

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each student and lecturer. Jaeger included, drew a card from the deck and completed a work with their fated arcana in mind.

"In this class, I was focusing on the theme of where art comes from and why we do it," the 34-year-old artist explains during a video call. "And Tarot can be a tool to read life in a poetic way, a key to reading the world and your life as art. It's also interesting to get into the symbols, numbers, and colors, which are incredibly rich."

The concept for the banquet stemmed from the course's overarching ethos, which reflects Jaeger's own approach to artmaking: to investigate and reveal the wonderment and miracles inherent to every aspect of life, no matter how seemingly mundane. In his own work, Jaeger depicts intimate moments through a unique painterly style blending influences that range from art historical icons to manga and anime to videogames and cliché tear emerges from the Da Vinci drawing, adding a sense of both humor and sadness, while also shifting the plane of perception.

Now based in Vienna, Jaeger was born and raised in Frankfurt and spent summers in Sapporo, Japan, at his grandfather's house. Regardless of geographic location, he was always surrounded by creativity: His father is a writer, and his grandmother was a pianist. His uncle is an artist, and his aunt draws manga. Jaeger grew up playing video games and watching anime, finding solace and inspiration in the fantastical worlds and their illustrators' use of symbolism. As a kid, he always enjoyed drawing but began taking it seriously when, at age 16, he faced personal troubles and dropped out of school, becoming what he describes as a "shut-in" for two years. "It was a really angsty teenage time, and I struggled to find meaning in school or imagining a regular job," he





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says. “I felt like I had to figure out something I was good at and carve out my own space of belonging.” He considered becoming an apprentice for a sushi chef as well as other pathways, but ultimately, he found the most meaning in painting and drawing.

From there, Jaeger eventually enrolled in art school, where he began to make paintings straddling figuration and abstraction by overpainting works abandoned by former students. Now, he creates such base paintings himself. Sometimes they are purely abstract, other times, they are reproductions of artworks that inspire him. The concept of creating a base layer, for Jaeger, opens a pathway to cease control and access his subconscious—or ideas that he might not be immediately conscious of—in the layers to come. “Painting is always a fight against one’s inner cynic, which is saying, ‘Why are you doing this? There are so many paintings. Why do you have to add something?’” he explains, comparing the creation of a base painting to the process of allowing his inner cynic to expose itself on the linen canvas. “But when you finally let this inner cynic go, something that surprises you can emerge.” To slowly but surely let go of the cynic, Jaeger layers paint, scratches it off, repaints, and repeats this process time and again until a wholly new composition has emerged—albeit often with elements of the base bleeding through. In the work *Untitled (Transit)* (2022), for instance, blood cells slowly but surely became clouds; an overcoat became mountains in the distance.

“In life and in painting,” he says, “what you might consider ‘failures’—like the base layer of a painting or my shut-in teenage years—become, in the end, the most decisive, formative, or best things.” In his paintings, he explains, “The light and glow often come from the layers painted in the very beginning, excavated through sandpapering and etching.”

No matter the base or the final composition, each of Jaeger’s works depicts a moment frozen in time while still conveying a sense of movement. In *Untitled 1917 (Study for an Angel / Tear Through Time)*, a butterfly flutters in midair. In *Untitled (Transit)*, the pages of an open book seem to be flipping from a gust of wind.

“It’s interesting to have something in the paintings that indicates a soft movement. It gives the work an aliveness,” Jaeger explains. This idea of physical movement also conveys an ambiguous liminality: “I really like when a painting is in a hovering state when you can see the past and present, but there could also be an imagined future, like maybe a flower is still blossoming with a promise of wilt.” Adding to this idea are Jaeger’s custom wood frames, which he treats with black tea and rust to simulate an oxidation process, an artificial aging. He also recently started using iridescent paints to add a certain shimmer to the otherwise matte compositions. “When you walk past the paintings, the surface changes through the reflection of these iridescent parts, and this is another tool I can use to give the paintings this changing quality.”

Change is central to Jaeger’s practice, conceptually and practically. At the “Fools Banquet,” he presented *Gift / Temperance* (2024), a perfectly square painting named in part after the card he drew. The painting centers two elongated hands holding a drinking glass filled with water in which a Japanese goldfish swims. The background features what to me appears to be falling leaves combined with a starry night sky; but it is an abstract composition that most likely registers differently to every viewer, a hallmark of Jaeger’s paintings. The waterglass stemmed from the painting’s base layer, for which Jaeger reproduced a close-up of a Renaissance painting on a postcard that a friend left in his studio. Yet the element of water also closely relates to the Temperance card, which often depicts a central figure holding two vessels with a stream of water flowing between them, a symbolic representation of overcoming and balancing contradictions by placing a conductor between them that allows the currents to flow. For Jaeger, the contradictions between the inner cynic and the artist, between abstraction and figuration, between myriad influences, are balanced and flow through the act of creation itself. Fittingly, in the Crowley Thoth tarot deck, which Jaeger used for his class, Temperance is renamed Art.



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