

# Dream House

GREIL MARCUS ON JESS'S MURALS

**YOU OPEN A CLOSET DOOR** in an otherwise nondescript playroom with a lot of natural light and come face-to-face with a barbershop pole with descending swirls in orange, cream, and black. In a narrow bedroom hallway you look up, and what could be Celtic markings, then Paleolithic meanders, are running below the ceiling.

There is color everywhere, and everywhere there is the suggestion of the occult. There's the hint of some unnamed ritual being performed, its meaning lost, its images somehow still persisting; there's the echo of a joke, the setup clear, the punch line forgotten generations ago. Everywhere you look you see something new, old, incantatory, alive.

This is work that the artist Jess made in the film critic Pauline Kael's 1905 Craftsman house in Berkeley, California, at 2419 Oregon Street, just above Telegraph Avenue, about a mile north of the university, where Kael was a student in the late 1930s. She'd moved back to Berkeley from New York in the early '40s and fell in with poets, artists, filmmakers, professors; after 1955, when she moved into the Oregon Street house, she turned it into a place where people showed up to join a nonstop argument on movies, music, poetry, food, drink, theater, criticism, fiction, the last presidential election, and the next one.

Jess was born Burgess Franklin Collins in Long Beach, California, in 1923. He was a chemist at Oak Ridge, part of the Manhattan Project, and after the war he produced plutonium for the Hanford Atomic Energy Project in Richland, Washington. The first atomic bomb was exploded over Hiroshima on his twenty-second

birthday; at twenty-six, he dreamed that in twenty-six years, in 1975, the world would be destroyed. He quit his job and enrolled in the California School of Art in San Francisco. In 1951, he met the poet Robert Duncan; their love affair lasted until Duncan's death in 1988. Jess and Duncan opened the King Ubu Gallery in 1952 with the artist Harry Jacobus. By the time it reopened as the Six Gallery two years later and Allen Ginsberg gave his first reading of "Howl" there, Jess was cutting up the Sunday *Dick Tracy* comic strip for *Finnegans Wake*—like rewrites he called *Tricky Cad*, and he and Duncan were spending a lot of time with Kael.

Jess made what he called "Translations," "Salvages," or "Paste-Ups": paintings based on photographs or overpaintings of other paintings, often with such heavy applications of paint that the images stuck out of the frames like impasto elves, and the kind of collages Raoul Hausmann or Hannah Höch might have made if they'd lived in San Francisco in the '50s. They were fabulously intricate recombinations of magazine ads, slogans, and screaming orphaned phrases, as in *Goddess Because Is Is Falling Asleep*, 1954. At the time, Modess sanitary napkins were advertised as discreet,

comfortable, and luxurious, with deluxe tableaux of overdressed women in the throes of what was then known as gracious living: Jess's version merely pushed the visual idea a step or two further, where it blew up in its own face.

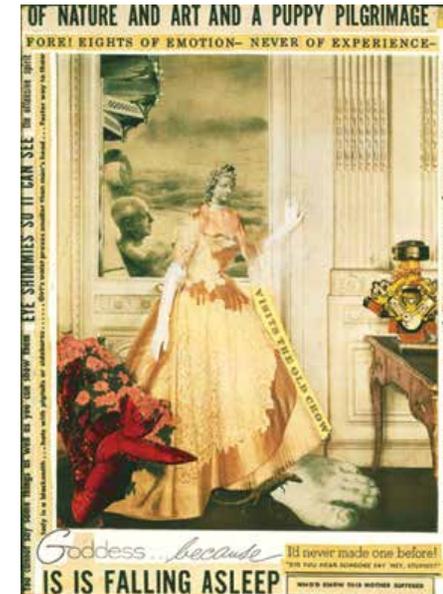
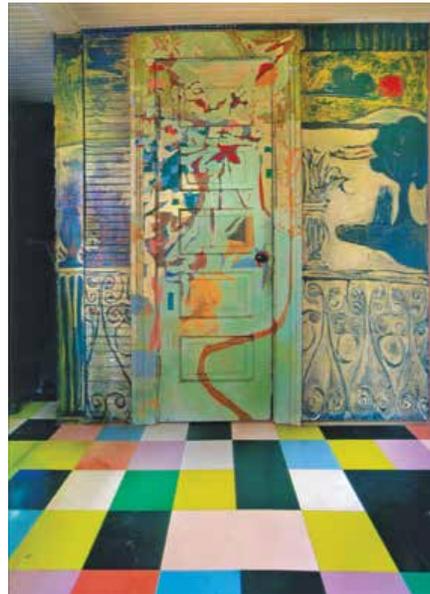
Writing in 1961, Kael describes catching a real-life version of Jess's collage—and Modess's famous slogan—when she found herself in a theater "looking at a frightfully expensive, elaborately staged movie. The beautiful heroine, in pale blue, was descending an elegant beige staircase, when a voice from the dark piped

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up—"Modess, because . . ." It had to be Jess, sitting right next to Kael, seeing his own collage coming back to him on the screen.

Jess, who died in 2004, painted Kael's house in 1956. Except for a piano, which he turned into a shape-shifting wonderland of tiny images and abstractions that Pauline kept in her house in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, until her death in 2001, he didn't touch the dark wood of the austere first-floor living rooms of Kael's house or the gleamingly bordered hardwood floor. Harry Jacobus painted the kitchen, turning a

From left: Exterior of the Kael Basart House, Berkeley, CA, June 9, 2014. Mural painted by Jess in 1956, with door and floor painted by Harry Jacobus in 1958, in the kitchen of the Kael Basart House, Berkeley, CA, 2014. Photo: Wilfred J. Jones. Jess, *Goddess Because Is Is Falling Asleep*, 1954, collage on paper, 14 × 10 1/2".





Above: Mural painted by Jess in 1956 over the stairwell of the Kael Basart House, Berkeley, CA, 2014. Photo: Wilfred J. Jones.

Right: Foyer of the Kael Basart House, Berkeley, CA, 2014. Photo: Wilfred J. Jones.



Above: Mural and door painted by Jess in 1956 in a bedroom of the Kael Basart House, Berkeley, CA, 2014. Photo: Wilfred J. Jones.

broom-closet door into an abstract drama of movement and decay, weaving patterns through the laundry room, and laying a linoleum floor that still looks like the road to a private Oz.

Jess climbed the stairs to the bedroom floor and all but opened a new storey. Suddenly, you were in a pagan forest. The lines between humans, gods, and goddesses were erased. No sense of time held. Nothing held still. Every door, molding, ceiling runner, and wall spoke in its own voice, or whispered, or stood silent, knowing its language had long ago left the tongue for the collective unconscious. On both sides of the stairwell, a mural, or a story, began in an explosion that opened into a landscape shaped equally by Bosch, the Grimms, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It stretched the entire length of the walls on one side of the upstairs hallway, then curved around a corner into a dead end, though it looked as if it could not bear to stop. But first, as you climbed the stairs, you saw the spell in the act of being cast.

On the left side of the stairwell, a woman with her hair on fire, the forest she embodies in flames, lets loose a smoky, milky, sperm-like substance from her fingertips. On the right-side stairwell wall, under a rain of pink and orange petals of light, a goat—a goat, if it is a

goat, with antlers—sits quietly on a patch of green, with dark, purplish ground at its feet. There is a sewing room—though Kael was running the Cinema-Guild and Studio double theater on Telegraph, with folding chairs and a sheet separating the tiny rooms, she made her living in the 1950s as a seamstress, sometimes taking in laundry—where the paintings on each wall were based on Picasso and Braque. Only one is still there; the rest, as with the walls in many of the rooms, are covered with off-white paint. This is a back bedroom where all that remains of a sorcerer’s collection of symbols and signs—all in black, covering the walls like threats, a grinning black mass—is a painted door.

A spirit of play pervades every surface. Wherever you look there is something odd, unexpected, out of place, until you realize there is no single place in this place. But for me, the stunner was a bedroom with a wall based on a dress Anna Magnani wore in Jean Renoir’s 1952 film *The Golden Coach*. It was so bright you could barely see the actress for her clothes; Jess’s translation might have been lit from the inside.

And the strangest touch, against the black-and-white entry door, which didn’t blunt the color of the wall so much as counter it with a blank *no*, was the closet door

off to the side, which seemed to take in the light from the wall and translate it in turn—unless it was the primary source of the light, and the wall only its kaleidoscopic reflection.

That’s the way the house works, if, with such overwhelming imagery flooding it, it has worked as a house at all. It’s hard to imagine a child, such as Kael’s daughter, Gina, or the children of the composer Robert Basart and the music teacher Ann Basart, who bought the house from Kael in 1964 and who have put it up for sale, living under these rays. It’s a roller coaster of color, sometimes pastoral, but even then with the Pre-Raphaelites conniving behind the trees in the rooms with the peaceful-looking castles in the last section of Jess’s snaking upstairs mural—a roller coaster plunging into every upstairs room, except for Kael’s own large front bedroom. Here the walls are not plaster or Sheetrock but pristine Philippine mahogany plywood. There’s not a painter’s mark on them—just a back wall in the closet that Jess painted a blue no decorator would have ever used. □

*As of this writing, the Committee to Preserve the Kael Basart House and Jess Murals and the Jess Collins Trust are working to raise funds to buy the house and restore the art now covered with paint.*

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