

ARTFORUM

Ken Tisa - Kate Werble Gallery
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Ken Tisa, *Janus*, 1982–2023, glass and plastic beads, sequins, mother-of-pearl and plastic buttons on vintage textile mounted on canvas, 56 × 47 ¾".

Rich brocades embellished with labyrinthine beadwork, florid bouquets of antique buttons and glittering swaths of sequins, mythical figures and ancient symbols gloriously wrought by an unrepentant maximalist: This is what Ken Tisa's Dream Maps are made of. The eight on view at Kate Werble Gallery were the first textile works of this kind to be shown by the artist since the late 1980s. Their return after so many decades out of sight may be why their leonine dazzle gives off a melancholy aura, but time has also been Tisa's coconspirator. From the intricacy of his handiwork to the vintage materials he rescues, it takes years to create a Dream Map. Even its name summons the hours when a mind is alert only to its numinous depths.

"The space in which we shall spend our nocturnal hours has no perspective, no distance," wrote the philosopher Gaston Bachelard of dreaming. "It is the immediate synthesis of things and ourselves." Tisa's practice—which ranges across painting, collage, ceramics, and design—has always entwined self and stuff. For his 2017 show "Objects/Time/Offerings" at New York's Gordon Robichaux gallery, the artist created a floor-to-ceiling installation of puppets, dolls, masks, ephemera, and collectibles taken from his formidable personal collection. Throughout the exhibition, he hung rows of modestly sized paintings he'd made, some of which featured the very things on display. The show bowled viewers over with the sheer glut of it all, the installation animated by the fine narrative threads Tisa pulled between particular pieces. Repetition and re-presentation prodded the viewer to closer scrutiny and reflection, allowing them to discover the fine neural networks that connect Tisa to the world and to art. His Dream Maps guide us otherwise toward the cosmic, the archetypal. In the intensely beaded *Bacchus*, 1990–2023, a shadowy figure falls—or hovers—head over heels above a sparkling ground. In the *Garden of Eden*, 1989–2023, the artist reimagines the titular paradise as a thicket of eyes above which two snakes balance the forbidden fruit—represented here by a red bead—on the tips of their forked tongues. Another is dotted with brightly colored plastic baubles, round and glossy as gumballs, all stitched across the surface of a funny piece of fabric that depicts two deer standing in a deep snowfall. It's a meditative, peaceful scene that's true to the 2019–23 work's title: *Heaven*.

Dazzlement is a condition that points to the pain of looking, too. A dress dripping in paillettes under a spotlight, each glint a teensy hot poker to the eye: You see the wearer, and you don't—you *can't* with that kind of interference. This is what gives glamour its gravitas and what gives Tisa's Dream Maps their push and pull. In an interview about his cherished friend and mentor Sara Penn (1927–2020)—a paragon of chic and the legendary proprietor of New York's Knobkerry boutique—Tisa recalled not being able to make art from the vintage cloth she gave him. "It was too beautiful and took over my visual space," he explained. Even so, from her he learned that "art could be worn, it could be strong, it could be sewn." Around the silver skull at the center of *Memento Mori*, 2020–23, Tisa appliquéd white flowers, long-lashed eyes, and iridescent teardrops; an earth-toned crown hovers overhead. If life and love are the most precious of all art forms, then even grief merits gratitude and deserves a wild celebration just like this.