

# BROADWAY

## ARTFORUM

### Jessie Henson

Broadway

By Donald Kuspit ☿



Jessie Henson, *Chimera (Protection)*, 2024, 24-karat gold, Beva adhesive, acrylic gouache, polyester thread, and rayon thread on paper, 63 × 41".

Jessie Henson's exquisite abstractions—materially dense and elaborately wrought compositions made from rayon and polyester threads sewn onto large paper fragments, occasionally adumbrated with paint or gold leaf—are chimeric, as *Chimera (Shield)* and *Chimera (Protection)* (all works 2024) make clear. Of course, they are not depictions of the fire-breathing female monster with a lion's head, goat's body, and serpent's tail of Greek mythology, but hallucinations, illusions, even *delusions* of the most spectacular stripe. These heroically scaled *aspides*—both about five by three and a half feet—are covered with twenty-four-karat gold, perhaps suggesting how valuable they are to Henson. Yet they appear fractured, as though these objects are remnants that fell from ancient masterpieces, or vestiges of a once rich and formidable civilization.

*Chimera (Mirror)* is a radiantly liquid thing—like a rippling, gilded vista from paradise, with hints of emerald, blue, and pink. It may allude to Jacques Lacan's theory that a child of roughly six to eighteen months old conceives of himself as a whole entity, an "I," when gazing upon his reflection in a mirror. Henson's "looking glass," however, reflects nothing at all—especially not a sense of her own unified self. It seems to me that the composition has an apotropaic function, as the aforementioned pieces subtitled *Shield* and *Protection* strongly suggest. *Apotropaic* is the Greek word for something "created to thwart evil"—I believe that nonobjective artworks, from Wassily Kandinsky's to Henson's, have such a function: to ward off what the Russian painter called "the whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude,

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which has turned the life of the universe into [a] purposeless game.” Yet abstract art has for some time now felt relatively pointless. Its transcendent aims have been perverted and subverted, made “tasteful,” empty, soulless: Charles Baudelaire would have characterized this change as “positivist” rather than “imaginative.” This depressing shift in *Weltanschauung* and aesthetics is perhaps most tragically epitomized by Donald Judd’s banal boxes.

Henson is attempting to resurrect an emotionally and spiritually resonant form of abstraction—her radiant palette, particularly her heavenly blues, communicate this effect through their wounded, archaic quality. Her exceptional, defensive works show that abstract art has become a broken shadow of itself—a relic to be rescued from oblivion by way of excavating its remains. “I use an industrial sewing machine to draw with thread on paper,” Henson writes on her website. “As thread accrues, tension begins to overwhelm the paper, warping its surface into furrows and waves that result in an undulating, topographical surface”—though I’d describe it as more of an *agitated* surface. “Wild bursts of color penetrate the stillness of the paper. . . . Colors serve as the base of different emotional states of mind,” she says. Her statements make me think of Kandinsky’s remark that “color is a means of exerting a direct influence upon the soul.” “These works are about the complexity of interior worlds,” she goes on to explain. “The thread is so thin and humble, but surprisingly strong when the strands build up together. The accumulation becomes an act of putting on armor, building up strength.” Thus, the two *Chimeras* that I discuss here are indicative of what the artist calls her “striving for cohesion”—that is, integration. It is clearly a never-ending, lifelong project—the pursuit of integrity and authenticity, or, as psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott would have described it, the pursuit of the true self. This search may indeed be a chimera. Henson restores nonobjective painting to a more genuine space through her own radical subjectivity, indicating how fundamental emotional conflict is to the vitality of abstract aesthetics.