

## JESSICA TAM: *Welcome to the Jungle* Oxbow Gallery, Northampton

By David W. Pritchard and A.B. Robinson

Last June we gave a reading at the Oxbow Gallery in Northampton, MA, in conjunction with the showing of Jessica Tam's *Welcome to the Jungle*. This afforded us with the incredible opportunity to spend a lot of time with the massive painting, a site-specific work tailored to the dimensions of the gallery in which it was hung. It stretched all the way around the room, so that no matter where you stood in the gallery, you were quite literally surrounded by Tam's signature figures of wrestling, which is not to say "wrestlers" but not either to exclude wrestlers from consideration. These figures are the building blocks of Tam's work. They come from images of professional wrestlers, though we couldn't tell you which ones, nor do we think that matters in the last analysis. The photographs Tam paints from or with are immaterial to the figures she derives from them, many of which are recognizable as visual tropes of wrestling: the iconic square rings surrounded by ropes, the referees clad in striped shirts, the contorted and bulging bodies and faces of muscular men in the middle of grappling, falling, winning, losing, wrestling. But Tam does not set out to demystify the spectacle of wrestling, to reveal it either as ballet or as the quilting point of a particular ideological domination. Instead, she uses the gestures of wrestling as the basis of an exploration in painting. She sets out to discover what she can do by painting wrestling in a certain way, and what experience, in turn, that affords a viewer.

In the case of *Welcome to the Jungle*, the space of the gallery participates actively in how Tam delineates and executes her painterly investigations. We do not think it is entirely true to say that the work's site-specificity made of the Oxbow a "constraint" on the painter, because Tam worked with the contours of the room her painting stretched around, underscoring that the gallery was not merely a passive receptacle for the displaying of works but rather an active participant in our experience of them. This is a well-worn, perhaps even obvious, thing to say in or about art, but we think that Tam paints it with great ingenuity. She treats the site her work will be displayed in like one of the wrestling figures with which she builds

her works. It is a rule in the game of painting, a plan or a guideline for action rather than a prohibition or a warning. Tam collaborates with space rather than allowing it to constrain her.



Jessica Tam, Detail of *Welcome to the Jungle*, 2015, Site-specific ink paintings, 40 x 960 inches (102 x 2438 cm), Exhibited at Oxbow Gallery, Northampton, Massachusetts (*Welcome to the Jungle*, Jun 4-28, 2015)

In all this, Tam paints with an incredible sense of humor. For instance, at one point in *Welcome to the Jungle*, a pair of small human figures—one wearing a striped shirt and perhaps a hat, bringing to mind a referee of a match—huddle in the foreground, seeming to converse in the shadow of the giant haunches of a wrestler (or wrestlers) in mid-grapple. As our eye moves to the right, the buttocks of the wrestler(s) cascade into the foreground; the tangle of legs grows larger and more complex, becoming simultaneously more prominent and more abstract. More legs seem to enter into the picture, and the two ghoulish figures, one of whom appears to be dressed as a referee and have a skull for a face, vanish entirely. All this comes to an abrupt halt when the painting quickly fades to black as it runs up against a doorway that splits the wall, the way a gutter in a comic strip divides the panels from one another. On the other side of the door, a new grappling scene awaits us, a new configuration of large wrestling bodies. But up until that point, a wrestler's butt organizes the movement of our perception. Whatever else one wants to say of this moment—and there is much to be said—it is extremely funny. And it is so without being ironic.

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This, perhaps, is Tam's greatest achievement: to pursue humor in painting without relying on someone somewhere else to serve as the dupe at whose expense we laugh. This means that what humor we find in these paintings is never primarily ironic, nor is it some sort of satire either of its materials or of the history of painting. Through the repetition of figures composed of mutilated and recombined bodies, themselves twisted and distorted into all kinds of strange and remarkable (and, yes, funny) positions, we see not only the negation of pictorial accuracy but also a Utopian proposition about the future. Tam uses the flexions and contortions of wrestling figures to wonder, in painting, whether or not we might remake the world instead of destroying it. It's a question worth asking, and—in these paintings—worth seeing.