

HYPERALLERGIC

Beer with a Painter: Paul Wackers

Jennifer Samet



Paul Wackers in his studio (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

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Paul Wackers greets me outside his building with his puppy, Buddy. His studio is on the first floor, and he's turned the window corner into a dense indoor garden overflowing with potted plants that hang from crisscrossing wires or rest on makeshift shelves and window ledges. A blue hammock is also strung up in the corner, and it's hard to resist the desire to curl up in the green oasis Wackers has constructed in the middle of industrial Bushwick.

Next to the plant corner is a table where he works on the objects he makes, alongside his painting. There are hand-painted ceramics in various stages of completion, a deconstructed Thonet bentwood chair, and a jumbo crayon box. Wackers has a relaxed and self-effacing manner. "I was the kid with the camera taking pictures of skateboarders and punk shows, so I could be around it but not have to do it," he tells me.

The cozy studio environment and the casual, gonzo aesthetic of the ceramic objects, not to mention Wackers's personality, may bely how technically precise and complexly orchestrated his paintings are. They often play off a grid system— shelving, fences, or window grates — against an abundance of domestic objects, including his own ceramics, alongside fantasy structures and containers, fauna and landscapes, directional symbols, and totally abstract painterly and spray-painted passages.

Wackers was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1978. He received a BFA from Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, DC, and an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. In San Francisco, he shows with Eleanor Harwood Gallery. In Brussels, Wackers exhibits with Alice Gallery, where he has a solo exhibition upcoming in November 2017. A solo exhibition of his work is currently on view at Morgan Lehman Gallery.

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Jennifer Samet: Were you into drawing as a kid? What were some of your early experiences with art?

Paul Wackers: I grew up in Connecticut, and my mother took us to the city to all the galleries in the 1980s and early 1990s, when they were in SoHo. It was big part of my understanding of the world around me when I was young: like the experience of going into a space with weird sheets of metal on the floor, being told it was a Carl Andre, and thinking, "Okay, cool, I can stand on it?"

Art was always around, although I wouldn't say I was overly into drawing as a young child. I did always love art class. But I was the kid who was always poking around in the woods and building tree forts. That was my creative outlet; I was an outside kid, running around in the woods, searching for lost treasure.

I have painted that idea or experience many times: the secret fortress or hidden gem that is found in the woods. As a young kid, I always had the hope that if I go over this hill, I could find the decayed remains of a lost civilization, an altar left behind by a tribe.

My parents are Dutch and they traveled a lot in the 1960s and 1970s, when my mother was a stewardess, and my father was in medical school or on leave; he was a doctor in the army. They went to Mexico, South America, Egypt, and Africa; they were at Machu Picchu the year it opened to the public. They have shards of pottery and decorative objects they collected. All sorts of cultural influences were around, mashed together.

JS: You went to the Corcoran School of the Arts and then the San Francisco Art Institute. What brought you to San Francisco? That school has such an interesting history.

PW: I always loved the idea of California, so for me, that was the draw to the San Francisco Art Institute, rather than a specific teacher. George Kuchar was teaching there and I thought that was amazing, although I didn't study photography or film. I didn't know about the storied past until after I was there, like Jay de Feo's painting, "The Rose" (1958–66) stored behind a wall for decades because it was too big to move. Things like that don't seem to happen here in New York, but they did in San Francisco.

The way I really learned to paint was by meeting a lot of artists who were active in San Francisco at that time. It was 2002, just after the big heyday of the Mission School. I met Chris Johanson and Barry McGee and other graffiti artists. I became active with the people who were making and showing art in the city.

There is a bookstore in San Francisco called Adobe Books, which was the unofficial community center of the art scene. They have shows in the back room and I was in a couple of them. You can go there and interact and get to know people, or just read books.

When I got out of grad school, I was making these sweeping, gray, earthy landscapes — the California drought landscape, with big mountains in the background. There were little structures in the foreground, which alluded to prehistoric huts or maybe some future dystopian houses. Then I started to zoom in more on the structures, and the rooms and objects inside.



Installation view of "Paul Wackers: Early Settlers" (2017), Morgan Lehman, New York

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Paul Wackers, "Scribbles" (2017), crayon, fired ceramic, 8 x 7 x 4 inches

Then it became a way to ask, "Is it possible for that shape to exist in the world? Or is it just made up in the painting?" I started playing with clay to find new shapes that could exist in painting. It was a nice dialogue in the studio.

Then I realized I had enough of objects in the studio, so why not show them in the gallery? I could see what happened in that context, and what that relationship could reveal. Is it an installation or just single objects?

They were not just my own shapes. I love ancient Greek and Roman vases and Mexican pottery. So I was making my own bootleg versions of that stuff for the paintings. They were always very off, like the Beebok versions of Reeboks.

I saw the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Pre-Columbian shrines in 2015. I tried to make my own version of those objects a number of times, and finally got one that worked. That is the tower in "Make Monuments of Peace" (2017).

JS: This body of work looks pretty different from what I had seen last year in San Francisco. How has the work shifted recently?

PW: Everything had felt very tidy before, even though there was a lot of chance involved in the process. With these paintings, I am letting go of control and allowing the process to be looser, technically. I don't do as much masking. There aren't as many painting tricks.

The Corcoran has an amazing collection of American art, and Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Cole, and the tone and air of Hudson River painting were influential. On the East Coast you don't generally have those broad vistas, so I was drawn to that epic American landscape. When I finally got to California, I thought, "Okay, this is real."

JS: Can you talk more about all of the objects in your paintings? Also, you show your own ceramics along with the paintings: How would you describe the relationship between the real objects and the objects inside the paintings?

PW: I was making paintings of ceramics and thought I should learn a little more about them, and so, about five years ago, I took basic hand-building and wheel-throwing classes. I made pots and bowls to use myself, and to give away. Gradually, I started making them more decorative or impossible. I would throw a shape on the wheel and it would inevitably end up in the painting I was working on.

After that happened enough, I started trying out the weirdo abstract moments in the paintings as real objects. I would put the clay in front of me and push it around, to see how far I could go before it looked like it was going to collapse on itself.



Paul Wackers, "Make Monuments of Peace" (2017), oil, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 50 inches

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There are paintings that are more like a return to the landscape. I am trying to let the objects in the paintings get obliterated. I'm allowing the focus to shift and not have every element be shown frontally and perfectly displayed.

I'm also letting the chaos that has been the last nine months in this country come into this work. In November and December 2016, when everything felt completely depressing, I couldn't make bright, pure spaces. Now, some months later, I am trying to hold onto optimism, but it's still cluttered and confused. I think of the more open places in the painting as representing optimism.



Paul Wackers, "Falling Light" (2017), oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 72 x 180 inches

The painting, "Falling Light" (2015) was about cataloguing and taking stock of what we have right now. I think of the middle section as being a battle. It is all very abstracted, but I was working through the turmoil.

JS: Each painting seems to include a whole host of different painterly approaches, including spray-painted passages and different kinds of mark-making. What is that about for you? Is it a record of certain parts of art history or painters that influence you?

PW: I think there is a whole history of painting, and I can use every bit. The different voices and languages can live on the same plane. One part wants to be Impressionistic, one part wants to be hard-edged Minimalism, one wants to be trompe-l'oeil, and another is going to just be cartoony and flat. That diversity, put together, is infinitely interesting.

I like the idea of making spray paint as un-spray-paint-like as it can. I don't want it to be like street art or graffiti. I am trying to turn the spray paint passages into a magical, voluminous thing.

Also, the paintings themselves become like indexes of the things that I might paint, have painted, or want to make. I get to pick and choose my inventory for the next painting. I am asking what scenario they might become part of. It's like in baseball — I have my bench, and there is the playing field. I get to pull out my players and see what they do.

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There are homages to all of my influences in the work. Matisse is all over these paintings: certain shapes come out of the ovals in “Blue Nude” (1905). There are passages of smeared color that have to do with Francis Bacon. I think of medieval altarpiece paintings by Breughel, with figures in the front, the landscape in the back, and through every opening, a little village or scene. In my own work I want that feeling that every little opening leads you to another world, to other things to investigate.

Isamu Noguchi is someone who I was really into. I like how Aaron Curry does his versions of those kinds of forms Noguchi made in marble, but Curry makes in resin, fiberglass, and cardboard. I like to think of taking elements from some of my painter heroes, but ham-fisting the paint application — and retaining the love.

JS: Can you talk more about the metal window grilles that are in these paintings, and your interest in the grid?



Paul Wackers, “Personal Best” (2017), oil, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 40 inches

PW: Some of the paintings are very much about the grid — breaking through it and reacting to it. I realized that while staring out my windows, that is exactly what I am doing, looking at that grid. But I don’t think I had seen the window grate as a thing in itself; it was just what I was looking through.

In my neighborhood in Brooklyn, there are so many different kinds of window gratings. It becomes a simple intervention in the paintings that can suggest a lot of different moods, which the paintings were already pointing to. Some are more hard-edge, some are more ornate. They can set the place and mood: a cool, airy background, dappled light in the dark forest, a medieval castle gate. They can be harsh and abrupt, or whimsical.

JS: It sounds almost filmic. Is film an influence for you?

PW: I worked in video stores, in both Washington, DC, and San Francisco, for twelve years. So I spent a lot of time watching all kind of movies. I had a purely situational knowledge about film, though. When I was at work I could tell you who directed every movie. The minute I left, I had no idea.

But yes, compositionally, film has been very influential. The landscapes are influenced by the way you would compose an image in film. If I have a branch poking into the scene, which disrupts the edge, that feels like a film thing to do.

JS: Do you think of the work as being about the domestic, and do you relate to any painters of domesticity?

PW: Yes, there are human-scaled things in the paintings. They could be fantastic, but they are still shown in a humble way. So in that sense, they are definitely domestic paintings.

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Jonas Wood is a contemporary I look at. He paints ceramics and plants. He paints his life. I paint my life. I remember seeing one of Maureen Gallace's painting in 2003. It was so simple — a house in a field. But it was also like the most amazing thing I've seen. I like how something so ordinary can be profound if you deal with it in the right way.

Matisse's interiors represent such a personal space. You are seeing what he is seeing, when he is looking out his doorway in Tangiers. There might not be a person, but there is always a suggestion of human intervention.

I like that when you look at the paintings you might ask, "Who would have that stuff? What does it mean?" I like that mystery. There is never a person in the picture, but if you are the one looking, that person might be you, or you might ask, "Who is it?"

I did paint figures in the past, but I realized I don't want to talk about myself that much. A lot of the elements are universal, and if you leave it open, people can inject themselves into it. I like how people read the paintings and see things in them that are wildly different from anything I anticipated. I don't ever think they are wrong.

There is a personal relationship that I have with a lot of these objects, but I don't know how important it is for people to know that. Once you put a person into a painting — that becomes the subject. With a figure, you are really directing the drama. I don't want to do that. I like to set the stage.