

GAGOSIAN GALLERY
HYPERALLERGIC

Beer with a Painter, LA Edition: Jonas Wood

Jennifer Samet



Jonas Wood, "Studio Exterior" (2014), oil and acrylic on Canvas, 112 x 114 inches (all images courtesy the artist, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; Anton Kern Gallery, New York; David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles; and Gagosian Gallery)

“Go ahead; you can write whatever you want about me,” Jonas Wood says. “Everyone knows I’m a stoner,” he adds, since beer has been mostly displaced by California’s drug of choice during my Los Angeles series of interviews. It becomes clear that what’s precious to Wood — more than words — are images. He checks what I am photographing, and asks me not to post shots of work in progress, or of his source images, hung copiously along one studio wall. He even takes my phone and starts flipping through the camera roll, while I try not to panic about anything sensitive in there. “Henry Taylor painted you? Let’s see it. He is the shit,” Wood says, in a tone both admiring and edged with friendly competitiveness.

We make ourselves comfortable on a sofa in his Culver City studio. Wood is recovering from shoulder surgery, and hooked up to a high-tech icing machine. The studio is in full operation: with assistants working on under-painting, setting us up with lunch, and doing administrative business. His wife, Shio Kusaka, greets me from her potter’s wheel in an adjacent studio, surrounded by her own posse. Basketball-themed objects are everywhere: throw pillows, mini garbage cans, and rolling chairs. At one point I ask about Jeff Koons and Wood reminds me, “Koons doesn’t own basketball. And people think I made this stuff. But I just bought it at Staples.”

Wood speaks, moves, and runs his studio like an athlete, with restlessness and rigor, his eyes trained on cultivating only what's useful. His paintings have that packed energy — the layering of pattern; the dynamic, odd interiors — and yet a balanced ecology of compositional geometry. He uses his own photography and appropriated images, sometimes manipulated, to make his paintings. His subjects include sports-related scenes, domestic interiors, and paintings of vessels and vases.

Wood was born in 1977 in Boston, Massachusetts, and received his BA from Hobart and William Smith Colleges and his MFA from the University of Washington, Seattle. He has exhibited with David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles (2012 and 2014), Shane Campbell Gallery (2007, 2009, and 2013) and Anton Kern Gallery, New York (2007, 2011, and 2013). He was also the subject of a solo exhibition at the Hammer Museum at UCLA in 2010. In 2015, he and Shio Kusaka were the subjects of two-person exhibitions at Karma Books, New York, and Gagosian Gallery, Hong Kong. A solo exhibition of Wood's work will open at Gagosian Gallery, London, on October 13, 2015.

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Jennifer Samet: *How did you first start making art? Was art part of your childhood?*

Jonas Wood: I grew up in the woods outside of Boston. As a child I thought that I was going to be a doctor, not an artist. But I was also encouraged to draw and paint from a young age. My parents met at graduate school in Yale in the 1970s; my father was studying architecture and my mother was studying drama.

My grandfather collected art, so there was a lot of art around me. The painting I remember especially is Francis Bacon's "George Dyer Talking" (1966). When I think about it, I remember exactly where it was hanging in his house. In graduate school, which is where I really began studying art, I realized how amazing it was that I grew up with a seminal piece by one of the most important figurative painters.

My grandfather bought it the year it was made. He sold it in 1980, and basically gave the money to his grandchildren, encouraging us to get as much education as we wanted, which obviously was a huge blessing. He was a doctor, but he also painted later in life, from age 60 to 90.



Jonas Wood, "Guest Room" (2007), oil on canvas, 96 x 120 inches

JS: *You studied psychology in college, as well as visual art. Can you tell me about that?*

JW: Yes, I went to Hobart and William Smith Colleges. I finished my psychology requirements by junior year, and spent the first semester of my senior year abroad for a research program. I decided that when I returned, I wanted to spend the rest of my time just learning how to paint. I set up my first personal studio in the basement of an off-campus apartment building, where people were storing their bicycles. I asked a professor, Nick Ruth, to do an independent study with me.

After college I had a job working in a Harvard brain imaging research lab outside of Boston. At the same time, I set up a little studio at my friend's horse barn. I made twenty paintings — enough to apply to grad school. I was accepted into the University of Washington, Seattle, where Denzel Hurley teaches. Nick Ruth had studied with him, so that was the connection, and why I was accepted.

Ruth's advice was to learn how to draw, and to be in my studio 40-60 hours a week. I lived in a sketchy motel-like apartment, kind of like the building in *Karate Kid*, except the pool had been filled in. My strategy was that I was going to teach myself through a massive amount of trying out stuff. I have an underdog mentality and I am competitive. I had just dabbled in art at a liberal arts college. I knew I wasn't that good, and wanted to get better, so I made tons of work.

Then I had an accident and couldn't use my right hand. I freaked out for a minute, thinking I would have to suspend school. But I realized there wasn't any pot at the end of the rainbow after graduate school, so I just kept going; I made left-handed paintings. It didn't matter what I was making — twisted, crazy figurative paintings. I had not yet hooked into my true interests, but what I was doing was about the practice of putting things together.

Hurley, and a few other University of Washington professors, had studied at Yale in the 1980s. They had a strict philosophy about modern painting. They emphasized that drawing is the fundamental root of painting. They taught out of all the modern painters after Manet: Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Bonnard, and Vuillard. For me, it was perfect, because those were my heroes growing up. I love David Hockney and Alex Katz, who are looking at modern painting and riffing on that. I'm looking at what they are looking at, but I also get to look at them.

Hurley had us read Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (1990). It is a difficult book, which references tons of philosophers and thinkers who you then have to look up. It was great, because the true idea of painting, the thing that makes painting sustainable, is to push yourself, constantly evolve, and move through the practice. People think painting is about an image that can be repeated and sold, as opposed to a long-term practice. You need a lot of tools and ideas to draw from, when you end up in a studio alone.

JS: *After school you moved to Los Angeles. What were your early years in Los Angeles like?*

JW: Moving to Los Angeles and getting a job with a world-class artist, Laura Owens, was the second-most lucky thing that happened to me. It was like grad school, part two. The great thing about working with Laura is that she doesn't paint just one thing. She paints her life; she paints whatever she wants. Her example gave me a kind of freedom. Often, as a young painter, you want to find that one thing that defines you.

JS: *What is the story behind the Black Dragon Society, where you had your first solo exhibition in 2006?*

JW: It was a gallery in Chinatown started by UCLA professor Roger Herman, along with Hubert Schmalix and Chris Sievernich. It was started to show student art, and they made exhibitions of artists like Ry Rocklen and Nick Lowe. It became very popular, and was known for figurative painting. It was a young gallery with heat, and I wanted to show there.

I showed portraits of my friends, my family, a small landscape painting, and a couple of still lifes. I designed a poster based on one of the first sports images I appropriated — a drawing of a basketball player from my hometown.

JS: *You have said sports images are not so much about sports as they are vehicles for portraiture. Tell me about that idea.*

JW: I had made sports images, but I realized that I could appropriate images, like sports cards, which I had collected in high school. I realized they were perfect for my work. The colors are interesting, and they are designed in a flat, Pop way, with text.

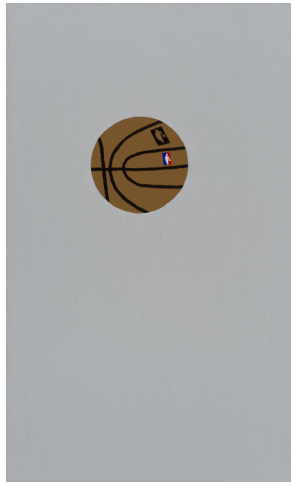
They also are portraits, which I can romanticize, because I love sports. But I don't depict only those athletes who have meaning for me. Sometimes it is about the images being interesting, or that I like the color of the card, and sometimes it is about loving the athlete. I don't think it should matter, one way or the other.

JS: *You talk about the flat or graphic quality that interests you in the cards, but your paintings often also have a lot of layers, and space is made in that way, don't you think?*

JW: My forms are not rendered spatially. My paintings of tennis courts were about an interest in abstraction, and how the court becomes a geometric puzzle. There also is text, because of the advertising. My work is under-painted with big flat shapes of color; that is how they start. They are generated from an abundance of flat planes built up on top of each other.

JS: *You paint both complex, layered interiors, but also singular images, like basketballs, plants, and vessels. How do these two modes of working relate to one another?*

JW: The floating basketball, which became an image in my work, evolved out of looking at photographs that show the ball floating in the air. I started cutting the balls out and painting the floating balls, without any sports figures. You only need a couple colors and a couple shapes to make something work. Sometimes I push the boundaries of that.



Jonas Wood, "Floating Brown Ball" (2014), oil and acrylic on canvas, 50 x 30 inches

It is about how you set up a challenge. Sometimes you only need a couple things to challenge yourself, and other times you need one hundred. I like to have a lot of things going on in the studio the same time — different images and sizes. They are built up at different rates. I like to have options, to not feel there is only one thing I can do. Usually I have one or two big paintings going, and I offset that by working on smaller things — drawings and prints.

I like to have something started as I'm almost finished with something else. Finishing a piece is fulfilling, but it can also feel hollow and empty. You might think you are awful when you finish it. Then, a couple of weeks later, maybe you think it's not so bad.

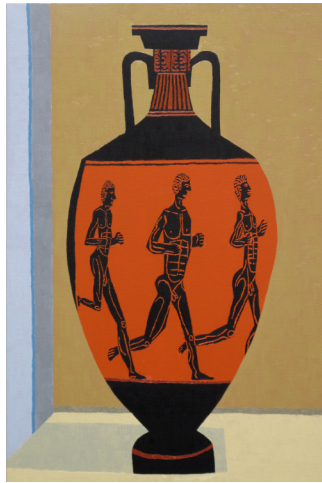
JS: *Do you think that your process — having a multiplicity of things going on simultaneously — is related to your subject matter? The interiors often include images of art, your own and others. You repeat and shift some of these motifs in different paintings.*

JW: Artists set up their studio practice to benefit themselves, in terms of what is going to positively push them. For me, having a lot of different stuff around works. I pick environments that have things in them. I have a wife who is an artist, we love art, and I'm super into collecting art. I'm making paintings of rooms and I borrow things from myself. Repeating elements appear in different paintings, and change shape.

I love living with really good art. I just got a Chris Johanson drawing from 2001 — a seminal San Francisco drawing. We have this awesome Robert Heinecken television photograph. There is a great piece by Calvin Marcus in my studio. I like the electro-magnetic vibe that comes from great art; it gives me energy and makes me excited about making stuff.

JS: *Vessels and vases are a motif in your work. You did a series of drawings based on Greek vases at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Can you tell me about that work? You also collect contemporary ceramics. Who is featured in your collection?*

JW: When I met my wife, Shio Kusaka, who is a ceramicist, I started looking at vessels. I became interested in the Greek pots. Like basketball cards, they have a shape and a form, and they have images that are very flat, graphic, and simple. Basically, there are cartoons on the sides of the pots that tell stories, often, athletic-related stories.



Jonas Wood, "Naked Runners 2" (2011), oil and acrylic on linen, 36 x 24 inches

We have Ruby Neri ceramics, Ry Rocklen porcelain pieces, Akio Takamori's cast ceramics, and Patrick Jackson's giant coffee cups. The work of Magdalena and Michael Frimkess is very highly ranked in our collection. They are awesome. The work has these amazing qualities: the imagery, the shapes of the vessels, and the appropriation of Pop and art historical references. It is all in our wheelhouse of interest. Shio feels a special connection to them, and many other people do too. I've made paintings of their pots.

Ricky Swallow curated a show of the Frimkesses for David Kordansky Gallery. Ricky and Lesley Vance are friends with some of the coolest underground ceramicists and artists in Los Angeles; they keep bringing these people to life. And there is a huge history of ceramics in Los Angeles – artists like Ken Price, Peter Voulkos, and John Mason.

JS: *Writers on your work have described your interiors as being uninhabited. Do you agree with that characterization?*

JW: I think people want me to have some sophisticated answer about why I am painting an empty interior, but it's not like that. Sometimes there are figures in them, and other times I am just interested in them as places. But they always have significance for me.

For instance, the painting "Children's Garden" (2015) is based on an old photograph of a daycare center that my parents started. It was a room I spent time in as a child. So technically, it was inhabited. It has signifiers that I like, but there are also patterns, and colors, and weird shapes. It is mysterious and chaotic. I realized it would make a rad painting. The photograph becomes a crazy vehicle — the beginning point.



Jonas Wood, "Children's Garden" (2015), oil and acrylic on canvas, 93 x 93 inches

The paintings are based on images that I have had around for a while. Then I decide, "I choose you." That is based on two things – the shapes and forms, and the loaded choice of imagery that is going to carry everything else. They are images that I realize, after a long time of looking and thinking about them, resonate with me. They might remind me of something, bring me back to some place.

It doesn't matter if anybody else is into these places. I have had a deep emotional connection to most of the places I select to paint. That is going to come across. There is a personal nostalgia I can feed off. Everyone wants to go back to his or her youth in some way, be naïve, and be a kid again. I know there are powerful emotions, and I use that as fuel.

Lots of things happen in a kid's bedroom or different parts of a house. I grew up with art in beautiful rooms, and I am revisiting them, reimagining them, and moving them around. I had a conflicted childhood, so there is energy within the existence of each room. I pick things that stimulate me, whether they come from a positive place or a negative place. I use it in a therapeutic way, partly. I am reanimating those experiences in a beautiful way, working through both the painting issues and the stimulus.