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Recalled in Human Memory: Q&A with Eric Uhlir

Eric Uhlir is a painter and photographer who grew up in the sunny melting pot of 1980s Southern California. He earned his BFA in Studio Art from the University of Texas in Austin in 2003. He currently lives and works in Washington, DC with his wife Phoebe and their dog, Violet.

Recalled in Human Memory was on view at Hillyer on May 3 – 26, 2019.

Can you elaborate on the “cultural surface tensions that [allow] us to relate to each other” that inform and inspire your work?

When I talk about cultural surface tension I’m referring to the shared layer of understanding that permeates any given moment as a society. So topics like human migration and the environment are concepts that are pretty broadly understood. Whether people agree or disagree on the core of those issues is something different, the work’s intention is to make a connection between the viewer, the cultural moment and the history of humanity and art that we seem unable to fully process and learn from as a society. In layman’s terms, we keep making work about



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speaking for everyone, but I do think there's a lot everyone can do in our society to engage with our own history and with the stories that others have to share and look at those things in a critical way.

You mention how you draw much of your inspiration from biographical or historical influences. What are some of these specific influences that have informed your work and particularly this exhibition?

A lot of this work is directly inspired by the big history painters like Delacroix, Géricault and all the way back to Michelangelo and Leonardo's dueling commissions for the "Battle of Cascina" and the "Battle of Anghiari". The palette is very much rooted in a west coast sensibility gained from my childhood in Los Angeles. I hope what comes across is an energy and a vibrancy that you also see in the shift Diebenkorn made in his Ocean Park series, when he moved to Santa Monica.

My biggest source of truth had to be Cecily Brown and Joan Mitchell, though. When I saw Brown's "Girl on a Swing" at the re-opened East Wing a few years ago, it was like I was struck by a bolt of lightning and suddenly understood a strategy for making a big shift from figurative to something more abstract. I've always looked at the work of Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler as my ideal of painting, but it was Brown who provided the key. I also took a lot of inspiration and energy from the recent Kerry James Marshall exhibitions. There's a palette and a grasp of mythology and symbolism of which I think has a unique command.

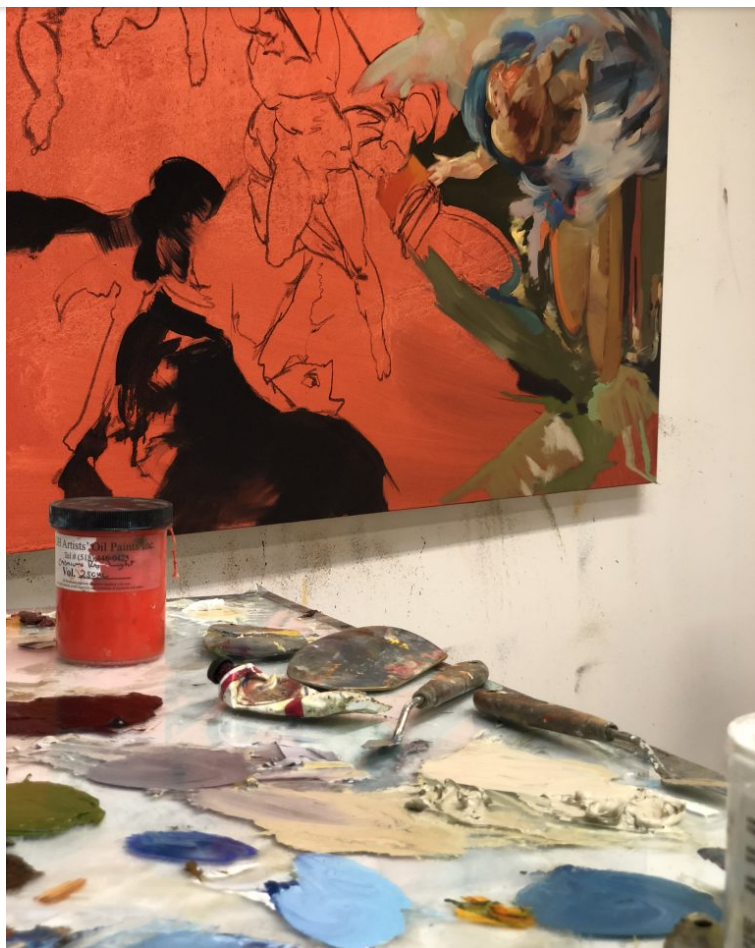


What are some things you want viewers to take away from your work?

First and foremost, I want the viewer to take pleasure in the act of just looking. The work is intended to reward your investment of time and attention and to be digestible up close and from across a room.

Second, I want the viewer to develop their own narrative, since the references aren't any secret, I hope people invest in the ideas and mythologies I'm creating; Southern California as a problematic garden of Eden in "Indio", the tiger of "Trophic Cascade" an emblem of humanity threatening our own well being by our inability to understand and curtail the destruction of our own environment, the shipwreck of "The Crossing" a story of the risks people take to escape their circumstances because of social conflict, and "Tartarus" about our history of creating mythological places of punishment that are both a part of our existence but set apart to an extent.

We tell ourselves stories about the lessons we're supposed to learn from our own misdeeds but are endlessly destined to repeat them. It's not to say the work is all doom and gloom, the colors and energy are meant to convey that these are all ideas we can, and still are, engaging with in a real dialogue. I want the viewer to put down their phone and think about that conversation, spend some time with the marks and the energy of the



You talk about how you have had a recent shift in your work where there is “increasing abstraction is deeply influenced by artists across history.” What influenced this kind of shift and how has your work changed?

Like I said, this was largely influenced by Cecily Brown, who I had never had the opportunity to experience in person and see how she builds layers through additive and reductive mark making. My lifelong love of artists like Frankenthaler and Mitchell has been important, but also painters like Wayne Thiebaud, Richard Diebenkorn, and obvious the classics of the Italian Renaissance. J.M.W. Turner was a huge influence for me, as well as more esoteric artists like Louise Bourgeois and Jenny Saville. The new Tintoretto show at the National Gallery was also a revelation and I’m already spinning on ideas from how he constructed narratives in his compositions.

Now that I’m pushing 40, I also look at Amy Sherald and Barnett Newman as personal heroes for persevering and making their mark in their 40’s.



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sheer discipline and courage it takes to keep making the work. It helps I have an endlessly supportive partner and group of friends who give me the love and support to keep it going.

You discuss how much of your work is influenced by artists across history. Who are some of these artists and how have they shaped the work in your career?

Growing up in LA my mom used to organize trips to for my twin brother Raymond, also an artist, and our gaggle of friends. I think the main takeaway for me of a lifetime of looking at art and growing up with an art major mom, was that art is something full of both virtuosity and unfinished ideas. This can be hard for people to grasp when you first start painting. You have ideas, influences and motivation but aren't quite sure how all that fits together. In some ways the forced break in my practice from struggling to find studio space in DC actually helped me mature and understand my relationship with both my practice and art history. It gave me distance and perspective to make a shift in my process and strategy as a painter.

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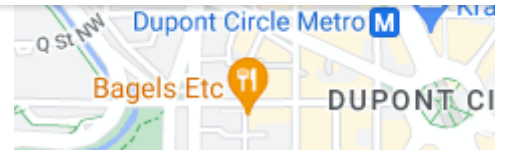
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