

On Painting Something that's Always Changing
For the New York Studio School's Fall Lecture Series

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October 21st, 2025

Thank you for having me, it's an honor to be here.

I'm going to talk about a few different things, including painting something that's always changing. But I should probably start with a general description of the way I work, so you have a sense of where I'm coming from.

Almost all of my paintings are made in a single session, and they're all made from life-- although maybe I should clarify that for me "life" includes memory and language, because those things can shape how I see, I can't get away from them. And I don't usually start a painting with a goal in mind other than to see where it goes. Mainly because if I already know what a painting will be, it's unlikely I'll be interested in making it. Also, most planning-oriented ideas are language-based, and if I am going to make an image to act as a kind of statement, I don't assume painting is the best way to make that statement. I mean, very few ideas that occur to a person as words are also worthwhile directions in painting. So I make a lot of things, I am constantly making things, and I follow my gut on what directions to go in.

So there is the act of making the painting. That is the primary act. And then there is a secondary layer, which is deciding which paintings get

scraped off or painted over. I'm not sure I can explain this process, since there really isn't one. I can be pretty impulsive and sometimes I'll scrape a painting immediately, just out of frustration, and sometimes I regret it. And then there is a third kind of engagement I have with these objects, which is spending time in the studio without a brush in my hand, considering the group of paintings together. This is an exciting part, because I start to be able to see what I've been up to in a new way, to peer in at myself and get a sense of what's been on my mind.

But it's really not until I start putting paintings together, like for a show, that my work starts to feel social, that I start to consider how they might be read. A painting is not its image, but of course they also operate that way, they appear through the eye. They can function as little meaning cards, or hieroglyphs or something, which I can use to make pairs and groups which have their own kind of significance, on top of whatever weight or meaning each painting might have on its own.

I started painting a burning candle in November 2023 because I couldn't stand to do anything else.

Like most people, I've been horrified by a lot of things lately, especially the bombing and starvation of children and civilian families. How do we go about our everyday lives, knowing this is happening? I think about Aaron Bushnell, the airman who set himself on fire. He might have had a similar question.

So I'm going into the studio, and I have the luxury of working but I'm stuck in a kind of daze, I'm just casting about with what to do with myself. In a kind of psychic paralysis. (Maybe this is something you've experienced too? Where you desperately want to work but everything feels wrong?) And then finally I realized there was something that didn't feel disconnected and terrible. But it didn't happen on purpose, I kind of stumbled into it by accident. Sitting with a candle burning was one of the few things that didn't feel inappropriate. It felt like sitting vigil. I mean these aren't paintings that are trying to tell anybody anything. That's not why I made them.

Since this is a talk for a painting school, I also want to say— it took me a long time to realize it's not usually productive for me to strong-arm my work into doing everything (or anything) I might want it to do or say. But it turns out my paintings get encoded with what I care about anyway. It seems kind of unavoidable.



The candle paintings are all made from life, and they're all single-session. I am facing a burning candle, and I have a pretty straightforward goal. I am trying to paint what I see. More specifically, I am trying to paint what I see in the moment. Painting sessions usually last somewhere between four and ten hours, and the candle is changing all the time— the wick, the flame, and the wax— so painting what I see in the moment, in this context, means constantly going over the same ~ 4 x 6 inch area of the composition. The painting of the candle mirrors the actual candle as it burns. Once the candle is lit, painting feels kind of like running after a train leaving the station. It's simultaneously calm— because I know I can't catch it— and totally chaotic— because I am really trying. Almost all

of my work gets buried in the end. If a painting session is 6 hours, the surface of the painting might only show the last 40 minutes— when the candle was in its hottest, most liquid state.



A burning candle isn't the only object matter that moves. Cut flowers move a lot, too. If it's warm in the studio, they don't stop opening until they're completely dead. I bought a bouquet of white roses at a bodega on a 19 degree day— roses that had been in a bucket outside— and when I brought them in to my studio, which was super warm because it's about 50 square feet and half-filled by an enormous old radiator, they basically exploded. Even with a more static still life, there is always change. The light, for example. Or me— sometimes I move a little by accident, or my mood will shift and I'll see something else.



Painting from life has been especially important for me lately because of the way it both affects and shows me the nature of my own presence of mind, because of the way it affects my attention. And that might be the most valuable thing I have. It's been a while now that one of the biggest, most high-tech industries is ad placement— and one of its most fundamental goals is to hold onto you for as long as possible, to show you as many ads as possible. There's all different kinds of costs to this. One is, these ad systems end up promoting a specific kind of sensational, viral content. And now, it's not just about what gets put at the top of your feed, because these incentives are also affecting what kinds of things get published, and what people post. The floor is tilted, and everything is starting to fall out of the house, out through the windows and the door, hanging open on its side.

But there is also a deeply personal cost to getting sucked into these algorithmic holes, which may be even more tragic. And that is the loss of your attention, in hours and also in other ways that are harder to quantify. It does something to your mind.

And the thing is, your attention, and the quality of your attention, is really closely tied to the quality of your life. I mean, your perception of your life is your life. Outside of direct physical stimuli, that's all we have. It shapes our ability to take in new information and act with kindness and purpose. It shapes our relationships. It shapes our sense of our own lives. So if the nature of my attention degrades, if I lose the capacity to be fully present, if I lose the stamina I need to focus—those aren't superficial losses. That is a direct degradation of my life. Painting from observation, the way I've been working, has felt like a kind of antidote, a kind of protective struggle, swimming upstream, against the current. Also, reading has helped me a lot. Just the act of reading a book and finishing it. And I was unable to do that for a while. I was addicted. I'm not talking about this stuff from any kind of distance. It happened to me too. And sometimes I fall back in.



The way my presence of mind changes with painting, and how my attention changes—I don't really know how to describe it. But I remember hearing the eighth grade concert band perform when I was a kid, maybe 8 years old, and having a kind of transcendent experience of all the parts played together, it was so beautiful, kind of blossoming with harmonies and rhythm and conversation between the different sections. I think a lot of people have this kind of experience with music, especially live music.

And with painting, really it's a very similar kind of attention, seeing without narrowing your focus, without singling out one part, just listening and being alive to the sound. But that's just the beginning, because of course painting is incredibly active, it's not only about openness and receiving. A painting is built. If I go on with the music metaphor, someone who is painting from observation is like a musician working to embody an entire orchestra, alone. It's a kind of romantic fool's errand. But the painter does have the advantage of being able to layer time on top of time, in a kind of vertical record where every part plays together, all at once. Instead of thirds and fifths, instead of harmony

and dissonance between musical notes, there are relationships between colors. But this is sort of a dry explanation. The hard part, which for me is the heart of it, is to hold onto the feeling of the orchestra, to see in this other, fuller way, and to feel how each mark relates to the whole in my mind's eye. This gets harder the more the painting develops, because once a picture starts to exist, it can become kind of persuasive, just because it's there. My goal is to stay unattached as I'm working, to keep seeing rather than focusing on the painting object and how I might resolve it from some kind of indifferent, formal position.



Painting from life is a way to encounter the world and myself in it. It's a kind of auto-sensing thing, a process that can show me how I see. It's a phenomenological project. And I think it's easier to explain this part if I'm talking about portraiture, so I'll switch to that for a minute.

I don't know if you have this experience, but for me, it's way harder to make a painting of someone I'm close to. I draw people on the subway all the time, but when I try to draw or paint someone I'm entangled with, or someone I love, it's really a struggle to get the painting to feel like them. This is a real thing that happens with me, and I find it a very interesting problem, a kind of quintessential painting problem. And I think it's related to the phenomenon where someone you love will appear increasingly good looking as you get to know them, while a handsome jerk will only look uglier and more twisted. It's a kind of psychological sight, it's not only about rods and cones. And when you go to describe it, I mean visually describe it, there can be a real dissonance with your regular vision. And the two things kind of wrestle each other as you work. It's something that might not come up until you try to make the painting. I mean, you might not even realize how you see your model until you try to paint them. And the process might drive you nuts. But once in a while you'll get it to feel right, and this painting will be a strange, almost otherworldly object. Because you will have made a tangible thing that belongs equally to your inner

life and the shared, physical world. A painting like this is a bridge between realities, a kind of psychological object.

Once the painting exists, you (the painter) can have another understanding, another layer of relationship or awareness. I always think, painting is a thing you can do if you want to have a deeper experience of your experience.

Sometimes when people say something is subjective, what they mean is “there’s no single right answer.” But in painting from life, if the painter doesn’t give up, if they are really intent and insistent on describing what they see—I mean what it looks like and what it feels like to them—to me it seems kind of the opposite would be true: that there is single painting they can make in that moment, given who and where they are, and the materials they have on hand. There’s only one honest painting. (But maybe that’s not true. Let’s say it’s half of a dialectic and I’ll sleep on it. Or you sleep on it and email me.)



Looking at other people’s paintings is like taking a walk in the early evening when people start to turn their lights on and you can see right into their apartments. Because every painting has this aspect of being a record of how it was made, which is very intimate. People have all kinds of reasons for making paintings and most of them are fascinating to me. (Maybe partly for the same reason I like to read the craigslist “free” section.) And of course a painting made from life has the added layer of immediacy, of presence, of the encounter, the seeing and feeling something in a particular way. That’s what it’s made of. To mistake a painting for its image would be to disregard a fundamental aspect of its nature-- how it came to exist, by what process, and why.



I have this idea of the painter as a kind of deep sea diver, submerging themselves for extended periods of time, on an exploratory mission.

(as opposed to a disembodied eye, or hand)

(as opposed to someone who already has an answer, who is explaining something)



The thing I want to leave you with is from Notes from the Woodshed, Jack Whitten’s book, the part where he talks about making his work during the Cuban missile crisis. I forget exactly how he says it but the gist is— if it ever mattered to you, if your work ever mattered to you, certainly it matters now. The work to be present and aware of your life, to make meaning, whatever you do to make meaning, to be there for the people around you. Despite crisis, or because of it, if it ever mattered, it matters now. Which is not to say other things should not also be done. There is a lot of important work to do, especially in this city.

Paintings from the Orange Room
390 Broadway, 2nd Floor
October 31 – December 20, 2025

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