

CULTURE

Nicole Wittenberg's Colorful Paintings Transcend Realism

In the studio with the artist channeling Monet and Cezanne on acid.

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Wittenberg wears her own clothing throughout.

In the heart of Manhattan's Chinatown, the artist Nicole Wittenberg's sixth-floor studio is flushed with late September afternoon light. Bleach-white walls and floorboards are the perfect backdrop for an explosion of fauvist-colored canvases depicting the natural world, from the Mediterranean to the painter's beloved ragged Maine coastline. A large orange and turquoise patterned hammock separates the corner where Wittenberg stands at an easel. Prince's *Piano & A Microphone 1983* plays, and I detect the faint chirps of a bird somewhere in the background.

Like her paintings, the studio has a vibe that's at once soothing, sensuous, and electrifying. Known for her twisting landscapes and streaked horizons, the 46-year-old artist creates hot, sensory overloads of tangerine sunsets, strawberry-hued forests, and giant fuchsia roses that transcend realism—think Monet or Cezanne taking a hit of acid. Indeed, her scenes are meant to capture an impression or a sensation, the memory of a specific plein

air snapshot extruded through time. They render an internal vista rather than a physical one. “The color I choose doesn’t reflect what I see, but what I feel,” says Wittenberg, who is wearing a paint-spattered white pants-button down ensemble and bright red, high-heel clogs. “If something feels quite intense and shady, I will probably use red because blood-red feels like black or darkness to me. I might pick four different shades of pink to create the feeling of light.”



Nicole Wittenberg, *Morning Light 5*, 2023

This week, Wittenberg opens her first large-scale solo show in New York, her home of nearly 25 years, where she’s taught painting and critical theory at the New York Studio School, Bruce High Quality Foundation University, and the School of Visual Arts. On view at Acquavella Galleries from October 16 to December 5, *Nicole Wittenberg: All the Way* features 13 new works drawn from her recent exhibitions at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art and the Ogunquit Museum of Art, as well as never-before-seen pieces from her studio.



Acquavella is also including five of Wittenberg's *Gardens of Courances* paintings, which were part of a Christian Dior commission. At the end of the month, the French fashion house will debut its first U.S. dining experience, Monsieur Dior by chef Dominique Crenn on

Rodeo Drive, which will showcase a massive, site-specific painting by Wittenberg that was based on her travels to the Courances chateau in the Gaitanis region outside Paris. Wittenberg describes her process of working on the seriality of an image “as kind of an addiction. I never know how many works I am going to make, but it’s part of an obsessive part of myself. I see something and I can’t get enough of it. I want to see it in as many ways as I can until I tire of it.”



Nicole Wittenberg, *Woods Walker 7*, 2023-2024

Wittenberg prototypes in pastel, creating small studies and diary-like entries for what she later paints in the studio. “My pastel drawings serve as a record of a moment in time, as a place that I can return to over and over to recall that exact moment, so that intensity will find its way into the painting,” she says. Her oeuvre brings to mind the philosophical idea called the Ship of Theseus paradox: it’s impossible to exist at two different points in time without something changing. In this way, Wittenberg’s pastels-to-painting practice reflects subtle, private shifts.



“The pastel flower drawings that I made for the *Climbing Roses* and *August Evening* series during the summer of 2024 were very open and round and soft,” she says. “They were energetic, but they had a gentle relationship to space.” But upon returning to Chinatown

from Maine to paint them, the presidential election in full tilt, she absorbed the highly charged energy that transformed the city around her. Wittenberg's studio affords a view of 1 Police Plaza and New York's courthouses, and she recalls how "the space and the paintings started to compress." The floral tableaus became more aggressive.



Growing up in California's Bay Area, some of the earliest memories the artist has of herself, at three or four, are of drawing flowers outside. "So not much has changed," she says, laughing. At 12, Wittenberg was diagnosed with scoliosis; debilitating back surgeries followed, and she was bedridden for long stretches. "It was isolating but it was also a gift because it gave me a huge amount of time to read and be alone."



Nicole Wittenberg, *Gardens of Courances 10*, 2025

Her breakout moment came in 2012, at a show at the Lower East Side Freight and Volume gallery with paintings of bedroom interiors and monochrome Skype portraits, based on images of long-distance conversations with friends. But she leveled up in the art world with her pornography paintings. Mining the Internet, she paused videos repeatedly to block the perfect image to paint. “I discovered the amateur tag on Pornhub,” she explains. “I realized that these were just videos uploaded by people to the site because they wanted to. I’ve always been attracted to the things that we do just because we want to. I don’t really see myself as having a job. I have never seen art as work.”



For her landscapes, Wittenberg travels to far-flung destinations like Thailand and Greece, but Maine occupies a sacred place for her. She now has a second studio there, and frequently leaves the city to make art. A tiny blue parrotlet travels between studios with her—eleven-year-old Roy, who can no longer fly after a stroke. He often rests on Wittenberg's shoulder, a spiritual presence that informs her brush strokes.



“The symbology of birds in art is a manifestation of the divine in Western paintings,” she tells me. “Roy has some of that. I have this beautiful image of Matisse holding these doves, and there is something about the nature of the bird that is also about freedom and a certain kind of willfulness that I respond to.”