

ARTS

Nicole Wittenberg's Sweeping Landscapes Take Root at Acquavella

BY GRACE EDQUIST

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Nicole Wittenberg, *Climbing Roses 3*, 2025. Oil on canvas. 48 x 60 inches (121.9 x 152.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Acquavella Galleries

Nature encourages a different understanding of time. The rhythms are predictable, mundane even, but in them exists the sublime: a flower blooms, leaves turn, the sun sets, tomatoes rot on the vine. The cycle marches on, unaware of, though not untouched by, the joys and the tragedies of the human realm.

Take hydrangeas, a happy flower millions of years old that grows well in soil but wilts quickly when cut. What does it feel like to behold something that is at once fleeting and eternal? Capturing this slippery essence is at the heart of the effervescent landscapes of Nicole Wittenberg. Her paintings burst off the canvas. The lavish colors and broad, bold brushstrokes are a call to action: *Pay attention*, they say. *This might not last*.

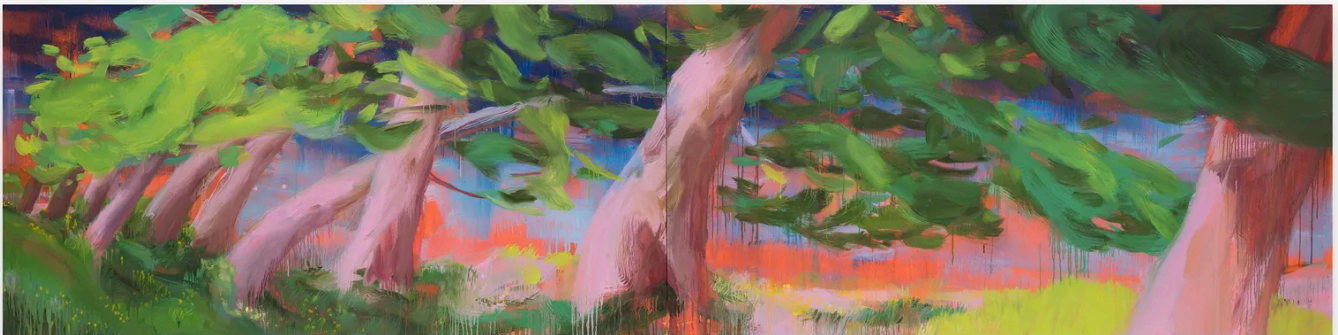
For “All the Way,” Wittenberg’s latest presentation at Acquavella, opening on October 16, she continues her interest in painting flowers and trees. But these paintings are not really *about* flowers and trees at all. Her hydrangeas, roses, and spruces convey a mood, an attitude. They are about light and layers and presence. Some of Wittenberg’s works are exuberant, others somber or wistful. “They come from a subconscious place, a feeling that hovers below the surface,” the artist says. In this way her landscapes are vessels, not descriptions. They, too, encourage a different understanding of time.



Nicole Wittenberg, *Gardens of Courances 2*, 2025. Oil on canvas. 16 x 20 inches (40.6 x 50.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Acquavella Galleries

Wittenberg, who was born in San Francisco, starts with pastel drawings on textured paper, which she makes outdoors, often in Maine. Last year she added another setting to the mix: over the course of a week she made 20 sketches while visiting the 120 acres of gardens at the Château de Courances, in France. These plein air studies are dashed off quickly. (Before the light goes! Before the poppy wilts!) They are electric—infused with spontaneity and explosive colors that practically fluoresce. She has hundreds of them. “It’s like having a library of experiences that I can pull from at any time,” she says. (Not unlike Peter Paul Rubens, who made countless anatomical studies that could later be referenced for his paintings. “When he needed to draw a hand on a figure, he’d just go through his file of hands,” Wittenberg says, a bit in awe.)

A selection of Wittenberg’s pastel drawings get scaled way up into grand oil paintings—some as large as eight feet tall—once she’s back home in her studio, either in New York City, where she has long had a studio in Chinatown, or in Maine, where she has spent an increasing amount of time since the pandemic and where she recently built a new home base closer to the nature that inspires her work. But the paintings are not just larger versions of the drawings. They take on new identities, undergoing tiny transformations along the way. A flower becomes a drawing becomes a painting: each step distilled through the filter of her own life experience.



Nicole Wittenberg, *Gardens of Courances 6*, 2025. Oil on canvas in two panels. 42 x 168 inches (106.7 x 426.7 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Acquavella Galleries

One essential difference between the drawings and the paintings is the tool employed for mark making. Wittenberg has, for the past decade, used a broom instead of a paint brush on her oil paintings. It’s like an extension of her body, a very long arm that allows her to stand several feet away from the surface, looking at one corner of a painting while working in another. It’s physical, a dance. The size of the broom enlarges the whole gesture, not unlike an actor scaling up their expressions as they go from a film set to the stage.

The form, too, changes with the broom. She can use the broad side, a corner, or smush the head against the canvas—versatile, but not a route toward precision. Paint does not adhere as evenly to bristles as it would to a brush, and she can add material but just as easily remove it with one swoop. Brooms introduce another time element to Wittenberg’s work as well. She must move quickly: The oil paint can dissolve the bristles. As the paint drips, flowers, or the sky, look like they’re weeping.

“It’s a completely out-of-control process,” she says, delighted at the fact. O’Keeffe’s florals, these are not.



Nicole Wittenberg, *August Evening 8*, 2025. Oil on canvas. 96 x 96 inches (243.8 x 243.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Acquavella Galleries

To achieve her signature Fauvist color palette—like glistening Starbursts as they melt in the sun—Wittenberg first washes her canvases in bright orange or pink. These vibrant, almost neon underpaintings have the effect of direct sunlight: jarring, but life-giving. It's a way to get her oil paint to more closely mimic the intense chroma of the pastel drawings, which have a natural saturation against the paper. Adding the brightly colored ground to the paintings gives the whole thing a lit-from-within aura.

Wittenberg is an expert colorist, highlighting the bark of a tree with an unexpected line of purple, or dotting a rose's pistil with a chartreuse so intense the flower looks 3D. Some of this, perhaps, comes from Wittenberg's earliest memories of seeing fine art as a kid at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Matisse's *Woman with a Hat*, from 1905, which she saw when she was about seven years old, was particularly memorable. "I just knew I wanted to do that...I connected to it completely on a nonverbal, nonintellectualized level," Wittenberg told Jarrett Earnest for an interview published in her new monograph, released this year from Monacelli Press and Phaidon. (Wittenberg and Earnest will be in conversation at 92NY on November 5.)

But some of Wittenberg's oneiric landscapes have darker undertones, of violence or worry. Flowers gnash and ooze (like in 2024's *August Evening 2*), trees lean to the point where you wonder if they'll break. You can almost feel the wind. She mentions that last summer, in 2024, the rise of the political right around the world left her with a feeling of tightening and deep tragedy. Hydrangeas, beautiful but fleeting, offered a counterbalance. "It felt like flowers were the thing to do," she says.

That's the thing about flowers. They are both vulnerable to the forces of the world—climate change, pollution, war—but also completely separate from them. It is no small miracle that a wild rose blooms at all.



Nicole Wittenberg, *Climbing Roses 7*, 2025. Oil on canvas. 72 x 144 inches (182.9 x 365.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Acquavella Galleries

Wittenberg's godmother, a noted Berkeley ecologist, introduced Wittenberg to the work of Gertrude Jekyll, the British high priestess of landscape design who created some 400 gardens throughout the UK, Europe, and the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Jekyll was quite painterly in her approach to gardens, planning colors and

perimeters the way an artist would. She has been a big inspiration for Wittenberg. “She had a very delicate touch to the way she was planting and forming the landscape so that it would almost seem like it was a natural occurrence. There are very large areas where it feels like things are just wilding.” When Wittenberg was staying in Courances, she was told the gardens were designed in part by a Gertrude Jekyll protégé. Research confirms this—Kathleen “Kitty” Lloyd Jones, a Jekyll disciple, assisted with the addition of a Japanese-style garden sometime shortly before World War I.

Jekyll was also a prolific writer. In her most famous book, *Colour in the Flower Garden* (1908), Jekyll puts forth a thesis that could have easily been written about Wittenberg’s paintings: “I am strongly of opinion that the possession of a quantity of plants, however good the plants may be themselves and however ample their number, does not make a garden; it only makes a *collection*. Having got the plants, the great thing is to use them with careful selection and definite intention.”

Definite intention—that is a Wittenberg hallmark. Standing before her colossal paintings, the petals and tree trunks dwarfing the human body, you feel an immediacy, an overwhelming sense of being in the moment it was first glimpsed.

Wittenberg has long spoken of her admiration for the cinema, and in particular the cinematographer Michael Ballhaus, known for films like Martin Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence* (1993) and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992). Ballhaus had a reverence for art, often nodding to famous paintings in the shots he set up. He understood the power of the image—more so, even, than the power of narrative.

The cinematic quality in Wittenberg’s art stretches back to her early days, when she worked in a figurative style. She often painted people as they appeared filtered through screens. This started over Skype. Her friends would sit for her onscreen, and she would do a portrait. (It’s interesting to think of how her plein air studies are almost the opposite—she is sitting for the trees and flowers in order to observe them, a studio visit in reverse.) After years of working this way, she started to take inspiration from amateur porn, which she found kind of fascinating for its, well, amateurness. Wittenberg’s erotic art has the same open, gestural brushstrokes of her landscapes. It’s like the figures became flowers, tangled leaves in place of limbs.

But just as Wittenberg’s DP hero Ballhaus went for image over narrative, she eschews a prescriptive reading of her art. Think of the content, not the subject matter. She calls herself an intuitive artist rather than one who responds to political or linguistic inclinations. “I realized, I’m really kind of a romantic painter,” she reflects.

Wittenberg resists trends. As an artist she is independent, and with experience she has become more trusting of her instincts. “I never wanted to make the paintings everyone else was making,” she told Earnest for the monograph. A landscape painting—to be even more precise, a landscape painting of Maine, a most painterly of places—is not novel, but the unabashed approach she takes sets her apart from the long lineage of those who have worked to document its rugged beauty.

It's a big year for Wittenberg. Preceding her Acquavella presentation—her first since officially joining the gallery's roster—were three other shows in 2025 (two in Maine and one in Paris), plus the release of her monograph. In September it was announced that a new LA restaurant from Dior will feature artwork by Wittenberg. Amid the planning stages and the openings, she finds time to keep painting. An artist's artist, she doesn't stay away from the studio for long. There's a zeal to the work, like she can't help but make it.

This shows up mostly in the boundlessness of the edges—or really, the lack of edges. There is no containing these pictures, and more than anything that is what unites them. “I guess that's the thing I'm after,” she says. “With this new work, it's like it moves from sensation to sensation, emotion to emotion, subject matter to subject matter. But the way it's painted, the energy of the painting is the constant force.”

“Nicole Wittenberg: All the Way” is on view from October 16 to December 5, 2025.

