



Nicole Wittenberg, *En Plein Air*

By
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She made her name with paintings of coitus.
Her latest subject matter, the focus of four exhibitions on
two continents this season, is no less wild.

Nicole Wittenberg began making waves in downtown New York art circles more than a decade ago with lyrical paintings of amateur porn.

"I had a lot of fun putting in different search terms—hitchhikers! Sunset! *Blue Velvet!*" she recalls of trawling the Internet for source material. The artist, in her 30s at the time, would pause the videos over and over until she found a still that sparked her imagination. Sometimes, it would be an erect penis; other times, a shadow on the wall would do the trick.

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To Wittenberg, these libidinal morsels felt less risky to depict than the natural world, which has since eclipsed porn as the primary focus of her practice. After steeping herself in critical theory and identity politics in art school, landscapes "felt like [they were] something I wasn't supposed to do," she says on a recent afternoon in her airy Chinatown studio as Roy, her bright blue miniature parrot, rustles in the other room. "Art is exciting when you do something you're not supposed to do."

That ecological promiscuity underpins no fewer than four exhibitions on two continents by the artist this season. In April, the Ogunquit Museum of American Art opened Wittenberg's first solo museum survey featuring paintings and studies she created in Maine, where she has spent nearly every summer since 2012. Two and a half hours away, the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland is presenting her largest canvases to date through September 14. In Paris, smaller-scale flower paintings will fill the modernist temple that is Le Corbusier's Maison La Roche through July 19. Two weeks before that show closes, Phaidon will publish her first monograph, featuring essays by painter David Salle, OMAA curator Devon Zimmerman, and art historian Suzanne Hudson. And to round it all off, Acquavella will hand over its New York outpost to the artist this October for her first solo show with the gallery since 2022.

It was a trip to Maine—her first—that inspired Wittenberg's foray into the landscape genre. She was

drawn to the lush wildness of the state's outdoors, which reminded her of growing up against the backdrop of Northern California's unmanicured nature. After a decade of urban life in New York, "there was an attraction to being in the opposite condition," she recalls. Before long, she found herself painting the way Claude Monet or Pierre-Auguste Renoir did, but also the way she had as a child: *en plein air*.

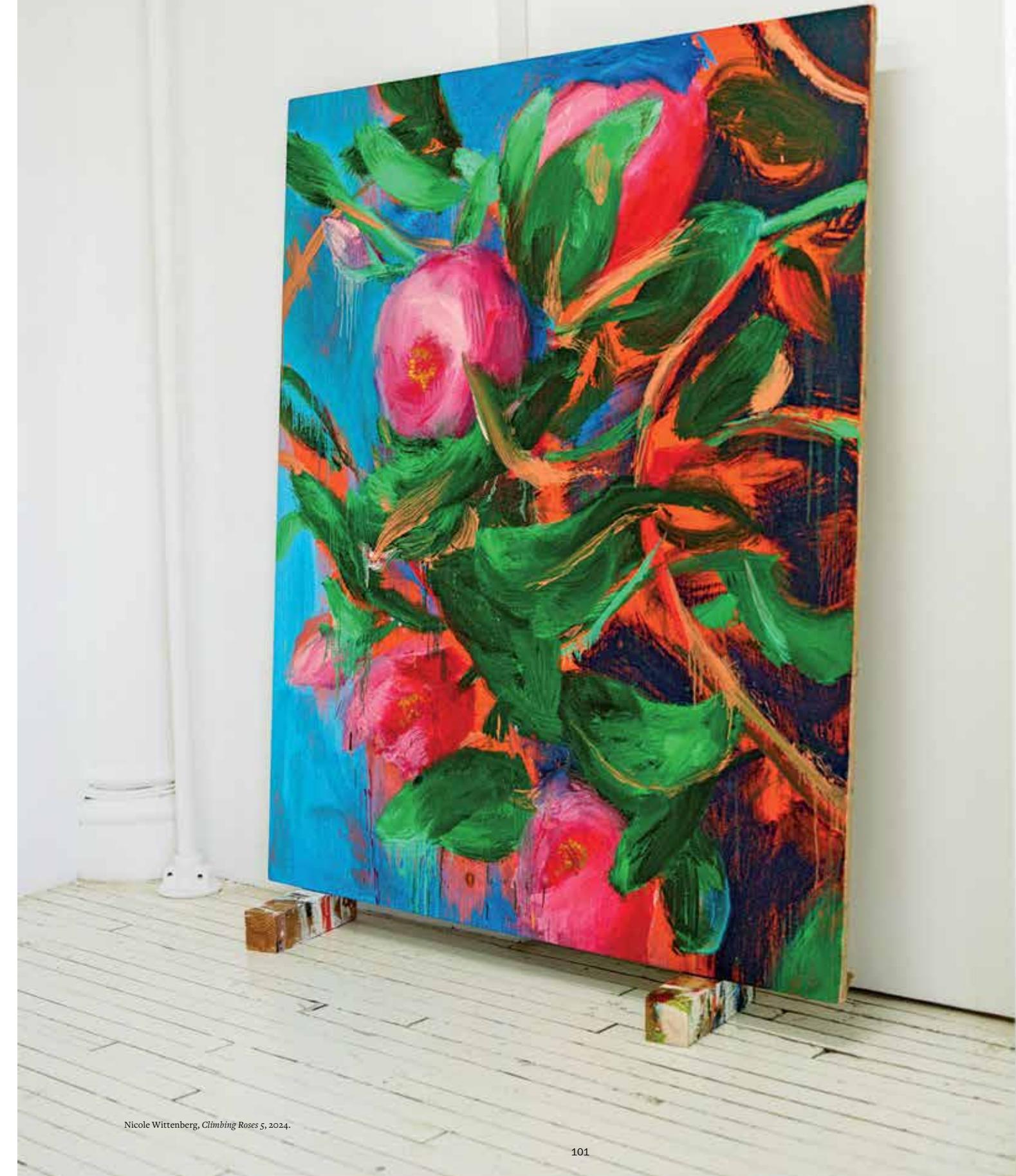
It took the artist a number of years to realize these efforts were as worthy of investment as her more theory-laden work. A breakthrough came on a trip to Greece in 2017. At the suggestion of a friend, British portraitist Chantal Joffe, Wittenberg brought along pastels and created dozens of impressionistic images of the light-dappled water. (As any painter worth their salt will tell you, water is one of the more vexing subjects to capture effectively.) They were fast, experimental, and, above all, fun. "For all those reasons, I didn't take them seriously," she says.

But she couldn't deny the pull they had on her. Wittenberg's next challenge, which took several more years, was to figure out how to translate the sensation and spontaneity of her pastel studies of water and, later, flowers and landscapes into oil paint on canvas. "I was really laboring over these paintings—and they looked like dirty old dish rags," she remembers. "I had to realize I wasn't replicating the image, I was replicating the feeling."

"I like an out-of-control process—it fits my nature."

By mastering the transparency of oil paint and accelerating her execution, she eventually managed to capture in oil the moment the light passed through a flower petal or the blur of a hydrangea bush in the breeze. To achieve this improvisational sensation, she uses a combination of brooms dipped in paint, which introduce the element of chance, and more conventional brushes. "I like an out-of-control process—it fits my nature," Wittenberg says.

These days, she sees little difference between the porn paintings, which she still makes, and the flower works. Both are about sifting through a series of moments to capture the utter thrill of being in contact, and in communion, with another living thing.



Nicole Wittenberg, *Climbing Roses 5*, 2024.

