

On resisting the pressure of productivity culture



Visual artist Nicole Wittenberg discusses the difference between obsession and compulsion, the importance of time in nature, and learning to understand what art can mean.

July 2, 2025 -

As told to Katy Diamond Hamer, 1978 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Time management, Inspiration, Independence, Mental health, Focus.

Two solo exhibitions of your work opened in May 2025 in Maine; *A Sailboat in the Moonlight*, on view at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art and *Cheek to Cheek*, at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (CMCA). Then you have yet another opening in September at *Maison La Roche* in Paris and a solo at Acquavella in New York in October, as well as a new monograph, published by Monacelli, Phaidon coming out in July. Can you share more about these current and upcoming shows?

A Sailboat in the Moonlight at the Ogunquit Museum, is a survey show that focuses on the last four years of painting mostly in Maine. Some of the landscapes have figures in them, but they are primarily about light in the trees, the seashore. There's a room of nocturnal paintings and pastel studies. I've never actually had the two of those together, in such a direct way. Then for *Cheek to Cheek* at the CMCA, I expanded the scale of a series of initial studies [made from life in the landscape], allowing them to grow in size. And those will be installed in a building that was designed by a wonderful architect named Toshiko Mori.

The show with *Maison La Roche* in Paris, includes a series of flowers—seaside roses and wild hydrangeas—in a very beautiful Corbusier building, designed with Pierre Jeanneret between 1923 and 1925. It has a modernist scale and the paintings have that kind of scale. As an architect, Corbusier had a way of bringing the outside to the inside. These flower paintings [engage with a] very different kind of space than what I was playing with before, which was much deeper and vast. I made studies last summer when I was feeling quite compressed by the world-less landscape, more interior.

How are you handling being so busy?

Honestly, I'm a little knackered, you know? I'm tired. Maine is a month behind in terms of the weather. So the blossoms that are already gone in New York, they're just beginning to start here.

David Salle has written about your work several times. He wrote about you once again for the upcoming monograph that is being published by Monacelli, Phaidon, as did Jarrett Ernest. What is your relationship to them?

Jarrett has really become such an active voice and presence in the contemporary art world, writing about art and other themes related to writing and thinking. David is an icon, a fantastic painter, and his writing is really wonderful. I'm lucky to be connected to these voices and to have a chance to be in conversation with them. I just reread one of Jarrett's books, *Valid Until Sunset* that I recommend to people. Each story has its own identity combined with an image. They are very focused around his own experience, and feel very *seen*. It was important for me to read this book again recently.



Nicole Wittenberg. *Climbing Roses 7*, 2025. Oil on canvas, 72 x 144 in. Photo by Jason Wyche. Courtesy of the artist.

Your new monograph comes out in July, and truly focuses on a variety of paintings you've made over the span of your career. These range from natural landscapes to the figurative. Do you approach a body in the same way, you would approach a tree as a subject?

When it comes to my subject, I'm a bit omnivorous. I don't tend to categorize things in a kind of subject matter. What we [painters] do is constantly shifting in scale and focus.

I've always spent a lot of time in nature, longing to be back, to be around things that are growing and of their own volition. Being outside gives us the time and space to think and to have reflective thinking not just active thinking. It requires unscheduled time. I just planted a tree. It's a yellow magnolia and it's going to bloom soon.

Some landscape designers have been a very important subject matter for me. I like to spend time reflecting on Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932), who was an English horticulturist and garden designer (amongst other things) and did quite a few fabulous projects [including over 400 garden designs across the United States, U.K. and Europe]. And then somebody who's related to her in ideology, is landscape architect Beatrix Farrand (1872–1959), who was born in New York, but ended up moving and working in Bar Harbor in Maine. She's done quite a few very famous projects, including the Peggy Rockefeller Rose Garden at the New York Botanical Gardens, the gardens of the White House (during the Presidency of Woodrow Wilson), and campuses of Yale and Princeton. I've been influenced by these very powerful female voices that permeated the history of landscape design. [They forever altered] how we see landscape design now, and how we have experienced nature during my lifetime.



Nicole Wittenberg. *August Evening 8*, 2025. Oil on canvas, 96 x 96 in. Photo by Jason Wyche. Courtesy of the artist

Once the shows are actually installed, will you have a moment to rest and relax?

Well, I have some projects forthcoming and the show in New York at Acquavella opens in October. I'm also working on a large commission right now. Do you need to keep busy all the time?

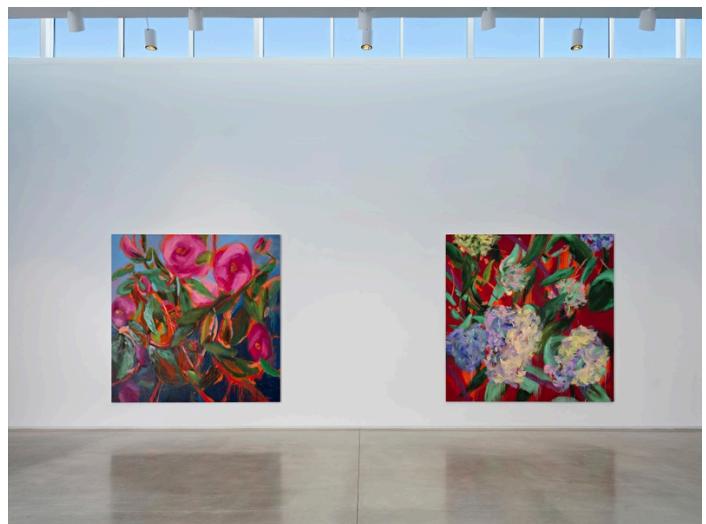
To be honest, when I was younger, I would say yes. As I get older, I'm in my forties now, I actually really relish that in-between time and find that I can be more efficient when I can recharge.

I think that's a really important aspect of living. It's a strange thing about our time now, in our culture, there is pressure to make things, get more done more quickly, to [match] the ease of and speed of communication. But this ease and speed of consumption has not made the quality of our conversations increase and it hasn't made the quality of our consumption increase either. It's just increased the quantity. I think that it's a kind of a compulsive behavior, and there's something about making art that needs to be more obsessive.

The word purpose or purposeful comes to mind.

Exactly, because there's a purpose behind an obsession. So, I think that is the word that defines or distinguishes the difference. I would say the paintings in my studio, aren't really about the way something looks, but they're more about the way something feels. The sensation is actually the narrative, and not a story per se. I've been thinking a lot about how art functions in our world and in dialogue right now.

There's more visibility in our culture and in our lives now. It's an interesting dynamic of our time, a strange commodification of culture. And it still takes a lot of time to be a painter...to learn how to be a painter. There's the craft, or the technique of making a painting, and then there's the thinking behind making a painting—an intellectual component to painting as well.



Installation view of *Climbing Roses 10, 2025*. Oil on canvas, 112 x 112 in; and *August Evening 6, 2025*. Oil on canvas, 112 x 112 in. Photo by Dave Clough. Courtesy of the artist.

After years of trying to understand this while in art school, then after art school, and even as a professor, I've realized that art isn't really about anything that can be described specifically and accurately in language. Perhaps art is something that can be, in its best sense, experienced. And experiences don't always fit within the parameters of words. They go beyond or go into places where words can't reach them. So a lot artists try to describe painting or artwork in language, and some people do it better than others. But it's never never fully amounts to the experience of experiencing an artwork.

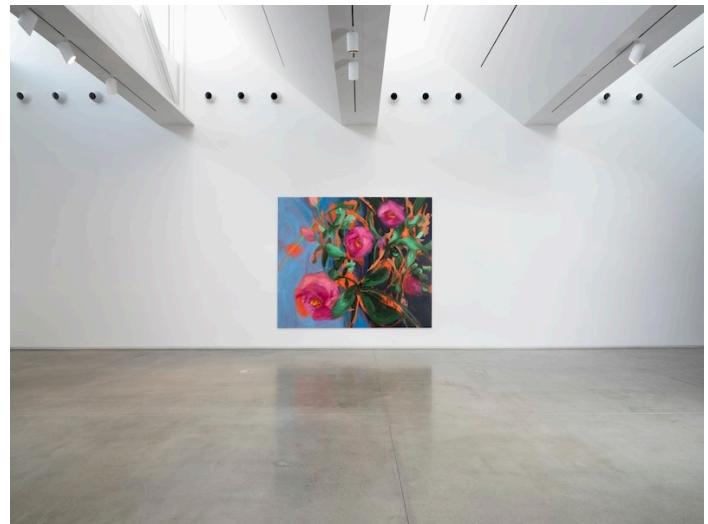
That's true, especially now when so much art is shared via social media and email.

Talking about my art is an interesting exercise. Because it's something that isn't about my artwork, but is parallel to my artwork. Some people understand what these paintings are and what they're about. I'm asked the question a lot, "Why do you paint?" and "What are your paintings about?" And after a lot of unclear statements and missteps with words, I think I can say that these paintings are experiences and ideally somebody can have the opportunity to experience them in person.

That makes a lot of sense to me because one of the things that I always find fascinating about artwork as an experiential entity, is the way that the body interacts with the work. Your work looks like it's very physically involved—the marks, the drips. There's a lot going on. Can you talk about what the experience of making is like for you?

Like you say, the paintings are very physical. They are large and [in contrast] I'm not a very big person. I started these paintings thinking about a certain feeling I had when I saw, in this case, wild flowers growing last summer in Maine. Beach roses are a kind of rose that grow by the seashore here, and they are everywhere. I make very quick drawings of them in about 15 or 20 minutes. The drawings function as visual notes about how I'm feeling [while] looking at those flowers at that time of day, on that day. They're personal. I show them sometimes, and I make a lot of them, yet not all of them become paintings. They have a sense of scale, color and form.

They're spontaneous enough that I don't feel like I have to stop time to catch that time. I take all of these personal notes and think about the painting and how to translate those notes into something that's made with a much different material. Paint is very wet, viscous, it moves around and has its own kind of tendencies of what it likes to do. I don't really like to control paint very much. In part, I'd say these paintings are just the way the notes and my personal recollection of that moment feels, combined with changing the scale and the material. The result is the [finished] painting. In a way, the painting is also completely separate from that experience because no two things in life are ever really the same.



Installation view of *Climbing Roses 6*, 2025. Oil on canvas, 112 x 132 in. Photo by Dave Clough. Courtesy of the artist.

There is a sense of freedom and control within your canvases that I really appreciate. Being a painter, one can have a didactic or academic way of approaching art. The next level is how an artist actually creates or uses the medium to help fulfill their vision. What I really like is how your hand feels so evident, it feels uniquely you.

It's all so personal, depending on who's holding the brush. Any kind of painting could be a great painting or a bad painting. When you experience an artwork, we can feel the way the painter feels about what they're doing. Anything could be a great painting, if the painter feels connected to it. Artists have their own set of values and in that way, it's interesting because it's incredibly personal. Not a lot of things in life fit into that [category].

Self-awareness, is really hard as an artist. I think it's hard for everyone probably. It's hard to know who we are through other people's eyes.

Name

Nicole Wittenberg

Vocation

visual artist

Nicole Wittenberg recommends:

Valid Until Sunset, by Jarrett Earnest

Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932)

Beatrix Farrand (1872-1959)

beach roses

rhododendron