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AN ARTIST ON FINDING BALANCE, AND HIS GIANT BASKETBALL SCULPTURE

by Janelle Zara



The artist Jonas Wood in his East Hollywood studio, with a giant basketball by Paa Joe, a Ghanaian artist who specializes in fantasy coffins and palanquins. Credit...Chantal Anderson

Jonas Wood's East Hollywood studio — a refurbished industrial space hidden behind a razor-wired metal gate — is populated with the familiar objects that appear in his paintings. There are colonies of potted plants and basketball paraphernalia that ranges in size from plush couch cushions to man-sized orbs. Every room is filled with art, most notably by the ceramist Shio Kusaka, Wood's studio mate and wife, and Kiki and Momo, their son and daughter.

But the studio is where Wood culls various photographs from the internet or his own archive and uses them as source material for his paintings — they are printed out and pinned onto walls, then flattened and distilled into blocks of color. Wood then layers these dense graphic patterns, overlapping fields of stipples and stripes, circles, squares, dots and wood grains.

Thirteen years into his career, following a year and a half of preparation, Wood is finally wrapping up preparations for the two biggest shows he's ever done: an exhibition of new work at Gagosian in New York, opening in late April, and a survey at the Dallas Museum of Art, opening this week — his first major solo museum exhibition. Admittedly, the prospect of facing works — landscapes, interiors and portraits of family and friends — from his early career was giving Wood "a hard time sleeping." He wondered, "Are the old paintings horrible?" and "Did I used to be a better painter and now I'm worse?" During the installation of the show at the museum last week, he had two big realizations: "I wasn't a hack, which is a big relief," and that now, after more than a decade of steadily producing gallery shows, he might be ready to slow down.

Nursing a can of tangerine-flavored LaCroix, Wood answered T's Artist's Questionnaire, which unearthed memories of the early days of his career, the first painting he ever sold — and the YouTube videos that nearly brought him to tears.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule like?

I drop the kids off at school, eat some breakfast, start working a little bit, usually have a meeting, have lunch and work for a couple hours in the afternoon. Maybe I'll work for a couple hours at night. I'm trying to sleep more. In general, in the last couple of years, I've been trying to balance sleeping, eating, working, working out and spending time with the family. I've had my head down trying to make it as an artist since 2006, and I've had one or two shows a year for 12 years in a row. It's not that I want to paint less, per se, but I want to take a step back.

I'm talking about taking a step back and looking at what I've done, and taking a step back from the pace that I was running and changing gears. After these two exhibitions, I don't have any booked shows coming up. It's a big opportunity for me to rearrange the way I spend my time. I love to paint and I want to paint, but I don't have to paint right now, this second, and I don't have to paint all next week and miss four school events.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

Every day, I'm super into it. I need to paint. If I go away for a couple weeks, I'll just draw. It's like a must for my mental health. I would have to say that I've been all-in on painting since I was younger, and I realized that it was because of a lot of fear that it would all go away. That's not how I want to paint in the future. The pressure and psychology of that setup isn't totally right. I would like to build bodies of work outside the calendar schedule of art fairs and shows for a little while. I love painting, and I think I can paint without having a giant carrot in front of me. I don't think that I'm the best at painting, and I want to get better at it.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

The first painting I really cared about was probably when I was a teenager, maybe 13 or 14 years old.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

The freezing-cold basement of my parents' house on Martha's Vineyard. Winter of 2002.

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

I sold a painting after college for \$1,000, before grad school.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step?

I think there's a certain amount of avoidance. I like to have things sit around for a while before it's go time. I find a photograph that I like, and then I usually make drawings. Maybe half the time I paint from the drawings and the other half from photographs. I use the photo for the structure of the painting; I project out different shapes, trace it out, mix the colors and build an image, like a flat map, and then I paint all the details on top. I like to have things just starting and just finishing and everywhere in between. I like to wake up and have choices to gravitate to.

How do you know when you're done?

You know after a lot of looking.

How many assistants do you have?

Two.

What music do you play when you're making art?

Mostly basketball podcasts. I listen to Howard Stern three days a week. Reggae, lots of eras of hip-hop, a variety of rock 'n' roll.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

I was a slow learner and a late bloomer in painting. I didn't really put it all together until 2006. I had a show at Black Dragon Society. I made \$29,000, I quit my job, and after 2006, I was a full-time painter. Making a living from being an artist and not having to do anything else usually changes a lot — something happens, sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad, right? But you spend all your time doing it. You're dedicated.

Are you bingeing on any shows right now?

Oh yeah. "Crashing," "Million Dollar Listing," "Vanderpump Rules."

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

This giant basketball is a sculpture by Paa Joe, a 72-year-old Ghanaian artist. Look him up. He makes fantasy coffins that are in most major museum collections. This was commissioned; I wanted a giant Spalding basketball, and I told him the colors and everything. I didn't get a coffin because my wife thought it would be too morbid, so we got a throne. It's actually called a palanquin, and you carry people around in it.

How do you get your news?

I just started listening to these quick little podcasts that The New York Times does. I read The New York Times. I go to CNN a little bit and check out some weirder news, like serial-killer names and stuff like that.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

Play poker with friends.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

It's hilarious that this made me cry: The kids wanted to watch N.B.A. players flying into the stands trying to get out-of-bounds balls. I was like, "This is so cool that they're so into basketball." Even thinking about it makes me — it's like happy crying. Positive. These kids want to see replays of Shaq, who's seven feet tall, flying into the stands. You should watch it.

What do you usually wear when you work?

Gym shorts and a T-shirt, or some sort of long, funky pants. I like to feel super comfortable.

What do you buy in bulk with the most frequency?

LaCroix. I've got a variety of favorite flavors.

What do you pay for rent?

We don't pay rent. We own the building.

Do you exercise?

We have a little gym. I would like to say that I'm fat and I'm also fit at the same time. I have a routine. VersaClimber and a lot of bands to strengthen the buttocks.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

I love that Picasso goat he made out of bronze, where he uses a basket for the goat's tummy. It's one of the great bronze sculptures.