

HOW JONAS WOOD GOT HIS START AS AN ARTIST

by Alina Choen



Jonas Wood, *Untitled (Self Portrait)*, 2006. © Jonas Wood.
Courtesy of the artist and Black Dragon Society.

Artist Jonas Wood possesses one of contemporary painting's most instantly recognizable aesthetics. His canvases depict plants and ceramics, often on shelves or in lush domestic interiors, rendered with a flattened perspective in vibrant hues. Yet Wood's work is hardly formulaic. His subjects are merely vehicles for skillful, textured mark-making, which evolves year by year.

Success caught Wood (b. 1977) early. In 2006, four years after he graduated from the MFA program at the University of Washington, the Los Angeles art space Black Dragon Society gave him a solo show that launched his career. In the years since, he has participated in exhibitions from Tokyo to Dusseldorf, Los Angeles to Beirut. Through July 14th, the Dallas Museum of Art is mounting Wood's first major solo museum presentation.

Wood now lives in Los Angeles with his wife, fellow artist Shio Kusaka, and their two children. Before he was settled and successful, though, Wood was floundering and alone, struggling to develop the discipline and practice that have led to over a decade of fruitful making.

How did you become interested in art?

My parents were into art. My dad was an architect. My mom was a drama teacher. They took me and my sisters to museums. I remember visiting the MFA Boston, where I grew up. Once, I saw a Lichtenstein landscape show there. We went to New York City and I saw MoMA and the Met.

A woman named Kimmy came to our house once a week to teach art to my sister and me. My sister, Augusta Wood, who's now a photographer, was already an amazing artist at around 12.

My grandfather collected art. He had this giant Francis Bacon painting that he'd bought in the '60s, hanging above the living room piano. It didn't mean that much to me at the time, but when I got to grad school I was like—holy shit, I grew up with a Bacon painting. My

grandfather also had a blue Jackie O Warhol in his study.

I had learning disabilities and dyslexia—I got kicked out of public school in third grade because I was disruptive—but was good at puzzles and drawings. I was a maker. I think my parents pushed me to do that stuff as much as possible because it was rewarding for me. They weren't saying, "You should be an artist," but they thought it was good that I was making stuff.

I was in an environment where there was a lot of interesting art, but I don't know if I was really conscious of it until later.

You got your bachelor's degree in psychology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in New York, then decided to get your MFA. What made you decide to pursue art?

I was just somebody who made stuff. Maybe other people's perceptions were like, "This guy's an artist." But early on, it was just my hobby. I doodled, made colored pencil drawings, took undergraduate art courses. After my junior year of college, I finished my major in psychology and then reconsidered my plan: I always thought I wanted to be a doctor. Instead, I started learning to paint and get better at art. This was around 1999.

Out of college, I started working in a psychology lab—an fMRI lab with neuroscientist Deborah Yurgelun-Todd. I administered IQ tests to study participants. At the same time, a friend let me paint out of his barn. I painted all of my family members—already, I was just mining the stuff around me for material. I made enough work that I could try to get into painting school. Still, I didn't really see myself as an artist. It was when I got to grad school that I realized I had all this time to just do this one thing I'd been dabbling in my whole life.

Now, art is my life and my therapy, and if I don't do it, I'm not going to feel great. It definitely has saved me in some ways.

Were any instructors particularly helpful?

This college professor, Nick Ruth, told me I needed to learn how to draw and spend more time working. That was really good advice. He also suggested I go to the University of Washington for my MFA and study with the person who'd taught him, Denzil Hurley, who shows at Canada Gallery. I applied to seven or eight schools and only got in there—which makes me think it was definitely nepotism. One person was vouching for me. If you look at my work from that time, it was so pedestrian; unrefined and underdeveloped, but I was ready to work.

I instantly connected with Denzil's approach. He had this idea that you should be able to make the work even if you live in the woods by yourself in a cabin, without anyone coming over to tell you what's good. You should be able to be critical of your work and push yourself to have a painting practice. I needed to learn that because I just had raw ambition and potent surroundings. Denzil was like the painting Yoda.

I knew I was a figurative artist. Denzil told me I shouldn't paint from life, though. So I removed this mirror (which I was using so I could paint from life) from my studio and ended up having this horrible accident. The mirror shattered and a shard of glass cut my right hand really badly. I cut a tendon and nicked this nerve bundle. It was like this weird metaphor.

This surgeon—who worked with dock workers who had accidentally cut their fingers off—had to sew my hand back together. I couldn't use my right hand for four months. I finished the work for my thesis show with my left hand. They were these crazy paintings with cartoonish shapes; angry paintings that wouldn't make any sense if you saw them.

Since that time, I haven't painted from life.

How did you land on your signature style?

When I was in grad school, I made images with letters and numbers and tried different ways to mark-make and make a line—it was all over the place. I didn't have anything to hold onto. Then I started to develop these big, flat shapes and colors that pushed up against each other with different colors. The flatness comes from this idea that painting isn't real; it can be whatever you want it to be.

I wasn't giving myself enough time to mix paints before I tried to make an oil painting and move everything around and change all the colors. Everything would get muddy. It was like my brain was moving faster than my body. I couldn't even access my ideas. Finding myself as a painter was figuring out how to change things, so that I could get a result that matched what I was thinking of in the first place.

I started sourcing images, compiling pictures that I took (of plants, for example) or cut out of magazines, or that people gave me. I've always been super into color. I started picking out the most potent stuff, [combining] a bunch of found images to make a hybrid space. It just kept evolving.

"How I found my style" is hard to answer. I don't feel like I'm there yet. Even when I'm in a moment of making a lot of things, there's still this daily practice of putting colors and shapes together and figuring out the balance, adding details, and deciding whether it's interesting. I've had this strategy the whole time that I need to get better—as opposed to thinking that I'm the best. Painting practices are ever-evolving and cumulative. I'm just starting.

Did you have any mentors after graduate school?

When I first moved to Los Angeles in 2003, Matt Johnson, who shows at Blum & Poe and 303 Gallery, was like a mentor. He was the only person in the city that I knew. We went to high school together. He's really rad. When me and my wife moved to Los Angeles, he got us jobs. I worked for Laura Owens and Shio worked for Charlie Ray.

Working for Laura Owens was a big part of my development. I got to see how she made her art and applied some of those things to my own work. I'd never used an overhead projector before. What's fascinating about Laura is she made these smaller works on paper and then either projected them or used these huge pieces of paper where she would draw the shape of the painting. Her drawings were pretty automatic, but the paintings were all slowed down: She'd dissect these smaller drawings and studies, then rebuild them as paintings. That really clicked with me because I was more of an automatic drawer who needed to slow things down when I painted.

I've had this strategy the whole time that I need to get better—as opposed to thinking that I'm the best. That strategy really unlocked my work and brought back some of my psychology experience, too. Not insight into a brain, but what happens in a lab. Like cooking. How do you formulate ideas and test them? It's like a puzzle.

Laura also underpainted with a certain type of paint, and she overpainted with a different kind of paint. I ended up doing something similar—underpainting with acrylic and overpainting with oil. I saw how she organized her studio and got ready for shows and used materials. I feel very lucky that I had that job for a couple years.

We had a nice community in Los Angeles. Matt was just graduating from UCLA. My sister, Augusta, went to grad school out here for photography. I came to a community. Then in 2006, I had my first show, at Black Dragon Society. I met Mark Grotjahn, who bought some of the work and became a mentor and a really good friend.

I read that you met Mark Grotjahn through playing poker?

I've been playing poker with Matt Johnson, Jeff Poe, and Mark Grotjahn for 13 years. After I worked for Laura Owens, I worked for Matt. He was getting ready to do a show at Blum & Poe. Mark Grotjahn, Mark Richards, Bob White, Matt Johnson, and I got invited to play poker at Blum & Poe.

I knew who Mark Grotjahn was just from being in L.A. for three years. I had a big painting crush on him. Mark didn't know that I was an artist. I definitely brought posters to Blum & Poe and said make sure Grotjahn gets one. He introduced me to Anton Kern and Shane Campbell, who both started showing me in 2007. Jeff Poe and Tim Blum got work from the Black Dragon show, too. It was like I instantly had an advocate.

What were the biggest obstacles when you got to L.A.?

The biggest obstacle early on was just not understanding how to put myself back together after grad school and access my power. My grad-school friend said I had a wild horse inside of me, and I needed to learn how to ride it.

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I was checking out an exorbitant amount of books because I was trying to learn about art. I'd thumb through the pages and paint at the same time, trying to study and see what I liked. When I saw her at the desk, I kind of hit on her. Then we saw each other at a bar and she introduced herself. We've been together ever since, except for when we broke up for a year and a half.

We never got a divorce. We got back together right before my show in 2006. We'd been seeing each other 8 months or 10 months after we broke up; being together, but not really being together. Then we moved into a house together. I guess it was mostly about getting to a place where I could handle somebody else. Selfishly, I guess we both needed our own time to get there.

If we hadn't broken up early on, we never would have made it. Obviously, it worked out because we have two kids. Since we got back together in 2006, we've shared studio space. We figured it out.

Did you ever feel any sense of rejection early on?

Oh, yeah. When I first moved to L.A., I set up a studio visit with some gallery and they never showed up. I felt like I was ready to show right when I got to L.A., and it wasn't happening. It was for the best—it would have been a fucking disaster if I showed right off the bat.

What would you consider your breakthrough moment?

There were a few paintings right after grad school where I started to put it together. But I think I really started to feel secure after my 2006 Black Dragon show. I had my first real stage, and people were paying attention. I didn't need a job after that. It's like if you're in a band and you can go on tour instead of working at the bar.

I was just so happy to have a show in the town where I was living. People were going to see it. It's every young artist's dream, right?