

JONAS WOOD: AN ARTIST'S PALETTE OF TRANQUILLITY

by Rand Al-Hadethi



Through his use of shadows, angles, and irregular balanced objects, Jonas Wood paints a parallel world that explores modes of abstraction. Inspired by Henri Matisse and David Hockney, his fresh documentative style does not come as a surprise, and neither does the welcoming aura his paintings emit. In a 15-year career, Jonas Wood has grown to become a vibrant figure in the world of modern art.

Jonas Wood has a distinct palette composed of his experiences, passion for sports (basketball specifically), and the surrounding domestic miscellanea. And while you might think that doesn't speak to you, you'll realise that you still haven't shifted your gaze away from his paintings. You see, though it is obsessively detailed, there is a certain serenity in Wood's artwork. In short, it's nothing but fresh, fashionable, and domestic. To Jonas Wood, painting is not only a hobby or a career but an extension of his existence. And much like how Jonas Wood finds it therapeutic and joyful, Jonas Wood wants you to feel that energy too. "What I would like people to take away from my work is energy, because that's what I look for when I collect art and when I live with art," says Jonas Wood. "I want to feel energy, I want to be excited."

Your work has a calm and cosy aura. What attracts you most about creating still-life paintings? When did you realise that this was your focus?

I like taking things and organising them in my own way—using pattern and shape and colour to try to find a balance that feels good. I approach still life in different ways; sometimes they're very simple and sometimes they're very complicated. There are times in which I've populated a still life with a bunch of plants and pots I've found in photos and other sources, and then cobbled them together to make a new space. In 2007, I made a painting called *The Still Life* which was my most elaborate large-scale still life at the time. That painting made me think that it was something I wanted to continue investigating in the future.

We know that "basketball paraphernalia" is all over your studio. What makes you so attached to sport-related art?

I grew up in Massachusetts. It was a big sports town for all the major teams: basketball, football, baseball, and hockey. Basketball was just one of my favourite sports, I played it up through high school. As I began to make paintings, it started coming into my practice. I liked the idea of a floating basketball because I was seeing the basketball as an isolated, simple object... I also liked making portraits from the basketball imagery I was looking at. I was searching for subjects to paint that I loved and was attached to, so it sort of infiltrated my work. As I've gotten older, I've found more time to watch basketball games while painting in my studio.

We heard you had a mirror that you used to paint from life. Can you tell us more about the process and how it has changed over time?

The mirror story is from when I was in grad school in 2001. A professor told me if I wanted to be a figurative painter that I should paint from life, so I spent a whole year painting from life, from a mirror, from a still life—just trying to paint from what was in front of me. I had a big mirror in my studio and was making a giant self portrait of myself, nude, standing up painting. And then when I had finished it, the professor told me I needed to paint more from imagination and not from life; maybe it wasn't for me. While I was moving this huge mirror out of my studio, I dropped it and it shattered—not while I was naked, I was clothed—but it cut my right hand badly and I had to have major surgery to tie a tendon back onto itself. I painted left-handed for the rest of grad school. I finished my grad school thesis left-handed. I guess that's a crazy story, but the reality was that even if I hadn't broken the mirror, I was going to begin trying to paint in a different way. That is when I started painting from photographs and source images, and drawings I had made. My process has developed over the years. I don't ever really paint from life; I draw from life and I doodle from life, but I don't ever paint from a 3D physical object. I paint from 2D objects and from tons and tons of images that I use as my source material.

Do you ever look back at your old paintings and compare the difference between then and now?

I do that all the time. I think the idea of painting is that you practice to get better. Sometimes I look back and assume that my early work is going to look worse than it actually does. It's for sure more primitive because I was naive and knew less and hadn't practiced as much, but it's not as bad as anticipated, especially in the case of going back and looking at my first museum show at the Dallas Museum of Art. For that show, we had collected all these earlier paintings that we wanted to hang together. When I got to the museum, I was anxious to see paintings that were 10–12 years old, and to see how they held up with my newer work, which were considered to be more advanced. However, looking back, I realised the earlier paintings were advanced because I was trying my hardest at those moments. It's really interesting. There are a lot of things you can take from the earlier works and bring back into the new paintings; they feed off each other. I think it's good to continue to look back, to appreciate a good painting, and to try and get back there with the newer paintings—to make a great painting.

What was the defining moment when decided to be a full-time artist?

I knew I wanted to be a full-time artist when I arrived in Seattle for my first year of graduate school. I still had about three weeks before school started and they were like, "Oh, you want your studio now." And I was like, "Sure!" They let me into this little cell of a studio, but at the time it felt huge. I just started working and within the first week, I remember talking to my parents or a friend, and saying, "I think I'm going to be a painter," even though I had just arrived at grad school. Before that, in undergrad, I had studied psychology and science. I had painted and made stuff before, but I had never spent all my time doing it.

You had learning disabilities and dyslexia, and then got kicked out of public school in third grade. Did painting help you deal with that?

In third grade, I got kicked out of school because I was super disruptive. I had learning disabilities, and probably attention-deficit disorder, that weren't diagnosed, but I was definitely dyslexic. I think my parents saw that I was good at making stuff and they kept that in front of me. It was never like, "You have to make art." My sisters and I were always just into making stuff our whole lives. We had different drawing tutors, so we were always involved in the arts. I think my parents saw that I was halfway decent at it as a child and they geared me towards it, even though, like I said earlier, I wasn't really aware that I was going to be an artist early on. Later in life, painting definitely saved my life in a way, because it's very therapeutic for me. It's a way to release energy.

What do you think is the trick to being productive and equally proud of your work? How do you embrace the wins and avoid beating yourself up too much?

I think being productive is setting yourself up to be successful. Like preparing some materials for yourself or understanding how you operate. How to be proud without beating yourself up? Well, make a bunch of stuff and then be critical about it. Say, "This is great" and then, "This is maybe not so great. But why isn't it so great?" I think that you have to beat yourself up, and then you have to be proud, and you have to be able to differentiate greatness. Not everything is great. You should be proud of your wins and you shouldn't necessarily be upset about your losses, but you should look them in the eye and try to address them.

There's an obvious element of commercialism related to the art world— such as sell enough quantities of your work in the first place. Should you consider that, and would that scare a new artist?

In all honesty, selling enough quantities is rubbish. Whatever dealer is telling you to make a bunch of quantities, you should just go tell them off. That's capitalism driving demand versus your interest as an artist in making something. If you want to make more work, figure out how to make more work because you want to make more work, not because somebody is telling you to. That's just going to lead you down some dark alley of negativity.