On creating your own logic

Artist Sam Linguist on the Texan attitude to painting, finding a community that inspires him, and approaching each piece anew.

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As told to Maria Owen, 2172 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Beginnings, Education, Family.

Let’s start by talking about your materials in the studio. You make ceramics, but painting is a strong element in your practice. What was this evolution of mediums like, and how do you think about it now?

Objects have always been central for me. Before ceramics, I started with sewing. I was thinking about objects and painting and how those things line up, and ceramics were the perfect combo. I also think about how they fit on a wall, which leads to weird infrastructural and architectural effects—the space that they’re in and how they hang on the wall, and how that adds to the experience of the medium.

When I first started making things, I became really interested in work that was conceptually rooted, and so I felt like I should be making the same kind of thing. I did ceramics on the side just because I liked it, but eventually found a way to combine those two interests. The material became overpowering. Then I realized that I use ceramics because it’s almost eternal. It’s archeological; it feels timeless in the way that it won’t decay. I became really interested in how the pigment is literally baked into the surface to never erode, yet the piece is ultimately fragile and will break very easily if not cared for.

Sam Linguist, *three name movie theater*, 2025, underglazed stoneware. Courtesy of Laurel Gitlen and the artist. Photo credit: Charles Benton.

I began by making Korean moon jars—they start as two hemispheres that are then joined—because I had a wheel. I used to live down the street from this folk art potter who was pretty well known, which made me think, "I have to be really skilled and do all this stuff perfectly." Then I realized that painting the surfaces was what I enjoyed the most, and all the artists who I was looking at that point were working in painterly ways on sculpture. I started making forms to paint on and flattening them into pie pans. Eventually I flipped them over and started painting on the back of the pans, and then it became a casserole dish, and began to feel like a canvas. These were all excuses to get to painting because I wanted to do that, but I didn't know how. I had this huge, weird roadblock with just making paintings. For everyone from Texas who makes paintings, there's always a sense of making fun of them.

Why do you think that is?

There are Texans making really incredible paintings, but they also tend to make fun of themselves. I'm always trying to figure out why. There's an amazing tradition for painting in Texas but it's never one of self-seriousness. I think about Robert Rauschenberg or Forrest Bess, artists who work to undermine a serious tradition or forge their own completely. Even someone like the sculptor Luiz Jiménez. He makes grandiose sculptures, yet they're always underscored by humor. It seems that he's not taking himself so seriously.

I remember hearing a quote that [was something like], “In New York, artists want to show you how hard their work was to make. And in California, artists want to work so hard that their work looks effortless.” I think Texas artists naturally work in a way to negate both of those sentiments. Because in Texas, the worst things you can be are lazy or too big for your britches.

What do you feel speaks to people who are skeptical of painting?

I think about the presence of logic inherent to every artist environment. No matter how weird the work is, everything has a perfect reason behind it. For example, the artist Chuckie Williams—I met him while working for the Webb Gallery. The Webbs would see all these pieces hung on the outside of his house in Shreveport, [Louisiana] and point out to me: “There’s a reason behind this. It’s Halloween. He loves Michael Jackson. So he’s making this painting of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* and putting it on his fence for Halloween.” It was powerful because of that direct logic. More people could pick up on that than they would from some type of esoteric downtown painting. People there don’t want to be grifted. There’s a directness.

Artist Chuckie Williams with his work. Courtesy of Webb Gallery.

I think that’s why ceramics are effective, too. Everyone uses ceramics all the time. All our buildings are built out of ceramic. We’re all so in it that it doesn’t seem foreign. You can enter into it in a lot of ways that I find really exciting, ways that painting doesn’t have. If you have an abstract vase, my grandma might say, “Oh, that’s kooky and weird, interesting.” Versus, if there was an abstract painting, she’d be like, “Oh god.” There’s a funny tension. I think it’s always more interesting to be on someone’s side and to expand their knowledge of something. That isn’t necessarily my artistic goal, but I think it’s just kind of in me to want to do that.

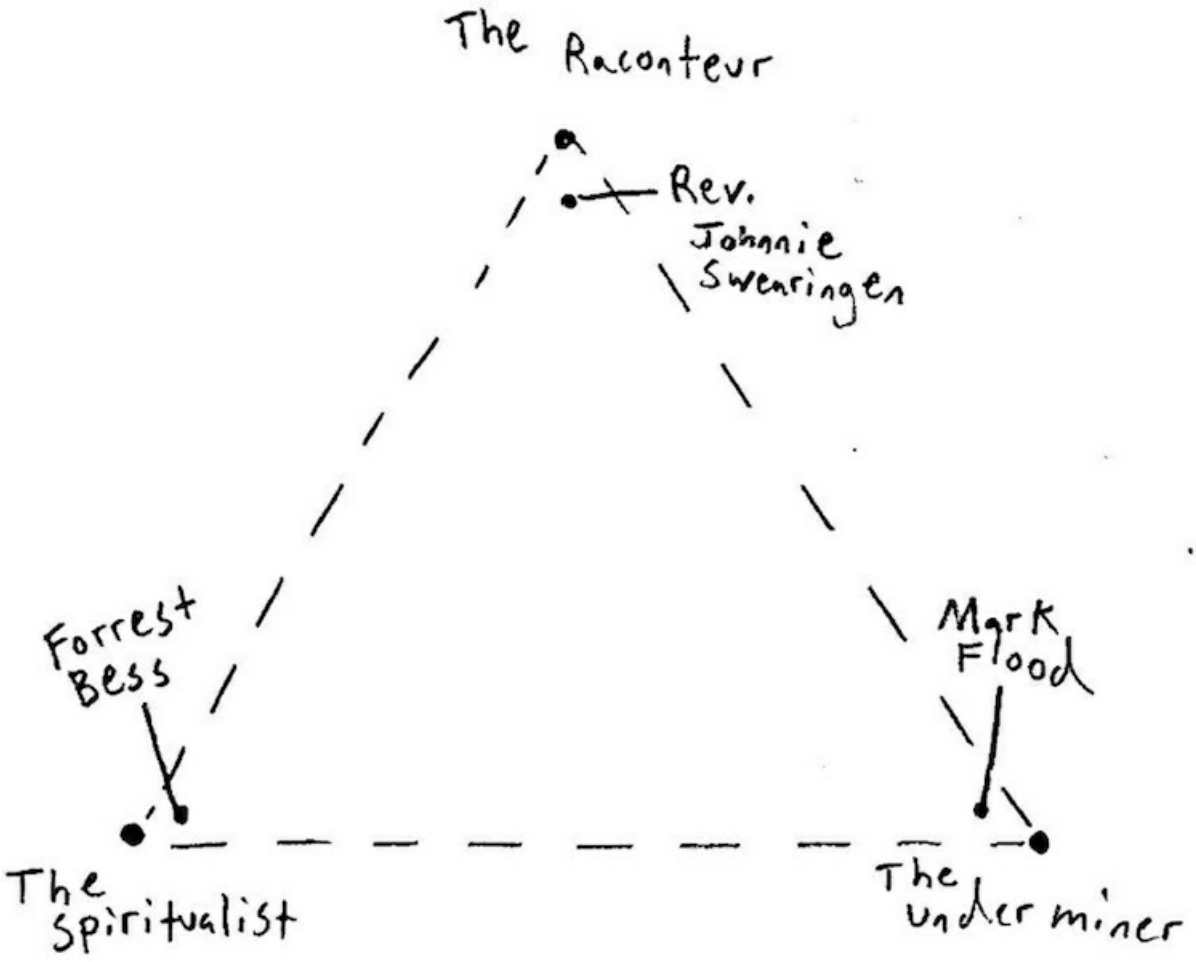
Tell me more about the imagery that you’re using.

I try to approach each piece for what it is. Sometimes I just really want to paint my dog. Most of the time, though, it's just about finding a way to cover the surface… Sometimes I have more specific ideas, but usually it's just things that I find on my computer—finding old blogs or old pictures or going through weird archives of different stuff and combining images.

It's a cumulative process. I'm always adding this on and wiping that off. The decisions that are being made aren't always the direct decisions that you might expect from a painter. It is this archival process where I'm trying to find things that I want to save. I ask myself how to make something so that I can keep track of and remember what has happened. It's almost like a curatorial practice. I always think about Sherrie Levine, who I really love because she's not appropriating images that she doesn't like. She's selecting what fits her idea of what's important, and I was always drawn to that method.

Did you know from an early age that an artist was something that you could be?

Not really. But I think in kindergarten I said I wanted to be an artist and then the guy after me said "karate master," which I thought was amazing. Gibby Chandler. He now runs the karate studio in Waxahachie, [Texas] and it makes me so happy. But I didn't think [being an artist] was a real thing until we visited a friend of my dad's, Jeff McMillan, in London one Christmas. I was in sixth grade. We went to their house and they had the most incredible art collection I've ever seen. It was crazy. They had this huge Grayson Perry next to their bathroom. I was like, "Oh, they live in a beautiful, nice house *and* they're full-time artists." That was my first inkling that it was something I could do. Then I started working for the Webb Gallery and that rocked my whole world. The idea that you could buy a building and do your own thing and find a way to make it work—and kind of in a vacuum, too. They truly made their own universe in Waxahachie.



What would you say to someone who is considering going to art school?

I think it was really helpful for me. I got a big scholarship and so it made sense. I never thought of it as art school. I was thinking of it more as a professionalization school for wanting to be a fashion designer, but changed to art pretty quickly. I feel like a lot of the artists who I really respect and admire didn't go to art school, but then a lot of them did.

My friend Tessa Granowski talks about this thing she calls the Weird Texas Enterprise. It's the idea that what you're doing is so outside of any other socially accepted focus that you get lumped into "art" but you're actually doing something more specific. I think about Terry Allen—he's a genius, and an artist. They don't know what else to do with him. If you're working in a lot of ways and can't really focus on one thing, then going to art school is kind of the perfect zone to be in, because they're not going to try to force you into a section. At least, it didn't do that to me. I was making seesaws and I was making chili for everyone and doing all kinds of weird stuff. It also helped me move to New York, and that was good.

Do you believe in moving to New York?

Oh, yeah. It can be tiring to always be in an uphill battle politically or creatively or socially. Growing up, other than with the Webbs and with my family, it was a constant challenge to get people to understand that what I was doing was worth anything. My self-worth really changed when I moved here.

It's beautiful that you were able to identify and connect with people whose values were aligned with your own. Sometimes it's easier to move to a big city and make a lot of fast friends than it is to find those meaningful connections.

Totally. I also need a lot of time by myself. I like being with a few people at a time. The Webbs gave me an amazing start for building a foundation of creative people who help me along the way. I have this really amazing family of people. Working with them ruptured my idea of only having friends that were close to my age. I was in high school and I would go to these dinner parties with people who were 90 years old—this huge, incredibly diverse group of people from all over the world who would come to Waxahachie for the Webbs. Yet no one in Waxahachie cares what they're doing at all.

Ike Morgan exhibition at Webb Gallery. Courtesy of Webb Gallery.

Do you think it's all about who you know?

Well, why would you do it if you don't enjoy being around the people who you're doing it with? I just got super lucky that I happened to be in a town where I found these awesome, inspiring people.

What do you think are the best ways of building that kind of community in a new place?

I think it's about really focusing on what you're doing to such an extreme level that the people who are on the same page as you, in terms of being committed to what they're doing, can find you… You really have to know yourself, too. You have to know what you need and are looking for.

How did you get to know yourself?

I was really into acting in high school. I had this one professor who taught Meisner techniques, who was phenomenal. It was way beyond the scope of what Waxahachie was ready for, and only a few of us were into it. I took it very seriously. It puts honesty at the forefront, but you're never trying to prove anything. That helped me conversationally with people.

How do you feel like Meisner connects with talking to people in real life?

You're actually listening. There's no pretense. If I'm not wanting to make eye contact, I'm not going to make eye contact. I'm not forcing myself to do things necessarily that I don't want to do within a conversation. I think my confidence went way up because I would actually know what was happening and would build relationships with people.

Sam Linguist, *summer reading in Wyoming (after JB)*, 2025, underglazed stoneware. Courtesy of Laurel Gitlen and the artist. Photo credit: Charles Benton.

How do you find your values as an artist?

Who are you? And what do you want out of a creative life? I think that was how it was proposed to me initially. A lot of people aren't doing it just for the art, it's about the day to day. If you really value what you think you do in art and in life and are forward about that, you'll find people who have similar values and end up working with people who have similar values. Then you have to question it at every moment.

Sam Linguist recommends:

Randy "Biscuit" Turner's drawings

Kazumi Kamae's ceramics

Franklin Williams' paintings

Christian Turner's sculptures

Joan Brown's self portraits from the 70s

Name
Sam Linguist

Vocation
artist