

On making art an everyday habit



Painter John Joseph Mitchell discusses the importance of private work, keeping your goals simple, and trying to change the viewer's understanding of time

January 15, 2025 -

As told to Ty Maxwell, 2890 words.

Tags: [Painting](#), [Focus](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Time management](#), [Failure](#), [Independence](#).

How does a painting begin for you?

Usually one of two ways. Either I see something in the world and I'm like, "I want to make that picture," or I see a picture and I'm like, "I want to make that painting." And then I look for a way to make it out of stuff in my world. So I guess the first process is more, like, self-explanatory; you make some sketches, take pictures. I usually make notes about color, particularly try to get one color relationship true in the sense that the distance in terms of value or temperature of those two colors is true. Not necessarily the colors themselves, but the way they relate to each other. Make notes about that. Then come back to the studio, and maybe 10% of the time I just start working on a painting. And then maybe 30% of the time I make drawings and start that way. And then the other...is from looking at a painting and seeing a question and a solution posed by someone else, and trying to pose the same question and find the same answer, or a similar answer. And my way into that is to find a subject in my surroundings that seems structurally suitable, I guess.

One thing I'm really interested in is that color-relationship notion - I'm curious how you arrived at not merely recreating what you're seeing exactly. Trying not to get the colors you saw exactly, but to get the emotion you felt.

Yeah, and that's based on the distance I think value-wise, and temperature-wise that two colors exist at. I think that's the way into emotional charge, I guess.

Finding that interchange, that energy between the two - did you find that early or was that a consequence of trying to do it one way and it not really being satisfying? When did you know that that was going to work better to just-

I just think that's the hardest thing to do, so it requires the most attention. When did I realize that? Yeah, I would say pretty early on in my painting. I guess I've been painting seriously now for 15 years. Early on, yeah.



Winter Morning Coffee, 2023, oil on wood panel with artist frame, 16.5x10.75 inches

Were you inspired early by painters who didn't necessarily go for the photorealistic image?

Yeah, I've always liked the same painting since I was young - expressionistic, figurative painting, I guess. Not figurative in terms of there needing to be a figure, but figurative in terms of there being a figure-ground relationship that is spatially sound, I guess, even graphic kind of. And yes, the painters I like are Van Gogh and Vuillard and Japanese printmakers like Hiroshige, people that all seem to approach the same question, which is...getting an object to have a beautiful, designed, crafted surface that gives way to an interesting picture.

It's like you need to get someone's sense of time to change. I think it's the same in music, you're guiding someone's movement through time, in terms of the speed at which your eye reads an image. And with a beautiful object, you move across it kind of fast, but with a picture or a photo, you move into the depth of it slower, you move back in space at a slower pace. And so if you can do both those things and somebody's looking at it, you feel that push and pull and that bounce between the surface and the picturesque part of it. That's what's interesting.

I'm curious how you feel about the changes that occur in the reality of being a painter once you start making a living off of it, once it starts being a profession, with the expectations that come with that...

I guess the biggest shift is in the fact that I never knew that anybody was ever going to see anything I made before. And so that was never even in the ether.

I try to still keep it private, still try to make it feel private in terms of making it for me first, you know? And even keeping stuff that's only mine, not necessarily putting everything I make out there.

I think it's an inherently private act - visualizing something on the back of my eyeballs and then trying to

translate that into a picture. That feels unknowable to myself, let alone anybody else. And so it's crazy. Yeah, there's some solitude in it. It's really nice. And in all things private, there's a solitude in knowing that something's only for you and it's yours, there's so much security in that. I think for me at least, there's joy in being the only one that knows something. So I guess making a picture is an expression of that, and so yeah, a lot of my drawings are just mine. I make paintings that are just mine to keep satisfying my own want for the paintings, too. I need to want them.

Right. So in that sense, it's not different to compare between not having an audience and having an audience because fundamentally you're starting from still a place of-

Me being the audience?

Yeah, you being your own audience.

Yeah, that's right.

I'm curious if you've had to navigate any difficulties or challenges with it shifting, trying to maintain [that privacy].

Yeah, of course. There's definitely just a shift. I don't even know if it's good or bad, but yeah, there's a shift.

If you can live off something, then yeah, you start to worry about that a little bit. Just like you worry about your job, just like you worry about-

Now you're depending on it.

Yeah. So that shift, that's a real thing. But I try to remind myself very often that the primary shift in my relationship to painting is that now I can do it all the time, and my goal has always just been to learn how to make nice paintings and now I have all that time to learn how to do that and get better at it. So yeah, just trying to still approach it...the positive of that is profound. It's kind of cool. I'm trying to just keep learning.

It sounds like you try not to be too precious about it, where if you have to kill your darlings along the way, like, "Oh, I like this, but I have to change it to make it better."

Yeah. I do generally try to stay true to the design, the initial structural design, the drawing. I try to stick to the drawing, which means not moving forms and shapes or stuff too much, trying to deal with what's there and change the colors of them.



By the Wood Stove, 2022, oil on panel in artist's frame, 19x16 inches

One thing that's going on with the paintings...they're small, generally. They're an object that you can hold in your hands. There's full intention behind this object, you've worked on every millimeter of it, down to the frames. What are you imparting or intending behind these decisions, these limitations?

Well, I don't think they have to be [small]. They happen to be, and have for a while, I think because it's just

in all the different ways I tried to make paintings, which were numerous, I didn't feel comfortable in the material until it was those things, until it was small and primarily hard surface, wood or canvas panel or something. And then it felt more akin to the way I approach drawing or prints or the monotypes. It felt much closer to that. And yeah, I just think [that's] the way I found to best do it.

It probably just comes down to body mechanics. I spent so much time drawing as a child and through my whole life before I started painting... the making of a big painting on canvas with big loose wet brushes and moving your whole arm, I don't know-

Yeah, you're dangling on a ladder.

[Laughs] Yeah, like that. It's harder for my body to do, I suppose. I don't have the muscle memory for it. Maybe I should try to break out of it at some point and do some exercising [Laughs]... [it's] an intuitive way to control the stuff, to control the medium that way.

Yeah, I think that's one thing that is sort of compelling about the work too, to me, is that there is a feeling that it was pleasurable to make it, you know what I mean?

I like that. That's a wonderful thing to hear.

I mean, you make the painting so you have a real sense memory of even the physical process of making it, and I wonder if, do you look at other paintings that are older, thinking, "That one was a pain in the ass"? [Laughs]

Oh, absolutely.

"I didn't enjoy a second of that."

The ones that I end up probably liking the most, if there's a general pattern, once I am removed from the painting or the making of the painting, that memory that's left is a little fuzzy. And so the ones I end up liking the most are the ones that usually were, like, "I don't know how I made that!" Probably because it was really hard and I probably hated making it.

Those are the ones you like the most?

[Laughs] There's a few that I have that are like that, and I'm like... Yeah, because it's just at some point they get funny or something. Like, "How did I get away with that?"

I don't remember where you said this, that sometimes you go to bed with the image in your head-

Oh, I try to always go to bed thinking about what I'm going to do the next day. It's how I fall asleep.

You can, I don't know what the word is... When you're falling asleep you can practice stuff. Your dreams are these weird little-

Rehearsals, almost.

Yeah, yeah! Rehearsals is a good word. And so if I can concentrate in that weird moment when I'm falling asleep..

Right. I'm curious about this idea of the creative work that goes on when we are in almost dreamlike or delirious states, late at night before we go to sleep or early upon waking.

Yeah! I think that's why I like starting so early in the morning, because I have the energy and the fortitude to make something, but it's the closest time to when I fall asleep. That's when you can have those moments you talk

about that are just very crystal abstract brain moments. [laughs]

You live in a pretty remote, small town in New Jersey and it seems like the things that inspire you to make images are mostly right here around you.

Yeah, yeah, for sure. It's where I grew up, so it is the visual landscape of my mind that when I picture things, it's the stuff from around here, so it's useful to be here to try to make those pictures. But there's so much other stuff too. My family's here and it's a nice easy place to be. And that's important because I think - to be able to focus, you have to keep the world small. I think our world, you have to, and that doesn't mean not be aware of what's happening in the world or anything like that. It just means like, all that's sort of like an assault on your brain. You need to have some space, some sense of barrier that's like safety...you got to be able to focus.

Obviously this area and living here and working here afford you that. Has it consistently been inspiring?

It just is.

It's just an unchanging reality for you that you're inspired by this place?

Yeah. Because ultimately the stuff's arbitrary anyhow. It's like you got to deal with what's given in some sense.

I guess what I'm getting at is do you ever have to deal with either, "I don't feel like making stuff right now" or "I feel like making stuff, but I don't have any ideas, nothing's striking."

I honestly really have only had a couple of week periods in the past, probably 18 to 20 years of not making stuff, one or two weeks at a time every few years.

That's awesome.

I don't know. I honestly try to approach it somewhat like a chore or a task that just needs to be done.

I just think it's a really interesting puzzle, it's a really interesting thing to do. It's one of the few things I think that we can just continually get better at and progress through the craft of painting. Most of the great painters are getting better the whole time and that's pretty neat.





Gadwall Beside a Pond, 2024, oil on panel in artist's frame, 11x7.5 inches

It almost sounds like you think of it in terms of the... is very related to the shape or the arc of a day where it's like if you finish something early, you're just like, "Wow, I have so much day left to-"

Yeah, you earned the day. And I don't know, it just becomes habitual, only in the most positive sense of that... I just think we have a lot more free time than we think.

It sounds to me that you are either more naturally disposed towards that or you trained your mind to... you've formed these habits and you've been able to keep it up in a way that other people might find more difficult.

I mean, I think just trying to be real simple about it. Stick to the initial goal. Don't change the goalpost on yourself. What do you like to do and what about it feels good?

For me, the way to remind myself that it is supposed to be joyous is to actively continue loving it in the sense of appreciating it outside of my making; always continuing to look at other people's paintings and just being like, "Oh, that's awesome. I love that painting. I want to make that painting." If that's there and it's approached with that joy and love and that's what I want to get out of it, that's what I got to put into it. There's no such thing as failure of any kind. It's like you always get that out of it if that's what you like about it. That's what you're starting with. So you got to give that to it. You got to keep bringing that to the table.

So many people do end up jaded because there's a lot to be jaded about.

Oh, you're getting beat down. [laughs] The world's sort of beat me down about it all.

But it's remembering that that's separate from the love of the work itself. The beauty of the work.

And your enjoyment of it as a viewer... It's a feedback loop. The way it brings out joy, loving, you put it back in, and then you get it back out on the other side. And that is back to privacy, part of maintaining that is the ultimate act of privacy. That is like, "This is my feeling, this is my joy." And so holding onto that is also holding onto the privacy of it. So if you look to get anything else out of it, you're introducing things out of your control, into allowing it to determine what can be reaped from what you alone sowed. I don't know. So it's only got to be for your own pleasure.

There's something you said in one interview that I thought was really interesting. You said something about how you make these things to be on people's walls and they have to be respectful of the fact that people look at them in different emotional states.

Yeah. Something along those lines. I think you have to be respectful of the fact that a painting, it's supposed to exist in someone's house.

I just think that's what paintings are for. That is their function. So it needs to exist in such a way that it can garner attention for sure, in terms of being an interesting thing to look at. But it shouldn't be distracting.

It's just about being simply... that's what they're for. That's what I want them for, that's what I'm making them for. And it's not even a question that that's what it's for. You need to set parameters on any creative process, you just need to set limits. It's like, what things are here to limit what I can use? What are my tools? What's the material thing? And what are the little funny ways I'm going to think about trying to make something out of it?

John Joseph Mitchell recommends:

Remember to do nothing. Baths are a good place to start.

[Horace Pippin - Saturday Night Bath, 1945](#)

[Pierre Bonnard - Nude in a Bathtub](#)

[Kitagawa Utamaro - Bathtime, 1801](#)

Name

John Mitchell

Vocation

painter, artist

□

