On finding a new angle



Painter Jonathan Ryan discusses getting more confident in himself and his work, not wanting to be bored, and scrapping his old process.

November 11, 2026 -

As told to Ty Maxwell, 2581 words.

Tags: Painting, Art, Process, Focus, Failure, Creative anxiety.

We were talking about how different the paintings look in person versus on a screen. You said that that's a pretty constant, consistent topic that people bring up when they're talking to you about the work.

Yeah. When they come and see it, and they've seen the work on their phones or on their computer, through the press release or Instagram or however they're getting connected with the work, and then they come to the opening, it's recognizable, but they have a very different optical experience with it. You get to see a lot of the texture of it, of course, with the sand and the little pieces of granite, but then also the color. I want that. We experience art and culture of all sorts on screens—and I think that's helpful and valuable to get work to people from anywhere around the world—but I also think it's very desirable, as an artist, to make work that then is able to bring something else to the table when seen in person. Especially in the realm of painting.

Where does a painting begin for you?

The first part is really the composition, so I start with drawings. It's a very playful phase where anything can happen in this ideation mode. I'm looking at books, looking at a lot of art historical examples. I'm usually sitting with monographs of different artists that I'm thinking about, and will start playing around with compositions and ideas that I've had or that come up in the moment.

And they're very simple. Usually thumbnail sketches, or sometimes I'll even take tracing paper and figure out compositions and different images that I'm looking at and come up with some rudimentary ideas of how an image can form. And once I get an image and an idea that I think could make a compelling painting, then I'll build the surface of the painting and I'll transfer the drawing onto the canvas.



Jonathan Ryan, *Citadel*, 2026, oil, sand, and decomposed granite on canvas 80 × 90 in.

There’s the illusion that each piece of material is individually painted, almost like it’s already there and you’ve arranged them.

Yeah, another question that I often get is when the rocks go on [the canvas], when the paint goes on the rocks, and how all that works. It’s funny, I’ve been doing this for 10 years, so I’m like, well, of course, it’s this way that I just described. How else would I do it? But then I realized it is a bit of a mystery that adds another layer to the experience of someone seeing the painting that I really appreciate, and I’m glad that that is a part of it. Someone asked me, “Do you paint the rocks before?” And I’m like, “That would take so long.” [*laughs*]

Totally, but they still look like they took a long time. That’s the effect. You get a sense of geologic time.

And they certainly do. It’s a very meditative process. There’s a lot of small brush strokes that are laying on top of each other and the paintings, a lot of these ones are fairly large; I like to work at that scale so that there is such a range of how you see the work and the material. As you get up closer, it becomes more abstract: you can see the material, you can see the rocks, you can see the many different layers of paint. And then as you move further away, it blurs a little bit more into an image.

I was reading an old interview where you were saying that you'd hit a point of feeling stagnant, kind of bored with your own work, until you entered an experimental period of fucking around and finding out.

It was a whole summer. My wife—girlfriend at the time, now wife—had to deal with my emotional mood swings quite a bit, because I was just like, "I don't know what's going on!" I think that was probably the summer of 2016… I was continuing more or less the process of making paintings in the way that I was in grad school. The paintings were fine, the images were fine, but it just really felt like I was losing steam and needed to reevaluate how I was making work and how I was thinking about it. I bought a lot of cheap canvases and just started throwing things on there.



Jonathan Ryan, *Passage*, oil, sand, and decomposed granite on canvas, 80 × 84 in

Tell me more about why it felt stagnant. They were fine, but what was missing?

I had developed a process of doing *en plein air* drawings. I would go out, sit in parks or go to the desert and

other areas in and around Los Angeles and Southern California. I was doing a similar thing when I was in Pennsylvania, or before that when I was in Louisiana. I would take photos as well, and bring all those drawings and the photos into the studio, and then make work from that. But I really reached a point where I felt like I was having a hard time separating myself from the source imagery that I was looking at. It was getting a little bit arbitrary, the deviations from it. I was having a hard time transforming them into something that felt more compelling or interesting than the actual landscapes or spaces that I was depicting.

I think I ultimately felt a little bit too beholden to the source material, and couldn't find a way to get away from it. So I started experimenting not just with new materials, but also I stopped doing the *en plein air* drawings and I stopped taking as many photographs. I started looking at landscapes from different points of view in different places. It's when I started looking at more art historical examples. I was looking at landscapes from comics or video games or films, any other source that I could really consume and process. That changed the way I was thinking about how to make a painting and how to make an image. I was also doing it at a rate at which I felt less attached or beholden to some sort of idea of a pure image that I had to hang onto during the painting process. So it was a twofold way to open up the work, materially and conceptually, and led to a lot of bad work—which was really necessary, to then come to a place where it felt like I had a point of view and a path to move forward.

Sometimes when I'm making really bad stuff, I feel better than when I'm making middle-of-the-road work. When you feel like you made something completely competently, but it's neither good nor bad, that's not necessarily as exciting as, "I just made something crazy."

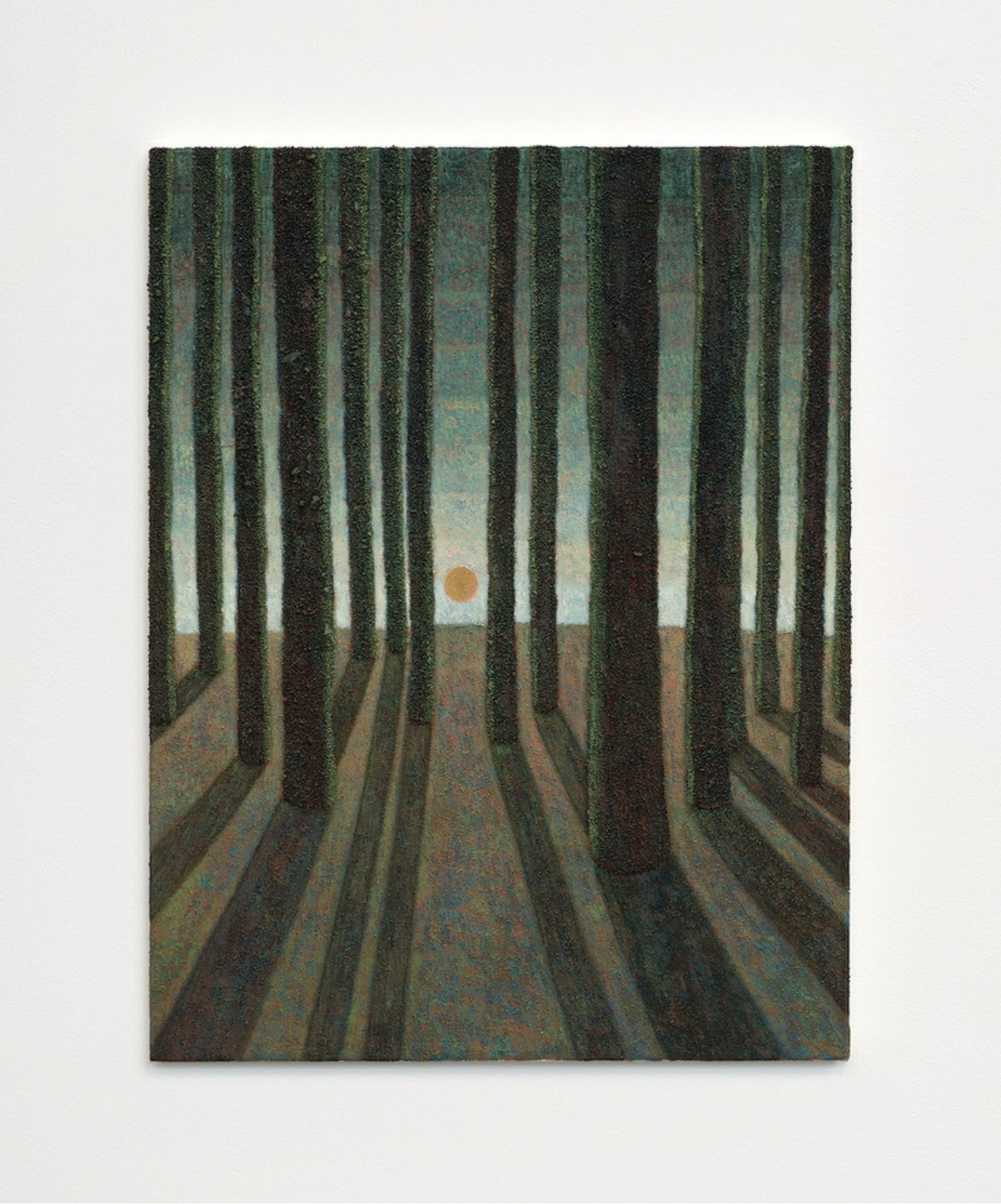
100%. And then you do that enough and you realize the old has really shed. It's like a skin that has shed, and then you're like, "I'm not where I need to be, but I'm also not tethered to some sort of comfort zone or some sort of idea and identity that I had built around my work and practice." So it's freeing.

Healthy molting… Do you remember any of your particularly bad paintings?

Most of the really bad ones I threw away, but I just kind of remember ideas of cutting up strips of canvas and mixing them up with a lot of gel medium and stuff and creating these craggy, funky surfaces, and just throwing a lot of paint and material on the surface. Probably some of them fell apart.

Literally disintegrating.

There was something to buying these very cheap studio canvases from the art store, too. They come in bulk packs that are really just for students to do that same thing. They were designed to be tossed at the end.



Jonathan Ryan, *Miles to Go Before I Sleep*, 2026, oil, sand, and decomposed granite on canvas, 26 × 20 in.

Is it important to you to regularly break your habits or challenge your assumptions?

Yeah. The work has gone through various larger ideas or iterations. I feel like every two or three years, once I get too comfortable, then I do have a tendency to want to find ways to challenge what I've been doing.

And in this case, I've been working with these same materials for a long time and it's become an identifying part of my work. Boredom is a thing that I am very attuned to. And when I get like that in a studio, then I really have to figure out how to keep myself interested, because if I can't do that, how can I expect anyone else to want to engage with the work?

How do you know when a painting's done?

It's a very hard thing to describe. I mean, I can intellectualize it and I will try, but ultimately, it's a feeling. I could describe all the things that I'm trying to get a painting to do based on the body of work and the things that I'm trying to achieve, but answering those questions when I'm working on something or living with something in the studio for days and days, it becomes a more general feeling. And then I'll make decisions based on that feeling.

It's interesting to me how the compositions suggest that the viewer has happened upon these landscapes at this exact right moment, found the exact right angle from which to view them. The exact right time of it is kind of beguiling, because when are you ever in the right place at the right time, exactly? Taken together, it's odd; it's uncanny.

Yeah. I mean, "uncanny," I like that word in relation to the work. I think there's always been this fascination throughout many cultures throughout the world, looking at certain environments or building structures, to capture those moments with the sun and the rising of the sun and the setting of the sun. And I always thought of the suns or the moons or what have you in this work as characters. And they influence the light and the color throughout the rest of the painting.

I sometimes make paintings without them at all, but I realize that they are playing a pretty crucial role, and they are constructed images. They're not "real" spaces, so they are designed to have that uncanny quality to them. They have an internal logic; they don't have a naturalistic logic, if that makes sense. I think that having everything be a little bit off adds to this uncanny or strange nature.

I'm hung up on what you said about the sun and moon being characters. That's the aspect of the paintings that I feel like is looking back at me.

The title of the show, *The Hour of the Pearl*, is a reference to this John Steinbeck quote: "It is the hour of pearl—the interval between day and night when time stops and examines itself." I like thinking about the light at dawn or dusk, when we experience the sun at its most active, where it feels like sometimes it's blinding; sometimes it changes the color of the sky and it's casting hard shadows. It's doing all these things that really keep you aware of its presence.

The first time you painted with the sand, it kind of immediately worked for you. You liked the way that the color and the paint were still coming through, but the texture of the sand was also there. I'm curious about that moment of discovery that something works, but you're also kind of figuring it out, before you've codified it into a technique or whatever. Can you tell me about that moment?

At the time, it was a painting of this hallway scene, and there was this area of dirt on the bottom portion of the painting which was supposed to be the ground. And it was a pretty basic idea. It was in that moment where I was like, "I'll do anything." So I grabbed some sand and poured it on in this area of the painting, in a kind of ham-fisted way, and then I saw that the texture and color of the sand changed as it was absorbed into the oil paint. And I was like, "Oh, that's …" It felt different because before when I was adding the materials into the painting, it resembled just a gooey muck over everything. It was gooey paint with crap in it. And this was really an interaction.



Jonathan Ryan, *Beacon*, 2026, oil, sand, and decomposed granite on canvas78 x 50 in.

I’m curious about feeling a need or a desire to have an expressive signature quality, a more personal, creative specific-to-you feeling in the work that you make.

It’s been a gradual process, but I think any artist of any kind feels like, rather than a signature style, what you want to have is a confident and identifiable point of view. And that can shift over time, but it needs to be rooted in some sort of idea that you’re going back to over and over again, and then trying to find different angles to approach it or look at it. And I don’t want to give the impression that I don’t look at source material now. I do quite a bit. But my point of view wasn’t as strong, and I didn’t know how to move away or deal with subject matter or source material in a way that allowed me to feel like I was saying anything super important with it.

And I recognized that, and I felt very uncomfortable about that. And now I feel like, through the process of making this work over the years, and working with these materials, and experimenting with different ways to create an image, that I’m so much more comfortable looking at another image and taking it and thinking about how I can use it and form an idea of my own. And I feel like that takes a degree of confidence and understanding in yourself.

Jonathan Ryan recommends:

Mississippi Records CSR Club. A subscription from a small label that sends you great music by overlooked artists across many genres and timelines.

Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water. A detailed book by Marc Reisner about water policy in the American West and how its landscape was dramatically transformed as nearly every major river in the region was dammed or diverted throughout the 20th century.

Norton Simon Museum. An excellent art museum in Pasadena, on the border of northeast Los Angeles. The collection is small but mighty, and the exhibitions are beautifully designed.

Promises by Floating Points, London Symphony Orchestra, and Pharoah Sanders, 2021. A beautiful conversation between jazz, classical, and electronic music. This was Sanders’ final album released before his death in 2022.

Paterson. A 2016 film written and directed by Jim Jarmusch. I recently saw this and enjoyed its quiet and thoughtful pacing and minimal narrative structure.

Name
Jonathan Ryan

Vocation
painter

Jonathan Ryan by Michael Allen