

On finding new ways to be an artist



Visual artist Annie Lapin discusses learning how to adapt your process to new interests, competing with AI and learning to love California.

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As told to Claudia Ross, 2511 words.

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Can you describe your painting process? I know you incorporate a lot of different imagery from different art historical periods and mediums.

For me, painting was always an exploration of how the mind works and an exploration of how we see as individuals, how we're influenced by our individual memory, and by our cultural memory. Painting was this surface that we impose all of this framework from previous viewing experiences, from our exposure to our history. I imagined I had almost like a warehouse, or a catalog, in my mind of everything I've seen in the past.

And funnily enough, it does sort of correlate now to this data set behind ChatGPT and all these AI generators. But I always thought about it. It's already in my mind, "Here's this warehouse of imagery, and I'm going to lay it over this piece as I try to find the image."



Annie Lapin, *Landings*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 32 in, 106.7 x 81.3 cm.

And then after I had children in 2014, I started working more on the computer. As I was working on the computer to map out the paintings, which was my way of extending my studio work into my evening, I started to think: rather than just relying on my own memory, I would allow myself to use the internet as an extension of that.

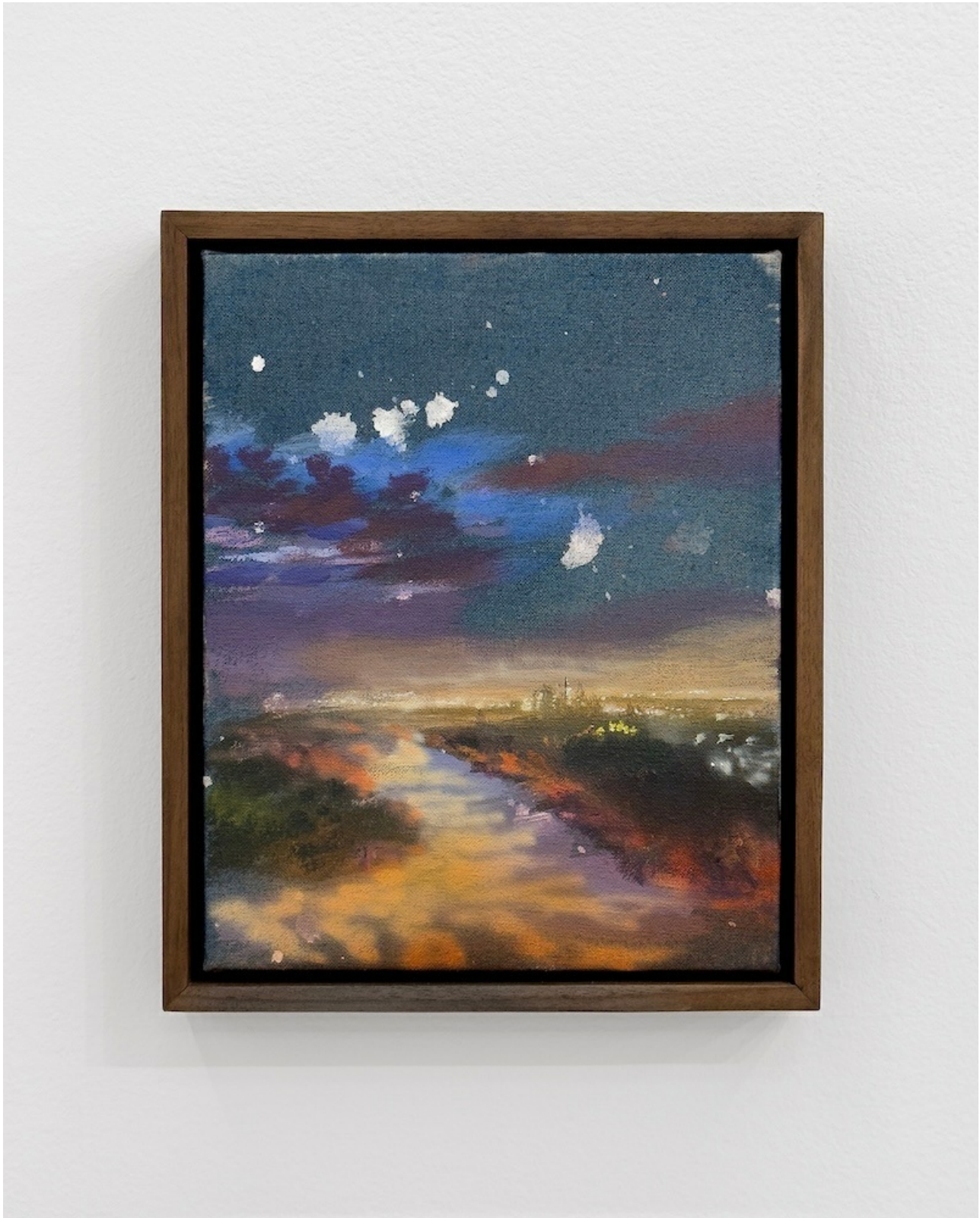
So I started to import imagery based on searches to go along with my ideas. So internet imagery has always been a part of my practice since that time, around 2015. My own photographs are part of that as well.

At the time, I was more interested in the catalog of paintings available to look at online. But more recently, and for this body of work, I am working more with photography of my contemporary world. I also allow user-generated photographs from online to be a part of the extension of my mind in some way.

Even though your paintings are gestural and expressive, I can see parts of the digital world seeping in. It has that aesthetic. How has machine-generated imagery or AI influenced your painting, if at all?

I have not utilized AI at all. What was interesting to me about AI around 2018 was that the model really seemed to go along with my model of my own mind. So that's actually a little bit scary to me, because I think AI art is garbage. But it's interesting to me to pit myself against AI. I think it's a bit of a competition. I mean, I think it's pretty easy to win, because AI is a soulless generator of imagery. But I do feel like it's important to be making something that's separate from that.

The digital component of the work is more there in its aesthetic and feel, which is part of me trying to convey how our experience of nature is so digital now. I'm interested in the oscillation between nature and this veil of the digital world that colors our experiences of natural environments.



Annie Lapin, *Night*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 8 x 10 in, 20.3 x 25.4 cm.

How has your relationship to California changed in the making of this body of work?

I've become very engrossed in the Los Angeles and Southern California landscape. But it's been a reluctant journey, because I'm from the East Coast, where things are much more lush. And I have often felt very uncomfortable here. I cannot spend time in the desert without feeling itchy. I'm literally allergic to everything here. Even going into the mountains feels so uncomfortable to me, but it's also very beautiful.

I'm amazed that we're in this very huge city that sometimes feels like it's just a smudge on this big land, even though there's so many people. On the East Coast, some of the cities, it feels like they're just dug into the ground. Cities feel like they've always been there. But in LA it feels like the concrete is very shallow.

LA can feel temporary. Like it could wash away.

There are vast spaces in the city that nobody can live in because the landscape isn't suitable. I love that part of LA, that interface between desolate chaparral, and people wanting to live in this really utopian California.

Your previous work has been interested in the permeability of the Romantic sublime and the real natural world. And LA has that kind of ebb and flow of man-made and natural.

Yes. I don't know if I'm capturing it in this body of work, but if I think of LA, I think of amazingly constructed representations of the natural world, and the imported water, fake-natural garden. It's so hard to figure out what's natural here, but that's sort of spectacular, too.



Annie Lapin, *Gape and the Glow Above Dust Softened Grids*, 2025, acrylic on linen, 59 x 72 in, 149.9 x 182.9 cm.

What brought you out to LA originally?

I came here for grad school at UCLA. But I really never wanted to move here. People would say, "Look how beautiful the nature is here." And I'd just be like, "What are you talking about?" But now I see what people were talking about. It's almost like if you don't live here, you can't see it. And then when you live here, you really can see this strange integration between nature and the city, and you love it. You love these little wild hillsides on the side of the freeway.

Can you talk about how you create the abstract portions of your canvases?

Yes. It's a very separate stage of the work. I pour paint onto canvases on the ground, and then those are photographed and kind of meditated on.

I started the pours because I had always worked on top of my paintings over and over again to kind of dig out the image from the previous image. I would make something very realistic and then try to break it down. But with the pours, I just wanted to start with this thing that existed, and then figure out how to just tweak it as little as possible to turn something that's an accident into something that seemed like it had a very intentioned history.

I also had this desire for a painting to contain all of the stuff that I'd ever experienced and loved about painting. So there was this impulse to make the pours originally just thinking about, "How can I make a painting that's my painting, that still relates to color field painting and minimalism?"

The impulse of a lot of artists is, "How do I put everything I love in one place?" And usually the advice is, "You don't have to do everything in one place."

But I like that your embrace of everything you love about painting has led to your aesthetic, which feels very singular. Did you encounter any pushback when you began incorporating so many different techniques? Were there naysayers at any point?

I think there can be a suspicion about what could appear to be a kitchen sink approach on the surface of the work. But it comes from a very personal inclination I have to treat cultural material and memory like a physical material that is inherent to each canvas. When I was coming up as a painter, mid 2000s in Los Angeles, especially coming out of UCLA, I was immersed in a deconstructive conversation about painting. Peers that I really admired were taking apart the components of the canvas, deconstructing the act of painting.

But for me, I felt the truth of the object also lay in the memories of the beholder. The materiality of painting extended into the information in the mind which informs perception. So even though my work was completely different from this conversation around deconstruction, when I approach the canvas, I imagined that I was excavating layers of cultural and personal history, not just the warp and weft of the linen. I wanted the image on the canvas to somehow flash between the history of its own making, like the paint pours and brushwork, and what I imagine is the mental material and images people bring to the work when they see it.



Annie Lapin, *Lights and Venus//Contours of Twilight Hike*, 2025, acrylic on linen, 58 x 71 in, 147.3 x 180.3 cm.

What do you do when you do feel stuck? Are these different techniques also a way of getting “un-stuck”?

It is very hard to develop a composition around total accidental things. I can get stuck on a painting, and sometimes I literally cannot fix it, and I have to throw it away. Especially for these paintings that are going into the show, I really wanted the paintings to breathe.

I just need it to be very clear that this is made out of paint and linen, and then have this other image on top. But if you go too far, you lose that. And so, I do have to have a lot of paintings in process at once, and a lot of pours that I can bounce from one to the other. But then, a lot of times, I just have to dump the painting. And for the show, I threw away a lot of paintings.

Really? What was the most consistent thing that you felt wasn't working?

I do a lot of studies, and I try to design the image before I create it, because I have one or two shots to get the image right. Because if you paint too much on the canvas, or if you add something, and then you're like, "Oh, no, I don't like that."

So I need to have multiple paintings happening at the same time, and I have to promise myself that it's okay to throw it away if it's not working.

Have you always been a painter?

Yes, it's always been painting. I've definitely tried other things. I made an installation at Grand Arts in Kansas City, right out of grad school, where I tried to make an installation that was almost like a three-dimensional painting.

And then I decided painting was harder. When I was younger, I always wanted to do the harder thing. Now, I'm not sure I'd want to do the harder thing.

What's your typical workday like?

I have a 9:00 to 5:00 schedule for the most part, sometimes 9:00 to 4:00. And then one day a week... at least one... I stay out. I stay at the studio until 11:00, and sometimes 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning.

I'll do one day a week where I don't see anybody all day. I have two kids, and that does intrude upon your mind and your creative process. But to have one day a week where you're just like, "I'm a crazy artist here by myself and I don't have to worry about putting anybody to bed." That has been a big help for me, and luckily I have a partner who supports that.

Do you have days where you don't work at all?

Not when I'm working on a show. I'll take a little time off after a body of work, just because I can't even do it. And there are times when I want to avoid the studio, because I don't know what I'm doing, or I just think I can get something out of doing something totally different. I'm looking forward to having time soon where I can just make paintings that I don't have to show anyone.



Annie Lapin, *Joshua Tree//Relief of Relief from Sun*, 2025, acrylic on linen, 74 x 78 in, 188 x 198.1 cm.

What's your relationship to exhibiting work? Do you have to steel yourself through that process?

I think that as I get older—and I think this is the same for a lot of my friends—the parts where you're showing the work become less of a big deal. It's not as exciting. It's not as scary. Which is fine, because it's much better to be focused on having relationships with your artist friends. The hardest part for me is not the exhibiting. It's figuring out how to paint something that I care about.

Building up to this new show, I was in a place where I felt like I really needed to rethink how I approached the paintings. These last couple years I was working on the body of work that felt like I was still making paintings out of this older thought process, but I was slowly getting to the point where I just didn't care about that as much.

So when I agreed to do this show, I thought I would figure it out. And then, I had been working so hard and doing so many other things that I just didn't actually have time to figure it out. Then the fires happened, and the world has been crazy, and I knew that I wasn't going to feel good doing another body of work like what I was doing before.

Maybe there are artists who don't have that struggle as much. They're just like, "Oh, I'm just going to do my thing." I was like, "No, I can't even do anything. No, I can't make work. I'm just not going to make anything." But various people pushed me until I figured it out, and I pushed myself. But I would not have been able to make

another show if I didn't feel like it was a new conversation for me.

How would you define that shift in your work for this new show?

Well, I think my new paintings connect more to an emotional, personal relationship to nature that I experience in my current life. And I felt like I needed to make my subject matter more personal, rather than this kind of philosophical thought process that guided a lot of my work in the past. Like I said, I think that's still a framework for how I understand things. But I also wanted to connect more with the world that I'm living in, in a way that felt maybe healing or something. There's a lot of difficult stuff happening in the world, and I felt like I wanted to connect more to something a little transcendental, while, at the same time, not turning away from horror.

Annie Lapin recommends:

Mount Thom via Las Flores Motorway trail, in Glendale, CA (at sunset)

Stay True, by Hua Hsu

Hahamonga Native Plant Nursery, La Cañada, CA

River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West, by Rebecca Solnit

Lupitas Gorditas, Oaxacan food truck Eagle Rock Blvd & Ave 33

Name

Annie Lapin

Vocation

visual artist

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