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AS IS | Brian Rutenberg

Artist

From South Carolina, US

Based in New York, US

Brian paints abstract landscape canvases packed with rich color, the result of a technique he has been perfecting for decades. With his typical sense of humor, he told us about his magical approach to life and dreams, the deep connection he shares with his childhood home in the South of the US, and showed us the importance of being a bit of a poet in our daily lives.



A: Please, tell us a bit more about yourself. What brought you into art?

B: I'm not a painter. I am a failed magician who paints. That distinction is important. Sneaking in the word "failed" has been a kind of truth for me for as far back as I can remember; true like ice, like fire. I began drawing at ten years old, but my dream was to be a stage magician. Unfortunately, my hands grew too large to perform convincing sleights. It turns out, Shrek fingers are terrible for French drops; however, they're ideal for wielding fistfuls of oil paint. Still, I am a card-carrying member of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, attend magic conventions around the country, and spend a great deal of time in the magic capital of America, Las Vegas.

Magic and painting have a lot in common. For example, both use our knowledge of natural laws against us. That which appears real is fake: it looks like the magician is really pouring milk into a newspaper. That which appears fake is real: Van Gogh's clunky, awkward sunflowers exude a fierce presence and are, therefore, real. But I got into magic to get attention and wear tight pants.

A: What inspires you the most?

B: My greatest fortune in life is that I was born and raised along the coast of South Carolina. Where I grew up, people didn't ask how you were doing, but where you were from—not the town or street, but what patch of shade under what tree. Southern children are taught to drink in the wondrous details of the local landscape: a flower isn't just a flower, but blue water-hyssop or southern marsh canna, birds are black-bellied whistling ducks or red-footed boobies, and barbecue sauce is light tomato, heavy tomato, mustard, or vinegar. Poetry lives in details, and the artist's job is to amplify them. My connection to the landscape of South Carolina has nothing to do with nostalgia; it's much broader than memory. It's my clear seeing place.

A career has many moving parts, but there must be a cable that runs from your soft tissue directly to your clear seeing place. Every artist needs such a place, for this is where your muse resides. Mine is an old man named Homiah. He has gray sideburns and wears a shabby root-beer-brown trench coat and a Gatsby cap. Homiah has been my muse for as long as I can remember. I work all day, every day, so that Homiah will know when and where to find me; I lock my door, start messing around, and pretty soon he appears, all soft-mouthed and weightless. His only prerequisite is solitude.

The word *inspire* means to inhale, which refers to the body, not the mind. Painting is an act of wild desperation. Every Southern artist is a natural-born extremist because we must resist the image of the banjo-plucking mouth breather and tear down the moss-draped mythology of a place gone with the wind. Because it remained somewhat separate from the western expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century, the South was perceived as complex, isolated, and exotic. That's why the South produces so many writers, artists, musicians, and eccentrics—because we have ghosts to push against. Art has to point someplace.

A: Do you have any specific rituals while working (creating)?

B: On my studio wall is a 1964 black and white photograph of John Lennon and Paul McCartney singing into one microphone, beaming with joy. I love this photograph because of their smiles; not those of a couple of rock stars thinking, "Look at us playing for ten thousand screaming fans", but of a couple of guys thinking, "I can't believe I get to do this for a living." I repeat that to myself every morning when I cross the threshold into my studio.

A: What would you recommend to someone who's new to art (whether artist or just an admirer), what to begin with?

B: Say yes to everything.

A: What are your three favourite adjectives related to art?

B: Incantatory. Luxurious. Wondrous.





A: The best angle to look at art is from?

B: Dead center, about ten feet from the object. Then, ten inches. When you stand in front of a painting, you are standing in exact same spot that the painter did as he/she applied each delicate skin of color over time. Two people, the maker and the taker, share one footprint and together manufacture a place that has never existed before and will never exist again. I think that's a beautiful way to live.

A: The perfect phrase to start any conversation about art is:

B: "How does it make me feel?"

A: Must-read books to help us talk about art (or do we even need them)?

B: Yes. Reading about art is important because it teaches you how to translate what you are doing into language. It's hip to think that your work will "speak for itself", but it won't. You have to help it. Look a lot, read a lot. I recommend *Three Cornered World* by Natsume Soseki.

A: If you could change one thing in the art world - what would it be?

B: Art speak. When an artist writes "My praxis interrogates the theoretical limitations of alter-modernism while traversing the modalities of the body as liminal space" I want to smack them in the ear with a sock full of manure. Describe what you are doing in your work in five words or less. My five words are *Standing here while looking there*. Content in my work is a direct function of how near or far something appears from your face. Albert Einstein said, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."

A: Please, share your favorite quote (not necessarily related to art):

B: "I usually take my hands out of my pockets." - drummer Buddy Rich on how he practiced

Thank you!

For more: [visit](#) or [IG](#)

Brian's best-selling books about becoming an artist: [*Clear Seeing Place*](#), [*A Little Long Time*](#)

Brian is represented by: [Forum Gallery](#) (New York), [Jerald Melberg Gallery](#) (Charlotte), [LewAllen Gallery](#) (Santa Fe), [Tew Galleries](#) (Atlanta), [John Raimondi Gallery](#) (Palm Beach Gardens), and [Nancy Toomey Fine Art](#) (San Francisco).

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