

## In the Studio: John Seed and Joshua Flint

an interview

John Seed spoke with Flint in July, 2022, shortly after a studio visit, about context, process, and our impact on future generations.



ICE BATH (2018)  
11 x 14 inches, oil on paper  
private collection

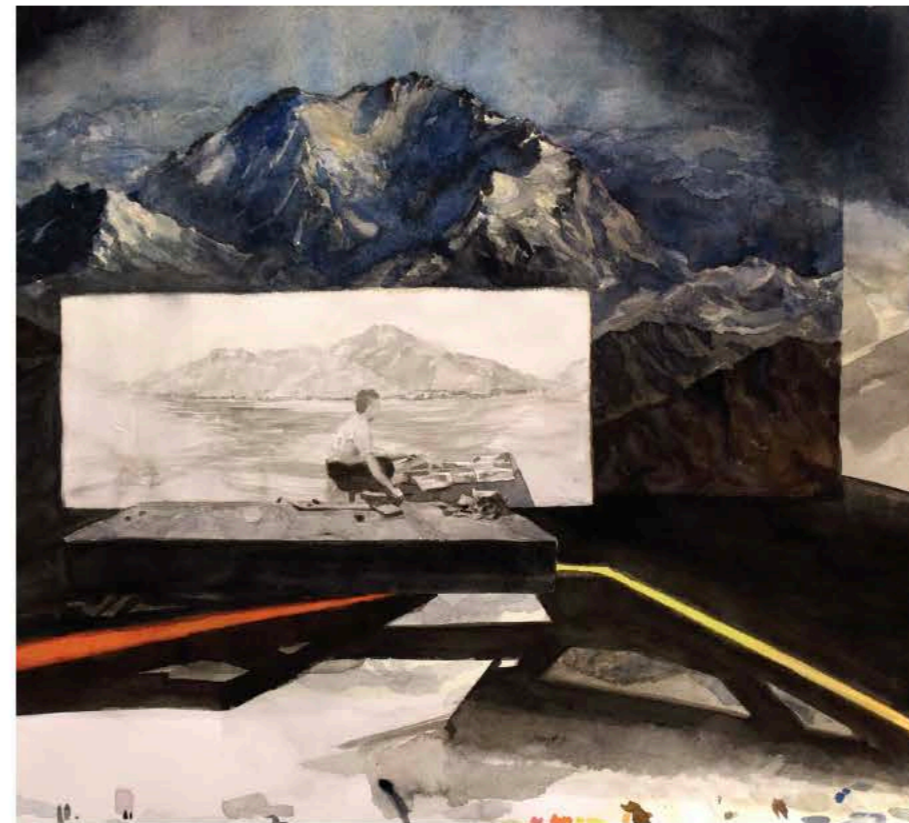
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**JS:** Tell me about your life and background.

**JF:** As I was deciding on whether to change paths in life and attend art school, I worked for the United States Department of Agriculture as an assistant researcher and greenhouse attendant. My role was to propagate, cultivate, and take care of plants for organic testing across seven greenhouses. Most of the testing was focused on controlling bacteria that effected wine making grape varietals around the world. Process was important. If I (or a scientist or another employee) walked into a greenhouse in the wrong order and potentially carried bacteria, then I'd have to destroy the cluster of plants being studied and start again. The job nurtured my interest in biology, geography, and plant life, and continues to be something I look back on with fondness and curiosity.

**JS:** What are some of the life experiences that have shaped your art?

**JF:** I grew up in small towns across the Pacific Northwest and Southwest. The feeling of running through forests of ferns and trees, the enormity of mountains, and the blue of an immense sky. The paintings I saw as a young adult while traveling in both central Europe and China, in these unassuming rooms, was the unexpected feeling that this was not unlike



THE DRAWING ROOM (2019)  
17 x 21 inches, watercolor

“ Art allows more in [holistically] than science, and as artists we can aggregate a wider variety of topics into a painting.

how it felt as a boy, captivated by the natural world, the scientific world, the inner landscape contained in each of us: here it was on the walls of museums and cathedrals and in homes.

Before I attended art school, I was studying forestry and wildlife ecology. I took a great class on Pacific Northwest Indigenous peoples' understanding of land, natural resources, and ecology. It really was a course in the diverging beliefs of Western perspectives on the natural world and how they're managed (and taught)

to the exclusion of information from the local Indigenous peoples. Growing up in northern New Mexico around communities of Indigenous Peoples I could already tell the approach in science wasn't as inclusive or holistic as it should be. Of everything I studied this class had the most impact.

One precept burrowed deep inside me: We need to know the seven generations before us so that we may understand our impact on the next seven generations. I think this class largely confirmed why I left to go to art school. Art allows more in than science and as artists we can aggregate a wider variety of topics into a painting.

**JS:** What are your works about and what themes and ideas do they encompass?

**JF:** My paintings are constructed realities often described as Memoryscapes which is to say they involve recollection, personal myth, and

psycho geography (the exploration of environments that emphasize interpersonal connections to places). There is a historical cultural visual memory that I'm excavating and exploring, with a focus on liminal spaces and the characters that populate them.

There might be a misperception that the work is rooted in nostalgia, which isn't the case. I'm not representing a specific era and making paintings associated with or promoting those values. I'm interested in the discontinuity of time. By bringing in figures and places associated with past eras memory is activated. A viewer knows the clothing style doesn't fit in with the "here and now." The order of time and space is broken and activates memory. Other artists may use flatness of shapes,

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some distort proportions or color, while others rely on many forms of exaggeration as visual approaches to painting, I utilize the multiplicity and bending of time. The linear dialogue around history that western thought has presented has been dismantled in our internet age. My paintings are grounded in realism, in things you would recognize, or partially recognize, weaved together and presented in an unexpected manner.

There are reoccurring themes in the work, just like we all have images that stay with us throughout life, some of mine are: mountains,

fire, flora and fauna, birds, to name a few. My paintings have missing fragments, blurred areas, an unexpected flash of color. The mountains are inside. The animals are inside. The dining room table is in the middle of the woods in a running stream. The riverbed is beneath a grand stairwell. The interplay between the literal and suggestive allows a certain tension and instability to the surface. I look to literature, poetry, philosophy, and science for ideas, plus films and occasionally dreams. As writer Robert MacFarlane states, "Illusion is also a path towards knowledge."

**JS:** Who are some of the artists and other thinkers that have influenced your art?

**JF:** There are so many and I'm sure I'll leave out artists I adore but here are a few: Giotto, Velazquez, Manet, Degas, Edwin Dickinson,

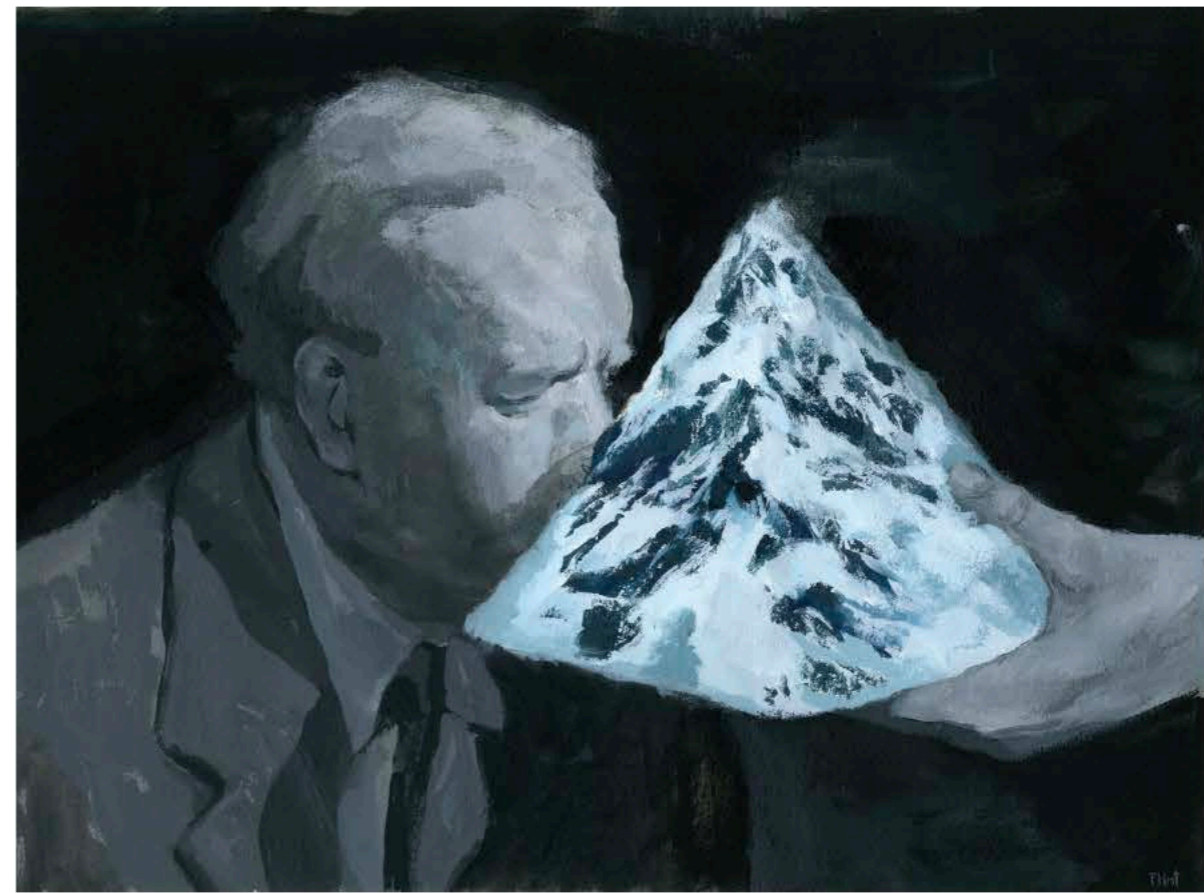
Edward Hopper, German Romantic painting, The Surrealists, The Dadaists, Bo Bartlett, and Hilma af Klint. I locate myself within these artists in some way, whether that be technical or conceptual.

Currently, I feel a kinship with a lot of painting being done in the UK and in Central Europe, where artists are infusing figurative work with other forms in tremendous ways.

Film has had an influence, and I'm drawn to movies that have a strong sense of atmosphere and color. Much like a director I'm moving actors

THE GUEST IV (2018) 16 x 12 inches, acrylic on paper, private collection

“I'm looking for the unexpected, to see something in a new way; to synthesize subjects that break from the laws of perception.”



PINNACLE (2018) 12 x 16 inches, acrylic on paper, private collection

around on an invented stage for an audience, while thinking about foreground, middle ground, background, scale relationships, and how these devices relate to one another as a whole.

Great thinkers and writers like Rebecca Solnit, Jose Ortega Y Gasset, Robert Macfarlane, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Andrea Wulf have given me words to feelings I don't know how to express, which then inspires my visual language. Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* left a lasting mark. Other influences are transcendental experiences, ancient history, and ecological

issues. A special influence is my wife Tara, who always provides vital insight when I need it most.

**JS:** How do you choose historical images as you search for ideas for paintings?

**JF:** As an image-driven thinker, ideas for paintings come to me before I paint. Usually, I've made thumbnail drawings or little sketches to capture the initial thought. If I don't have a sketch, then I have a starting place with a selected image that I want to explore. This could be a background element, like a group of plants or a



shadow on a wall, or it could be the main figure. It really varies. At this point these ideas aren't fully formed, which means there's room to shift the subject matter around. For example, in this book you'll notice preliminary studies exploring single elements and full color studies for larger paintings. I'll look for those elements in a very

deliberate manner. I'm reminded of T.S. Eliot, who called this phase 'critical labor,' the labor of sifting, combining, constructing, connecting, and testing of imagery.

I try to remain open to improving on the concept as I generate or locate source material. For example, if I find a different angle of a room interior than initially planned, I'll test this alternate view with another drawing or even create a digital mockup to discover if it improves the idea, moving freely

A STORY OF FATHERS AND SONS  
(2018) 12 x 20 inches, watercolor  
on Arches, private collection



between traditional and digital tools until I'm satisfied with a direction. I begin the painting phase without the concept totally resolved. There is always something I'm going to need to solve on the canvas. I'm looking for the unexpected, to see something in a new way, to arrange subjects that break from the laws of perception, from reality, and that can't be planned in every piece. The place I begin might not resemble where I end, but that image search has got me moving. On top of that, the act of translating the idea into paint has a way of altering the outcome. I'm speaking broadly here and trying to illustrate that the process is constantly in flux from initial concept to finished painting.

**JS: What are some of your other subjects and themes?**

**JF:** My paintings are synthesized from a wide variety of sources and eras. I've included pictures I've taken at dinner parties, during hikes with family, and even sunsets in Panama taken by a friend. It really runs the gamut.

There are certain themes and motifs that reoccur in my work, such as mountains, horses,

pull from as needed. Over the course of 20 years this archive has been slowly curated. I peruse these folders on my computer before going online or taking my own photos for whatever else is needed. Lately, I've been painting certain aspects from memory which is new territory.

**JS: Why are you attracted to uncertain and unstable images?**

**JF:** It can best be explained by understanding poet John Keats' idea of negative capability; the capacity to pursue a vision even when it leads to uncertainty or intellectual confusion. It is the ability to contemplate the world and the world of art without the need to fit it into rational thought. My approach is centered on this idea of creating art that can inhabit mystery, doubt, tension, and unexplained phenomena without constantly reaching for fact, reason, and concrete knowingness.

**JS: How open are your works to interpretation? How can viewers best understand and appreciate your works?**

**JF:** I'm not one to place parameters on the sensory and intellectual experience of someone viewing my painting, or any artwork for that matter. Labeling or naming it has a way of limiting the potential impact on a viewer. Once it's defined art can become inert. Everyone brings their own set of emotions wrapped together with

an individual, unique perspective. You and I can look at the same painting and go away with completely different feelings or understandings about what was visually experienced. That's the beauty of it. I enjoy hearing two people have

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interiors, greenhouses, and more recently, sunsets. These subjects are deeply imbedded and continuously rise to the surface. I'll look through these topics without any clear idea in mind and continually grow an archive that I can

top:

**FIGURE STUDY ( 2019 )**

8.25 x 11.25 inches  
oil on stone paper  
private collection

bottom:

**MEMORY CODE ( 2018 )**

12 x 12 inches  
watercolor on Arches  
private collection



“ There is a historical cultural visual memory that I’m excavating and exploring, with a focus on liminal spaces and the characters that populate them.

contrasting perspectives on what they see in a painting. When that happens, I feel like I’m doing something right.

**JS:** Are there any techniques, methods, or materials that help give your work its distinctive qualities?

**JF:** I’m not only interested in image but also the formal qualities of paint. The strength of oil paint is its versatility, from working with thin or thick layers or with transparency and opacity. On top of that there are so many ways to apply it. When it is layered it has such captivating attributes. At a gallery or museum, I’m often just staring at the surface of paint and looking beyond the subject matter.

My paintings contain missing fragments, blurred areas, sections not entirely realized, unexpected colors, drips, splatters, scrapes, a flash of color,

all which reinforces the themes in the imagery. I want my painting to function on both those levels. That’s important to me, the mark making, the paint application, the process. If you look closely, you can see the first to the final layers all present in the finished piece. It is a palimpsest methodology.

**JS:** To what extent is your work personal or autobiographical?

**JF:** There’s the adage that “all painting is a self-portrait,” regardless of subject matter. That is true to a certain extent but not all encompassing. Certain paintings, like *Another Country* do have its genesis from my family history but that is a rarity. My life experiences certainly find their way into the works mostly through indirect means. It is why I paint: to find things out about myself. How much do we really know about ourselves? Normally I don’t entirely realize those personal connections until the painting is finished or even further down the road, when time allows for separation and hopefully, perspective. Distance is important.

**JS:** At this point in time, what is guiding the evolution in your work?

**JF:** A painter’s role is to produce the type of work they want to see more of in the world, for whatever reason. As I mentioned previously, I’m a visual person. I think in images and less about the possible connector points to personal or broader issues when drawn to subject matter. The sources of inspiration I’ve discussed from literature are an umbrella that I’m working under and there’s plenty of unearthed topics yet to be examined.

In previous paintings, even when not working with the figure their presence can be felt in these places through indirect means, such as chairs and sections

of rooms. Leaving out the human presence and only focusing on the landscape or certain environments is an area I’d like to investigate.

Additionally, I’m planning to exhibit sculptures alongside the paintings that dovetail with motifs in the two-dimensional works. These would be with clay and smaller in scale or if I go larger, I feel they’ll be constructed mostly with found objects. There seems to be a correlation to found object sculpture and how my paintings are assembled. A relationship to the original object but also adopting the language of something new. That ambiguity generates a new life. ♡

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JOHN SEED is a California-based arts writer, painter, curator, and retired professor, with a BA in Studio Art from Stanford University and a MA in Fine and Studio Art from UC Berkeley. Seed has written for *Harvard Magazine*, *Hyperallergic*, and *Christie’s Hong Kong*. His book *Disrupted Realism: Paintings for a Distracted World* features the works of 38 contemporary artists who add subjectivity and disruption to their imagery. *More Disruption: Representation in Flux* will be released in 2023.