

IN THE STUDIO: JOE WARDWELL by openstudiospress

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On the top floor of a rickety studio building in an industrial corner of Dorchester in Boston, **Joe**

Wardwell is painting while listening to Japanese psych rock. Wardwell's work combines serene painted landscapes of the American West with rock lyrics—often in fonts handmade by the artist—conflating both the art historical narrative of landscape painting and rock history itself.

His more intimately-scaled works, scattered across a small wall as I swung by the artist's studio this week, feature abbreviated song lyrics from Black Sabbath, who is often playing in the studio while he works—early Sabbath, that is, featuring Ozzy Osbourne, a figure included in some of Wardwell's flat files and his 2006 series of rock star drawings, *A Heavy History*. (Not a surprise for a man who played guitar in high school for a Black Sabbath cover band named Mourning Sun. Pretty awesome.)





Much of Wardwell's new works invert the format of his current practice, blacking out his own painted landscapes to form silhouettes of text. A 6 ft. x 10 ft grassy canyon landscape rests on the gallery's largest wall, a take on Albert Bierstadt's 1888 painting, *The Last of the Buffalo*, built to exact scale. Wardwell's ode, however, features lush washes of color and incredible drips which cascade down the canvas. (And although Wardwell is playing with several lyrics, the text to be placed on its surface has yet to be chosen.)

"I grew up in the West, primarily around Washington, Idaho, and Montana," Wardwell tells me as we sit in his studio, my back to a drum set and mic stand. "Growing up, music was the way to imagine you're way out of that small town existence. I played in bands in high school, right when the shift from metal and punk turned into grunge, and that area of Washington just sort of blew up. I moved to Seattle right in that hay day... The whole time I was an undergrad studying art, there was this huge music scene that was always enveloping me and my friends, and we were always going to see shows. In some ways, I was always trying to figure out a way for that to fit in to my work."



Turn to Something New, 2010 | Oil on canvas, 8 x 10 inches



Oh Lord Yeah, 2001 | Oil on canvas, 8 x 10 inches



"I feel like the rock lyrics and the fonts I'm using now, combined with Western landscapes, allow me to kind of talk about or suggest relationships to things outside of music and outside of painting as well," Wardwell explains. "I feel like I'm able to address politics, to address national identity, the ideas of how landscape are in embedded in how we separate ourselves from [other countries]."

"When I started out, there was an aspect of the cheesiness or the irony of how kitsch and cliché the works were, sort of how Bierstadt evolved into Bob Ross. It's sort of activating that or acknowledging that part of my history because I was exposed to that so much when I was growing up in the West.

"Sometimes I think this whole work is coming out of one '70s poster that my dad had on the back of his door with a mountain that just said 'Rocky Mountain High' in this big orange font—but kind of evolved."



Featured in editions #56 and #80 of *New American Paintings*, Wardwell will be featured in a forthcoming show at Naomi Arin Contemporary Art in Laguna Beach, as well as *Behind the Image*, an exhibition at Georgia Southern University opening in October. —EJG

- <http://bit.ly/12KIK2u>

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