

**A Conversation with Scott Wolniak
Conducted by Elizabeth Lalley**

Elizabeth Lalley: In your first solo show at Goldfinch in 2021, many of the paintings and paper cut-outs on view furthered your explorations of plant forms and botanical imagery—though you’ve noted that the botanical imagery you depict is invented, rendered intuitively and involving a free sort of image-making. You’ve even said that creating these forms is akin to cartoon-making, letting your marks spiral like plant tendrils. Often, in these works, there’s been a sense of play and humor involved; tiny plant faces poking through, whirling forms that feel creature-like and alive.

With your more recent works, including the ones in your second solo show Crosscurrents, you’ve moved into a more abstracted language, steeped in pattern and in rhythmic, expressive mark-making. The forms that emerge are less recognizable and feel less representational, though they still feel tied to the natural world. You’ve described an interest in embodying the energy of natural phenomena within your work without representing it. Can you talk a bit about how this move into a more abstracted language developed for you?

Scott Wolniak: Thanks, yes...this has been an important shift over the past few years, which occurred pretty organically through formal play, experimentation with the shapes and structures, and letting go of concrete imagery. I sort of chopped and reshuffled the images. One of the things I liked about botanical imagery to begin with, as you touched on, was that it aligned with the way I naturally draw, so imagery could spring into existence somewhat effortlessly in the early stages of a piece. I wanted to see if I could find that sense of ease and fluidity without depicting anything. I also thought it would be interesting to try to capture some of that same character and humor without those more obvious moves, like faces etc. There are still a few little creatures in the new work, but I’ve mostly left that behind.

I also started to feel that the botanical forms were a bit limiting. Deconstructing and fragmenting the imagery helped to break up the sense of a singular scene and created something more multi-perspectival. I applied structures such as rows and columns, which allowed me to still work fast and rhythmically, but without the specific botanical motifs.

The other factor worth mentioning is an evolving metaphysical quality in my work. I was always interested in immersive spatial experiences and hope for my paintings to complicate the subject/object relationship. I thought that abstraction might help break down the division between seeing and thinking. I also like the way that a kind of groundless pictorial structure can promote openness. Space is where it’s at.

EL: Has anything changed in your material explorations through this turn to more pointed abstractions?

SW: I have continued to explore additive elements such as pumice, paper pulp and saw dust to build up textures on the surface, but am doing so in a more dispersed way. It pops up here and there without aligning to a complete shape. This helps to produce occasional, flickering effects between surface and light, and to interact in surprising ways with pigment. I have also been using oil paint, in combination with fluid acrylics and gesso, to achieve a spectrum of color saturation levels, opacity and texture.

With this, my work has become more painterly. I have been able to dial down the self-consciousness and get lost in the work—to let process flow and be more expressive, which is fun.

These paintings have no purpose other than to be paintings.

EL: Following up on this question about abstraction—something I really respond to in your work is the way the spaces of your paintings feel deeply grounded in lived experience, even when the space within them isn't stabilized by any ground or clear orientation. Things are upended, and at times even a little psychedelic, but they don't feel fantastical to me. I think, for me, this comes through your use of color and light. To my eye, they're very much tied to the outside world and our relationship to it—to shifting light at different times of day, to the way trees absorb or deflect light based on moisture or dryness. How do you think about these abstract spaces, in terms of "where" they exist and what they suggest, and how you're hoping they function for viewers?

SW: Those kinds of connections are important to me. Theoretically speaking, paintings can be thought of as "windows or walls," and I mostly think of my paintings as windows... portals that the viewer can move through or project into. I like your comment about times of day and quality of air. In a way, these paintings are all about atmosphere. They grew out of allusions to the natural world, so I hope that associations with environment still reverberate through the abstraction. Although I'm trying to set the work free from depiction, aspects of landscape like texture and light are still key to the palette of the work.

I want them to be immersive and transportive. I hope each piece can produce a particular kind of aura or spatial character. I wrestle with them to achieve the balance between ethereal and earthy. The ratio must be just so to work... which I can't explain but I know it when I see it.

I'm also interested in transcendence. For something to be transcendental, I think it needs to have a starting place—to begin somewhere concrete, and then shift or expand.

EL: You've mentioned that in terms of studio rituals, music is extremely important in creating a sense of flow and a head-space when you're painting—allowing you to become less self-conscious in your mark-marking and to work more intuitively and freely. Can you talk a little about the role of music in your practice, particularly in the way it creates this mind/body space where mark-marking operates outside of conscious decision-making and instead, in a more intuitive and even meditative state? What do you like to listen to while you work?

SW: That's a difficult question to answer concisely. Music has always been super important to my studio practice because it inspires me in a million ways and serves as an energy source I can draw upon. When selecting music in the studio, I don't want it to distract me or take up too much conceptual space. I kind of subscribe to Brian Eno's "sonic wallpaper" idea. I most often listen to ambient and instrumental music that generates a quality of vibration that I can tap into. I am most interested in organic, idiosyncratic, human-generated sounds.

Some of my recent paintings have aligned more directly with music in the studio. For example, the pieces involving rows and columns relate to time and movement, and there is a rhythmic quality in the way I make them. The tempo and tone of music in the studio can help me to keep marks moving across a surface, responding to the sound rather than thinking about how I am painting.

There are too many musicians that I love to mention here but I can name a few that have fueled my work lately.

Natural Information Society is a project I've seen live many times. Their music hits all the centers for me—head, heart and gut. It helped me to understand the way repetitive structures can create space for transformation. They also epitomize the power of building patterns somatically.

Laraaji's music has influenced me for many years, in and out of the studio. His work has an incredible range, from floating tonal atmospheres to entrancing and ecstatic patterns. His music functions as a meditative vehicle. His kalimba pieces create sonic energy that I can ride while painting. His music is also an extension of his spiritual life, so it is more than just music.

The last person I will mention is Mary Lattimore, an LA-based harpist whose work is intricate and beautiful in a way that I hope my paintings might achieve. Her music induces a kind of synesthetic experience for me, where I feel like I'm seeing and feeling rays of light.

EL: Within the spaces of your painting—because you begin with loose geometric structures, building from them with gestural patterns, color layering, reductive and

additive material processes—there is a fascinating combination of order and spontaneity. As a viewer, I'll find myself following one pattern of marks that seem to exist on the surface of the piece, and then something will come from beneath—an unexpected color or form, or a space that's been sanded away, creating a portal-like effect—which will suddenly force my eyes to recalibrate. How do you think about these disruptions (the sanding, the addition of pumice or texture) within the terrain of your paintings, even while operating within certain structures you've made for yourself?

SW: Thank you for looking so closely! Those kinds of surprises and shifts are intentional, but not exactly designed.

The loose geometric structures allow for fast, spontaneous movements within a determined spatial order, which sets the stage for chance alignments to unfold. The rows and columns place shapes next to each other that I would not have intellectually thought of doing. The textures mess with pigment and light in surprising ways. Regarding color, I just intuitively apply washes on top of one another until I find the right synthesis. I can't exactly plan the effects that occur, but I try to set up situations where they might happen and then respond to them. I love when surprising optical effects occur and am happy when viewers also notice them.

EL: In a studio visit recently, you noted that there's been a pretty major shift in your studio schedule, moving away from working late nights to more regular daytime hours. You also mentioned a correlation between these working hours and a shift to brighter color palettes, allowing bolder colors to exist more dominantly rather than tempering them or obscuring them with added layers of paint. Because your paintings so often capture light at moments of transition or movement (when viewing them, I've thought of sunlight cutting through trees or of sunrise viewed through a window) I'm interested in this change in routine and process for you, when you're engaging with light differently in your studio. Can you talk a little about this shift, from nocturnal working hours to daytime ones, and a bit about how this shift has appeared in the paintings themselves?

SW: I had arrived at a nocturnal studio routine years ago for practical reasons, including my teaching schedule and family responsibilities, but then I became kind of addicted to it. I liked the quiet, the sense of stolen time, and the way I could work without disruption. I had a spacy, entranced mental state late at night that I thought helped me to go deeper into the work.

I realized that my work had become perpetually exploratory, and I didn't always know when or how to stop. I had to be intentional in order to shift my behavior, which involved changing my whole relationship to my studio practice. I'm so happy that I did. Day light, higher energy and sharper mental acuity are just a few of the benefits. I see my work more clearly (literally and figuratively) and, maybe most importantly, I trust

myself more. I can accept a painting more readily, earlier in the process, without putting it through quite so much.

EL: There's an incredible new piece in the exhibition titled "[Radish, Et Al](#)" which is the largest piece of yours I've seen to date (at 72 x 60 inches). Many of your smaller and mid-sized works seem to have "auras," in a way—a dominant color that radiates from them—but on this large scale, there are so many pockets of color bumping up against each other, mixing with variations of form and composition. We've talked about the idea of "pareidolia," that tendency to see patterns or familiar forms in random stimulus—to look for faces in things—which is something that much of your work invites, regardless of scale. But, for me, this larger piece makes me even more inclined to search for hidden pictures within the landscape of the work, like an enlarged I-Spy or Where's Waldo book or...more art historically...like Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights"—compositions that are packed with such a variety of form, color, and micro-vignettes that we get lost in them as viewers.

Can you talk a little about the process of working on this large scale? How are things like composition and palette considered with pieces this size, in comparison to pieces of a smaller scale? What are the different challenges to working this way? And the different freedoms?

SW: I used to work at a large scale when I was first starting out as an artist, and it's been fun returning to it. Back then (we're talking 30 years ago) the move to work big was *the thing* that most dramatically impacted my development as an artist because it forced me to get out of my head and work with my whole body. That's something I needed to explore again. Creating a piece larger than yourself is a completely different kind of engagement, which I find very freeing. It takes a lot more time and you can get lost. I like how physically dynamic the painting process can be.

The basic approach to composition and color application is not too different from my smaller pieces... there is just more space to fill up. That physical reality forces me to work faster and looser and make more or bigger shapes.

Something I like about large abstract, all-over composition is that it allows the eye to bounce around, following a particular color or thread. This is how I make and look at my larger pieces. I think a lot about the path of the eye. I am interested in how moments, scenes or events are linked, how some are self-contained, and others bleed together.

This is another way that my paintings relate to time-based forms— the sequences are not unlike an animation story board or video transitions.

Regarding the forms and suggestions of imagery—that is a push-pull for me, between embracing and resisting things that I see in a painting as it's developing. It's the sense of discovery that keeps me interested.

EL: I'm fascinated by your titles, because they oscillate between a fairly concrete use of nouns and verbs (like "The Cat," "Listening," "Window and Bird") to poetic and a bit more cryptic ("To Become a Spiritual Seeker," for example). I also sense some humor—a bit of a wink—with the straightforward titles. "The Cat" for instance is the title of a richly textured piece, a stormy wash of grey mottled with blues and greens and flecks of muted purple. It reminds me of the surface of a lichen-covered stone. In the corner of the piece there's something vaguely animal-shaped, but in the way that we might squint and see a face or figure in a cloud formation. Titling it "The Cat," when there's so much to see across and through the piece, feels like a playful shrug to me—letting a small mark in the painting carry the piece's title, and just letting things be. How do you think about your titles and the way they function? Can you talk a little about the way you move between the concrete and the abstract when it comes to language?

SW: Titles are a way to bring the viewer a little closer to the experience I have with a work. It's an opportunity to point to something inside or outside of a piece, attach something or provide a red herring. I hope the paintings stand on their own and don't need titles at all... but it is nice to identify them in some way. My titles can be philosophical, silly or nature oriented. They can be based on a mood, a sense of place, perspectival orientation or a Rorschach-like interpretation of a detail. Often, they're in reference to something I've read recently or heard on the radio while driving to the studio.

I find imagery and meaning in my paintings as they are forming. They are never predetermined. They can be hallucinatory. In "The Cat," there's a clumsy purple brush stroke that, at a certain moment, looked like a cat to me, and the piece suddenly took on something akin to a scene. The piece already had a nocturnal ambience and it reminded me of cats that I see lurking around at night in my neighborhood. "Window and Bird" is similar in how I identified a couple elements from a field rich with potential characters and structures. If we can't easily locate the subject matter named in the title, then maybe we are more likely to keep looking. Imagery is never intentional, only the shapes, textures, colors and marks.

"Listening" is more about a relationship to environment and alludes to synesthesia and sensitivity. "To Become a Spiritual Seeker" might take too long to explain here, other than to say that it's about being on the threshold of something beautiful and unknown.

I would encourage anyone who is paying attention to my titles to take them with a grain of humor.