

Carol Real, “Emma Webster: Where Worlds Begin and Unravel,” *Art Summit*, March 25, 2025.

Art Summit

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Emma Webster: Where Worlds Begin and Unravel

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Emma Webster conjures landscapes that hover between memory, simulation, and myth. In her 2025 solo debut at Petzel Gallery, *That Thought Might Think*, she unveils her largest paintings to date—sweeping, atmospheric scenes born from virtual reality, sculpture, and oil on canvas. These panoramic works, painted during the Los Angeles wildfires, evoke both ecological precarity and otherworldly invention.

Webster builds her images inside VR before translating them into paint, fusing digital and traditional tools to create disorienting vistas where scale slips and gravity bends. Light behaves like theater, and nature appears sentient, shifting between serenity and collapse.

Born in 1989 in Encinitas, California, Webster holds degrees from Stanford and Yale. Her work is held in major public collections including the Centre Pompidou, LACMA, and ICA Miami. Through her immersive, invented terrains, she reimagines what landscape painting can be in an age of simulation.

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Portrait of Emma Webster, 2025. Ph by Joshua White - JW Pictures. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

An Interview with Emma Webster:

By Carol Real

Let’s dive into your personal space—the place where your creativity comes to life. How would you describe your studio environment? Are there specific elements that help inspire or shape your creative process? Do you have any routines or rituals that you follow while working in the studio that allow you to fully engage with your practice?

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I’m a painter first and foremost, but I also spend a lot of time just playing and imagining. I have various stations around the studio, so quite often at the end of the day, that’s when I paint—it’s more of a relaxing, meditative experience. In the mornings, I like to sketch and sculpt.

I don’t see myself as a “serious” sculptor, so there’s something about starting with a lighthearted experiment at the beginning of the day that helps me leave judgment at the door. It’s also physical—getting your hands moving, the circulation in the body going. If I ever don’t know what to do, I’ll just take five minutes and do jumping jacks or squats to wake up the body.

I go to the studio every day. There’s a pragmatism that needs to happen if you’re going to be a professional artist. I get in around eight every morning, have my coffee, and when my assistants arrive an hour later, we discuss plans for the day. Then I start sculpting, drawing, or messing around until the others leave at 5 pm. Typically I’ll stay a while longer so I can have a chance to metabolize the painting(s). It’s easy to forget how much time each painter spends in front of a painting but it’s days and days.

Do you listen to music while you paint, or do you prefer silence? If so, what genres or artists inspire you?

When I’m sketching, sculpting, or doing anything that feels generative, I need total silence. No music or podcasts. It’s incredible how anything can permeate that vulnerable stage, which makes silence crucial. When I’m painting, I crave energy—something to keep you in the chair, keep you activated. So for that, I love my ‘90s angsty grunge and alt-rock. I also love audiobooks.

Could you share some of the women or other figures who have deeply inspired your work? If you could collaborate with anyone on a dream project, who would that be?

Recently, I’ve been listening to a lot of young women writers like Emma Cline, Ottessa Moshfegh, and Lauren Groff. It’s fascinating to hear women my age creating images with words and seeing the parallels between their writing and my image-making.

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I would love to work with a filmmaker, musician, or choreographer too.

- Musicians: Emma Ruth Rundle, PJ Harvey, Mannequin Pussy
- Choreographers: William Forsythe, American Ballet Theater, Martha Graham Company

As for cinematographers, I don’t know many off-hand... I’ve watched so much David Lynch, and I’m inspired to see the painterly decisions he makes in color and composition. Collaborations within painting are less interesting. We artists are so used to building our own worlds, and I’d like to get outside my own.

What are your dream creative projects, and where do you envision taking them in the future?

I would love to work in set design. I ventured into that with my 2023 show, *Intermission*, at Jeffrey Deitch Gallery in Los Angeles. I’m hoping to do a theater residency next year that I can’t fully discuss yet, but it would be such a dream. I recently saw David Hockney’s set designs for his operas, and the idea of using my virtual reality sculptures—bringing them into physical existence with a combination of painting and projection—presents a real opportunity for advanced interaction between media. So if you know anyone in theater...

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Emma Webster in her studio alongside *The Material World*, 2025. Ph by Joshua White - JW Pictures. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.



Emma Webster, *The Material World*, 2025, Oil on canvas, 102 x 190 x 2 in (259.1 x 482.6 x 5.1 cm), (EW 25/001). Photo: Marten Elder. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

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The influence of theater and set design is evident in the work. In what ways do these elements shape the approach to composition, space, and storytelling in painting?

Theater is the first virtual reality. I think that’s often forgotten—a forgotten fact that theater is like a low-tech way of transporting us to different places.

I also think part of what we find so addictive about looking at paintings is this idea of the end. It’s like reaching the last chapter of a book and wondering, “What if?” To me, every time I look at a painting, I’m so aware of the edges—not just as formal devices, but as reminders of what’s been left out. There is always something being excluded.

Landscapes have been described as “optically tricky.” What techniques are used to challenge viewers’ perceptions, and what experience is intended for them?

I’ve been returning to the idea of a bodiless viewer. Imagine perspectives that you couldn’t have within your own body. Most landscape painting has been dictated by viewpoints that are about five feet off the ground, looking out onto a vista. We don’t even realize that the point of view is human-centric. So, whether it’s considering a viewpoint from the perspective of an ant or thinking about surveillance or drone aerial footage, we now can leave our bodies and simply see with our eyes. In my paintings, I’m trying to create a sense of multiple optics. When I do it well—though I don’t always achieve it—my goal is that in a single painting, there should be sections where one is grounded in a way that feels unexpected. As the gaze shifts to another part of the painting, perhaps the horizon changes, and it’s as if you’re in two places at once. Even though it’s one world, the physics of that world are shifting. You might feel like you’re both in the air and on the ground at the same time.

The way perspective is distorted in the work disrupts spatial orientation. If a physical space were created—whether an exhibition, a theater set, or a fully immersive environment—where viewers could step into the paintings, what would it look like? How would gravity behave? Would there be a horizon?

Cool question! The first thing would be that everything would have movement, however subtle. Movement is also a reminder that everything is alive! I’d also love

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a space where the scale isn’t fixed – where you could become big or tiny (à la *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*)

Often described as cinematic, immersive, and operatic in scale, these landscapes seem to have a presence of their own. If they were sentient rather than static objects, how might they perceive and remember the world around them? What would they witness?

Another rad question! German philosopher Martin Heidegger describes “thrownness” as the idea that we are thrown into a world with arbitrary customs and rituals that have evolved before and without us. Perhaps if my paintings witnessed us, that thrownness would seem all the more strange. I suspect they might see logic like algorithms’ if/then statements—that to them the world exists as causation. There is clarity to how everything came to be as it is. I don’t feel that clarity personally.

Imagine one of your paintings being excavated a thousand years from now. What might future beings, human or otherwise, interpret about our time from it? Would they see it as a record, a warning, or something else entirely?

I’d imagine they would be misleading to read as artifacts. It took me many years to see the inventiveness and the mythological side of ancient cave paintings—that they were not a literal representation of what it was like to live in that era. So often historians talked about the species depicted, and not the fictitious half-man, half-lion characters. Those cave paintings are full of magic. They were made by firelight. If my paintings were to be seen later, I’d hope they too would not be taken for fact.

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Emma Webster, *Era of Eternity*, 2025, Oil on canvas, 108 x 180 x 2 in (274.3 x 457.2 x 5.1 cm), (EW 25/002). Photo: Marten Elder. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York



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By blending reality and fantasy, often through virtual reality, these landscape paintings explore contemporary interactions with nature. How does this approach shape the way nature is perceived today?

I think the way we see nature is always mediated through our own desires. I mean, we curate it. You and I are sitting in a park right now that is probably the furthest thing from the wilderness imaginable. Even in New York City today, there’s an issue with the imbalance of male and female trees, leading to excessive pollen production and related problems. We don’t have true pictures of nature anymore. When I’m making my landscapes in virtual reality, I feel entitled to continue this process. When I’m working in virtual reality, I mix landscapes that I’ve seen or parks with sketches. It’s this hybrid where I use some reference material from the real world, but a lot of it is fabricated from these ideals—things I would like to see in a landscape, or things that would surprise me in a landscape.

Art seems to question reality, especially as digital simulations grow. How does your work fit into the conversation about digital vs. physical spaces?

With digital, if we take a step back and think about it, the digital is a creation of a new world. If we want to have space in this digital world, it raises the question: are we going to reproduce the space of reality, or does the simulation not need to match reality? That’s what I’m trying to say. I’ve noticed that when I look at how we portray space in computers, often through the idea of the window—the browser, a pop-up, layering—it tells us a lot about foreground, midground, and background. When you look at space in digital worlds, like video games, you realize they’re using inventions from painting, like atmospheric pressure, where things along the horizon look gray, and high-contrast dark objects are in the foreground. These are all techniques we’ve witnessed through our own optics, handed down through painting. So, I think the first stage of digital space has been about reproducing or recreating our reality. As this technology becomes more sophisticated, I’m more curious because it’s truly a blank canvas, unbound by our physics. There’s potential for digital space to be something other than reproduction or simulation—its own kind of entity. I believe that’s where the eeriness or discomfort in my landscapes comes from; they poke at what happens when there’s no oxygen, no gravity—what happens in this new frontier.

In *Lonescape: Green, Painting, & Mourning Reality*, the discussion centers on the changing relationship between landscape painting and digital

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media. How might landscape art continue to evolve as screen time increasingly shapes our perception of the world?

Technology is trying to hack and optimize our natural responses. If you stand in front of a screen with a video of skylight, it’s designed to enhance your health. For me, landscapes are changing in extreme ways due to global warming. We are seeing new weather conditions, and new patterns, and we are constantly confronted with new disasters and phenomena. Technology will hopefully allow us to predict these phenomena better, more intelligently, and to foresee what we haven’t before.

I was looking at an example—perhaps a silly one—like a lightning tornado captured on video. And you think, what is out there that we haven’t even seen? What other disasters could fall from the sky? Serious changes are happening. It’s in our best interest to use technology to anticipate what’s coming.

These new panoramic paintings were created amid the Los Angeles fires, embedding a sense of rupture and precarity into their landscapes. How did this environment shape your approach to light, space, and destruction in this body of work? Were you responding to the fires in real-time, or did they serve as a broader metaphor for the instability of the natural world?

I started these before the fires in December. When I began the sketches, I had been looking at John Martin’s painting, *The Destruction of Pompeii* (1822). The celestial painting, *Era of Eternity*, seems uncomfortably close to reality as it is coming into being. But there’s an optimism to the painting that I don’t see in our reality: when we see the opening sky something better may be coming.

Your process fuses VR technology, handmade sculptures, and traditional painting, creating landscapes that feel like avatars of reality rather than direct representations. With *That Thought Might Think*, do you see this hybrid approach as an expansion of landscape painting’s legacy, or as a break from it? What possibilities open up when painting no longer relies on direct observation?

For me, the process is an extension of landscape painting. Painting has always collaged sources and is rarely solely observational. My process disrupts this by introducing a new way of seeing—through the digital eye, we can observe places that we cannot experience. I don’t yet know what it means to observe from a non-human eye.

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How have influences from classical painters and modern figures like Walt Disney shaped your approach to landscape painting?

As we were saying earlier, there’s freedom when we consider the inventions of the past. It’s refreshing for me to think about French painter Nicholas Poussin’s grand machine, or the Claude Lorrain glass, and the invention of the pinhole camera—all these other techniques that artists used. They didn’t have to be geniuses with every single painting. They absorbed their era, the *Zeitgeist*, and processed it, which then came through in their work as a byproduct. As a younger artist, I revered the canon and felt I was trying to contend with gods. Only now, as I’ve grown older, do I see them as just normal people using the technology available to them to create their images. That humanizing relationship with art history has been incredibly helpful—it allows me to see their flaws and their mistakes, even in the work of the greats. I wouldn’t say I’m stealing particular techniques, but rather, I’m borrowing this sense of flawed humanity, which has been extremely helpful for me.

In your work, you often incorporate flaws and imperfections, even when employing precise VR tools. What guides your decisions on where to introduce these imperfections, and what significance do they hold for you?

A flaw needs to have a certain recognizable quality, so we can consider it as a challenge, something adversarial, rather than just a mistake, which feels too mild-mannered.

I’ve been thinking about how nature is not oblivious, but indifferent. It doesn’t care. It’s unthinking, unmoved by the human experience. It’s a bit like the sci-fi book and film *Annihilation* (2018), where it’s not trying to get us, but it’s also not trying to help us.

In this context, the notion of what constitutes a flaw is complex. In nature, there is no real flaw—a thing either works or it doesn’t. For example, a flawed tree doesn’t grow towards the sun, and it eventually dies. So, the moral judgment of a flaw in my work is a fascinating conundrum because it’s such a human experience to be in that place of judgment rather than just considering what perpetuates the future, what perpetuates the species.

The moral judgment of a flaw in my work presents a fascinating conundrum because judgment is such a deeply human experience. Rather than considering what sustains the future and our species, we default to critique.

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Your exhibitions, *Arcadia* and *Intermission*, both reference utopian ideals and stage sets. What does this tension between paradise and performance mean to you?

There must be a little bit of hell in paradise for it to truly be paradise. A utopia that is built solely on sugar, that’s so saccharine and perfect. Time and time again, we see that people are made through grit and resilience. Pain—not to fetishize it—creates a level of confidence and triumph within us that is integral to a feeling of happiness and achievement. When I’m playing with idylls—which all landscape paintings must contend with, from Claude Lorraine to Thomas Kinkaid—there’s always this green pastoral perfection. We need to remember it’s a fantasy, and that I wouldn’t want to be there. Perhaps the things that scare us, that create a feeling of suspense or ominousness in a landscape, are a form of paradise. They insinuate that we get to be our own heroes, that we get to make our own paradise.

In your 2022 exhibition, *Illuminarium*, you left out human and animal figures. Why did you make that choice, and how does it change the narrative in your work?

For several years around that show, I removed all recognizable human elements—any architectural paths, even the idea of a chopped tree that would suggest a human presence. I wanted to convey that trees themselves are creatures and actors. It bothers me that whenever we see an empty landscape, there’s this idea of, “Oh, we could build a house there,” as if it’s just a backdrop for some play that we can enact. It makes me angry.

That being said, in my recent show, *The Engine of Beasts* at Perrotin Gallery in Paris, I returned to including animals, which reintroduces this legacy of anthropomorphism by using animals as allegorical elements. In this show, I created animals from my own imagination. For example, I made an imagined version of a fox without using reference images. I found it to be a very amusing experience, trying to make a horse without actually looking at one. It gave me a lot more sympathy for AI-generated images; you realize how much better they are than we are.

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Interview conducted in New York City in September 2024.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

All images courtesy of the artist and Petzel @petzelgallery

Editor: Kristen Evangelista

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