

Petzel

“Peter Schoolwerth & Austin Martin White in Conversation,” *Do Not Research*, September 22, 2025.

Pieter Schoolwerth & Austin Martin White in Conversation

Austin Martin White: Tracing Delusionships

Petzel Gallery, 520 W 25th Street, New York

September 4 – October 18, 2025

Pieter Schoolwerth: Thinking Through (13 Years)

Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Kohlfurter Strasse 41/43, Berlin

September 12 - October 25, 2025



Thinking Through 2018 (13 Years), 2025, Oil, acrylic and inkjet on canvas, 90" x 72"

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Pieter Schoolwerth: As I was considering how we might begin our conversation, my first thought was I am continually inspired by the intricate relationship between the subjects you address in your work, and the according form and process you have developed through which to represent them. You have described the internal conflict you feel around the dubious category “Identity art” being imposed on your paintings, and how this interpretive framework you are pressured into contending with directs attention more onto who you are as a person, not what you create. With the shifting of attention away from your work and onto you, the optically dynamic, formally progressive nature of your pictures is often overlooked – or demoted to secondary in importance. Perhaps it would be interesting to start by discussing some connections between the pictures you create, the form through which you compose them, and where you see your subjectivity being positioned in your work of the past several years?

Austin Martin White: I really appreciate the way you framed this. To respond directly, I see my subjectivity being positioned by some as dealing primarily with what’s often reductively framed as “identity,” but that framing feels imposed—less a self-determined inquiry than a demand shaped by broader cultural expectations. In my view, much of this pressure is engineered and amplified by the way social media has instrumentalized identity—not as a space for complexity, but as a mechanism for legibility, for visibility, for performance. “Identity” becomes a kind of meta-brand: something flattened into a digestible aesthetic or narrative, packaged for circulation and recognition.

That demand can end up obscuring what I actually make—the pictures themselves—and the processes that structure them. There’s a particular kind of pressure in the contemporary art world to foreground personal narrative in ways that can feel at odds with formal concerns, as if the optical and material complexities of an artwork are secondary to its social legibility. I often find myself resisting the expectation that the content of my work should be easily summarized by autobiography, even as I acknowledge that lived experience inevitably seeps into process. The challenge, I think, is how to assert a kind of interiority that isn’t immediately consumable—how to protect a space for ambiguity and resistance within a cultural logic that treats identity as a platform, or worse, a product.

This brings me to form and process, which have always been central to how I think and work. I first encountered your work on a walk in the Lower East Side in 2008, and I remember being struck by a tension between the figures and the structures containing them—like they were caught in a process of slipping between states, resisting any fixed reading. That refusal to resolve, to settle into a stable form or subject-position, felt quietly radical

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Reflecting on that moment now, I realize how pivotal it was for me. At the time, I was trying to figure out what I truly wanted to pursue. The art school I attended, Cooper Union, had an open structure where students weren’t bound to a specific discipline. That freedom was both exhilarating and terrifying—especially as someone who had just moved from Detroit to New York. There was a bit of a class adjustment. I started in 2007 and, with the recession looming, my uncertainty about being an artist intensified. I found myself searching for something to anchor me. Looking back, seeing your work during that time feels like a turning point—it solidified my belief in painting as something worth committing to.

That commitment—to painting as a discipline—has remained central to how I think through form and process.



Massacre of the Children of Bethel Variation 5 (after B. Thompson), 2025, Oil, acrylic and inkjet on canvas, 100” x 102”

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PS: Conversations around form have been scarce in contemporary painting of the last decade, and as the physically-explosive surface and mind-bogglingly complex technique you utilize to compose images, which have much in common with my own, was what initially drew me into your work. I’d love to hear you talk about how you arrived at making paintings in this way? The first time I encountered a work of yours in person I genuinely had no idea how you applied to paint to the support – a common household window screen stretched over additional layers of burlap, athleticwear fabric and other textiles in place of traditional canvas. I was even more bewildered to learn that you paint quite literally from behind the screen by pushing the acrylic, liquid rubber and other viscous substances through the gridded mesh out of the picture and into the space of the viewer.

So the first question would be how did you begin making paintings in this way?

AMW: After Cooper Union, I focused on Afghan war rugs and how their geometric stylization shifted between the Soviet and American wars, I hypothesized that this was likely due to the spread of low resolution images online. I was drawn to hand-processing digital images, but after years of working this way, it started to feel like I was circling something without breaking through.

At Skowhegan, that shift happened unexpectedly. I arrived planning to make larger paintings—partly in response to a grad school rejection—while also navigating the end of a relationship. One night, overwhelmed in my studio, threw things around, and punctured a screened window. Waking up on the floor, I panicked, thinking I’d be kicked out. To avoid that, I ran to a hardware store, where a clerk—clearly familiar with Mainers drinking and wrecking their patios—sold me a screen patch kit with silicone rubber.

Back in the studio, I over-applied the rubber, and it seeped through the screen, creating strange, unexpected extrusions. That accident struck me. It resolved something I’d been chasing in my meticulous abstractions—something about formalizing contemporary image-making, about riffing on the mechanics of the JPEG. The subject in my work has always been secondary to the process, though looking back, I can see how its confrontational edge might reflect the overwhelming presence of digital images in our lives.

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PS: I remember being so visually intrigued with the space in your paintings, which did indeed remind me of woven textiles, that I did not even consider the narratives you were figuring. When I discovered the background details on the ethnographic historical imagery you were sourcing, which viewers in our politically-charged moment may behold as confrontational, I found it intriguing that the directional movement of the paint into the space of the viewer was symmetrical with how confrontation might be imagined - as a force that ‘comes into your personal space to challenge you’ - and I found it to be a beautiful idea.

How did you arrive at the imagery you select to depict in your work, what was your initial motivation to work from images of the past, and how do you think about these images in relationship to your personal identity as an artist?



Thinking Through 2014 (13 Years), 2025, Oil, acrylic and inkjet on canvas, 72.5" x 89"

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AMW: Well after undergrad, I came away from that experience feeling like I needed to eliminate the self from the work entirely. That impulse probably led me to hard-edge abstraction—chasing pure form, trying to resolve compositions without relying on representation. It was about removing any trace of subjectivity, as if clarity could only come through detachment.

The image was something I repressed for a long time. It felt incompatible with the ethos I had internalized—one that prioritized structure over subject. By the time I reached grad school, that repression had started to falter. I didn’t want to abandon what I’d built around formalism, but I could no longer ignore the undercurrent pulling me back toward imagery.

The imagery I use now emerged, in part, from thinking about—and at times even fantasizing about—rubber: its existence, its uses, and its history as a material. Growing up in Detroit, where rubber and the automotive industry were inescapable, I became aware of both its ubiquity and the sense of mystery one could project onto its origins. More than an industrial product, rubber is a substance of contradiction—stretching and snapping back, holding an imprint yet resisting containment. But it is also deeply entangled in colonial histories, extraction economies, and labor exploitation, from the brutality of King Leopold’s Congo to the plantations of Southeast Asia and South America. In this sense, rubber is both a residue of history and a fetishized material—charged with power, domination, and transformation, a site where control and excess collide.

What you said about the movement of paint into the viewer’s space being symmetrical with confrontation really resonates. The way rubber pushes through the mesh—its interruptions and obstructions—complicates the legibility of the image, making the past feel unstable, like something we encounter but cannot fully grasp. Rather than fixing history in place, I want to engage it as an active tension—where form, material, and meaning remain unsettled, in flux. The paintings themselves enact this: rubber resists total control, pushing unpredictably through the screen, extruding into space, partially obscuring the image and forcing confrontation with its presence.

Rubber, in this sense, operates like a wormhole—something that stretches history through it, distorts it, and threatens collapse under its own weight. It holds the marks of both force and resistance, expansion and compression, making it an apt material for thinking through how history is continuously rewritten, obscured, or distorted. My process parallels this: history does not simply sit on the surface—it must be pushed, pulled, strained through layers of mediation, its contradictions left intact. That’s why I’m drawn to rubber—not just for its tactility, but for its capacity to embody pressure, instability, and fixation.

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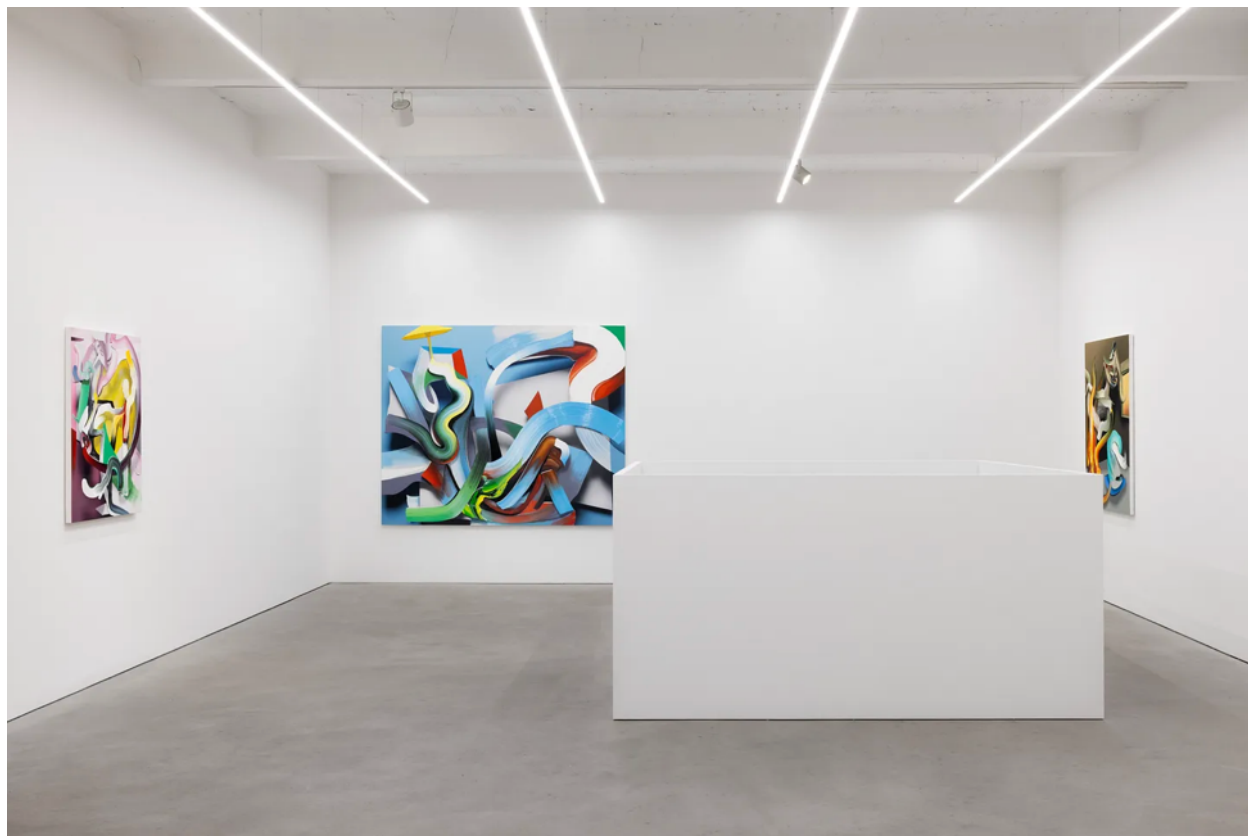
'The Dream of the Afternoon Nap (after B. Thompson), 2025, Acrylic medium, pigment, rubber, spray paint, vinyl, screen mesh, paper, 120" x 150"

PS: You and I both use current technological tools to make our work, and we have discussed how most painters that foreground their positionality as a subject embrace traditional, often pre-Modern, illustrative forms – which has the effect of directing critical language away from the visual nature of their work onto branding and marketing who they are and “telling their story.” This redirection, often enacted by wall texts and press releases penned by curators and gallerists, functions to tokenize these artists in a system they have no choice but to submit to if they want to participate.

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It’s an interesting and discursively challenge scenario to respond to: as a figurative painter working with politically-coded subjects how can you push the focus away from your personhood and back onto your work – in hopes of engaging a formally grounded discussion of composition, process, color, and gesture?



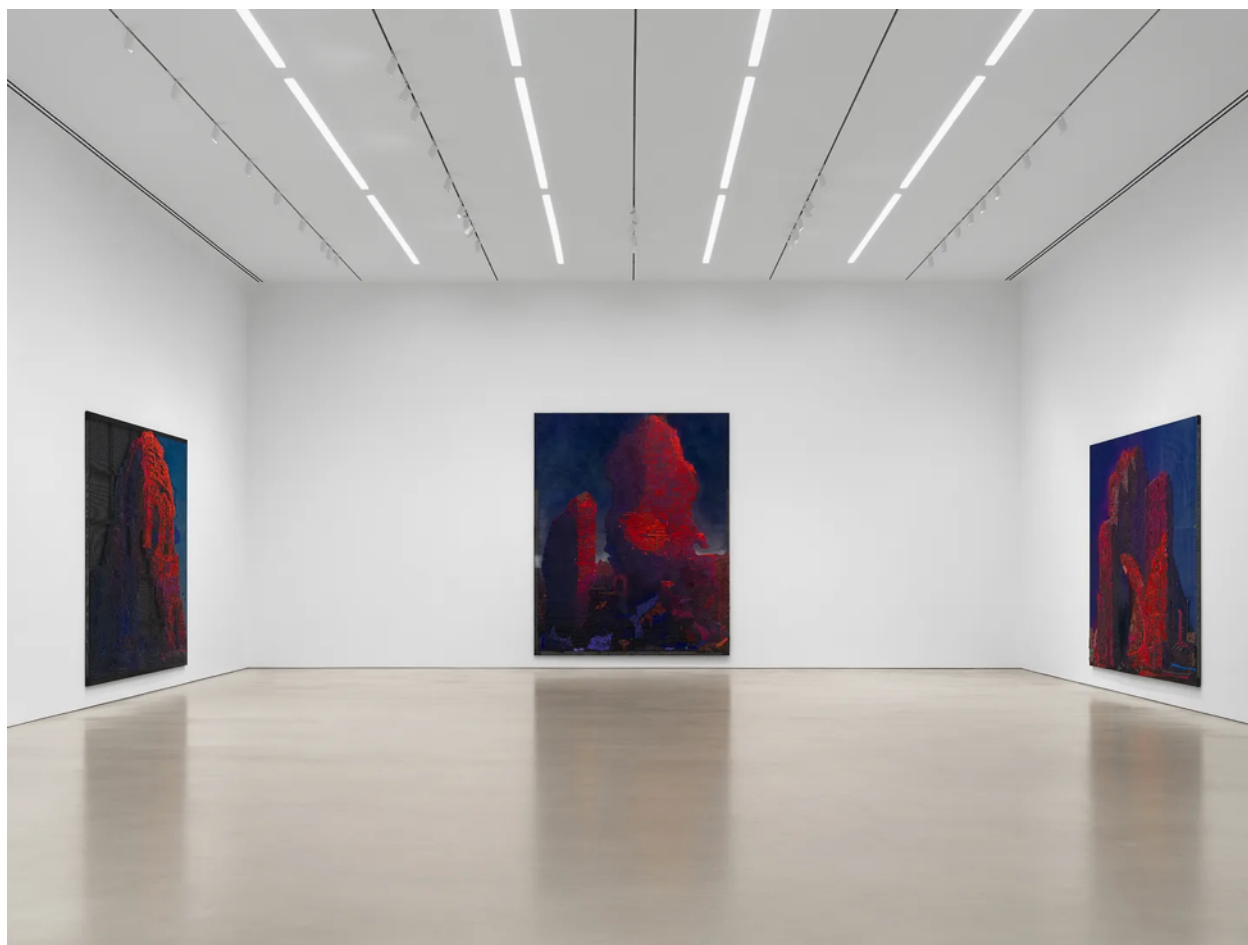
Thinking Through 2015 (13 Years), 2025, Installation view, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin

AMW: Yeah, I think you’re right to pinpoint that tension—how to engage charged or complex subject matter without relying on surface clarity or linear framing, instead allowing those concerns to take shape through form. That’s something I’ve embraced in my own work, where the figure of the artist and a sense of historical weight are processed through material transformation.

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For me, this challenge is tied to how space is structured in painting—especially how depth and movement function when mediated by different technological and historical frameworks. Figures and forms compress, shift, and recede within the image, registering a world where representation is in flux, shaped by digital tools, perspective collapses, and recursive reproduction. I think about this in terms of material persistence—how images don’t simply sit on a surface but shift, degrade, and reconstitute themselves over time. Depth becomes a site of slippage, where past and present fold into one another, and form remains unstable, shifting under the weight of its own references.



Tracing Delusionships, 2025, Installation view, Petzel Gallery, New York

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PS: When you first described the visual effect created by pushing rubber and mediums through your screens as “extrusion,” I connected to your composition process, as I routinely use extrusion tools in animation software to pull flat forms into 3D relief space – which produces a different form of space split into recessionary layers than the illusionism of conventional Modern or pre-Modern painting, which is composed exclusively on one layer. Traditional painters compose through applying paint directly onto a flat support by hand – working on the X/Y axes spatially. I have come to think of extrusion as an indirect form of painting which pulls the image of the picture onto the Z-axis – which produces a shallow form of simulated space resembling that of games and other CGI software effects built for the world of the screen.

I have always felt the primary function of art is to reflect back the feeling of what it’s like to be alive right now, as I see it, and I love painting and feel strongly it’s important to keep it relevant by using contemporary tools so as it does not fall into the dustbin of artisanal luxury culture - which is always organized around a nostalgia for craft and the handmade (which was a better, simpler time, for a certain demographic, allegedly). Few things are actually made by hand anymore, we touch almost nothing directly in daily life, and we live remotely through the screen. And as 95% or so of all mass media and interweb images are composed or post-produced through the Z-axis with CG I have made an effort to incorporate these same tools into my work to echo this feeling and look of reality.

AMW: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me—I’ve been thinking about this sense of space too, though I hadn’t quite framed it the way you have. The way you’ve described spatial construction along the Z-axis clarified something I’ve been intuitively working through for a while—it’s a sharp insight, but it also opens up a lot. There’s something distinct in how you’ve been able to name that dimension of depth—not as illusion, but as structure. It’s something I’ve been circling in my own work, even if I hadn’t put words to it in the same way.

Even in my earlier abstract paintings, before the current body of work took shape, I was always trying to build a kind of shallow, pressurized depth—something that feels constructed rather than depicted, a layering that resists conventional perspective while still implying space.

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Thinking Through 2024 (13 Years), 2025, Oil, acrylic and inkjet on canvas, 72" x 60"

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I’ve always been drawn to how formal qualities embed themselves in the psyche—absorbed almost unconsciously, then reemerge through the work, distorted and reconfigured. It’s like we’re constantly metabolizing the visual field, and what comes out is only partially recognizable. That’s what gives a work its contemporaneity, I think—not just subject matter or references, but the way it processes its moment through formal language. Sometimes I feel like it’s not intent that historicizes a painting, but osmosis. Like how the invention of the paint tube or the rhythm of train travel didn’t just support Impressionism—they haunted it.

More recently, I’ve found myself shifting toward a material approach that holds forms in an unresolved state—ambiguous, unstable, not quite grounded. I’m still figuring out how to describe that shift, but it feels intuitive, like a natural evolution in my thinking around painting. In a way, it ties back to that Z-axis notion—this idea that a painting can operate simultaneously as surface and depth, as an autonomous object and as something that gestures beyond itself. That tension—between painting as a discrete thing and as a fragment of a larger perceptual or conceptual system—has always felt central to what I’m after.

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New Yorker, 2025, Acrylic medium, pigment, rubber, spray paint, vinyl, screen, linen, 22” x 18”

PS: I think the destabilized status of the extruded marks and their insistent physicality is particularly dynamic as one moves around these new large-scale works : the viewer encounters this physicality from the long view in a narrative way - you have to get pretty far back to see a ten-by-fifteen-foot painting. As you move closer, the extrusion comes out at you, and the picture falls apart into abstraction – series of solitary suspended contiguous marks up close, which come to resemble pixels at times.

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I think this suspended impression of gesture is necessary for painting to continue having a visceral impact—it’s like a kind of pushback (pun intended, in your case) against the disembodied feeling of images relayed through the infrastructure of digital capitalism. It’s not just about insisting on the physicality of the medium of paint, during a moment in which the rl world is shot-through with abstraction, but also on depicting your presence. In my case, that bodily presence is in front of the painting; in your case, behind it. But in both, our hands are indexically recorded—there’s a mark of having done something manually to the work. That’s what’s missing from digital art or post-internet art, where you just print it out or render it, the body of the artist has been lost.

You’ve mentioned your interest in tapestries and imagining the heroic effort of teams of weavers on machines and being floored by the gravitas of labor stitched into the surface of a woven object – enacting a hybrid of human and machine labor working together. With painting, I think we agree it’s important to keep the hand alive on the surface. But the question is: how do you keep the hand in there when you’re trying to depict a world that’s taking it out?

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Studio portrait, 2025

AMW: Right, I am not entirely sure how to depict that world - I often think of my process in respect to this dilemma like making art as a cyborg - using the computer and electronic tools in conjunction with my meat tools (brute force and the hand). I find myself constantly mediating between the human error of the hand and the mechanical error of the various machines I use.

All my work kind of comes from drawing, from the hand, and that is synthesized through different layers of machine mediation—but in the end, it still holds that unique marker initiated by my hand. In a way, this process feels like weaving—a kind of tapestry where different modes of mark-making are threaded together, each with its own texture of fallibility. The act of stitching together different sources, whether they be hand-drawn, scanned, digitally altered, or reinterpreted, mirrors the workflow of a human-machine collaboration. But I don't think what I am doing as particularly unique in that sense - but rather a perversion of that process perceived between humans' relationship to their machines.

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Regarding the scale of these new works—I wanted to use size as a means of appropriating the space of history painting, that physical space being either a grandiose window or an oppressive object. I also think about this in relation to how I use my references and the “archive”—pushing through various forms of mediation and arriving at something not entirely of digital space or meat space.

Much of my source material comes from archives that exist entirely online, and some of these images I have encountered may not even have a physical form anymore. This is another form of weaving—tracing ephemeral, disembodied images and reconstituting them into something that asserts a presence, that takes up space.

In a way, the entire process is a kind of perpetual weaving and unweaving, a tension between control and entropy. The computer offers precision but also distortion, just as the hand offers intention but also failure.



Thinking Through 2015 (13 Years), 2025, Oil, acrylic and inkjet on canvas, 73” x 61”

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PS: I’ve heard you on multiple occasions refer to engaging “the small grid and the big grid.” The small grid, I presume, refers to pushing the paint through the simulated pixel shapes enmeshed in your screens—And the big grid being the history of the spatial grid in art, which in today’s context also connotes a slippage of meaning onto pinging the technological grid. There’s clearly a relationship to how you are confronting that from behind, literally through the back-end of painting perhaps? It’s as if you’re moving behind the control panel of the picture and pushing images back where they came from through that original window you broke at Skowhegan in 2014.



Study (Fire at the Enquirer), 2025, Acrylic medium, pigment, rubber, spray paint, vinyl, screen, linen, 22” x 18”

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AMW: I think of the small grid—the simulated pixel in my screens—as the site where materiality asserts itself, where paint confronts digital mediation. The big grid, by contrast, extends beyond that: it’s the broader system—historical, technological, ideological. It’s the grid of Modernism a way, but also the cloud, the algorithm, the vast structures that order and archive images today.

My process moves between these registers. Tracing—whether through historical sources or digital images—is a way of acknowledging presence while also asserting transformation. It’s not just about reproduction but about materializing something through paint, with all its slippages.

So if there’s a sense of working within the “back end,” as you put it, maybe it’s about pushing images back through the systems that structure them—interrupting or complicating their flow. I don’t know if that resolves anything, but I think that’s the point. The grid, in its various forms, is something that I find very very generative to engage with.

PS: It’s interesting that you mention tracing images of the past, recalling events from histories you feel a personal, emotional connection to, and you’re conveying them through a form and pictorial language so idiosyncratic that the viewer immediately recognizes the painting as yours.

For artists that utilize an illustrative, pre-Modern mode of depiction - the stuff of paint is largely transparent – deployed invisibly in service of depicting the world. In having no self-reflexive agency within the picture the materiality of paint is submissive onto transmitting the image.

But in your work, the painted mark embraces a role that is quite the opposite of submissive – it stands right up, spiritedly alive and alert, floating in spatial indeterminacy. You mentioned the effort involved in making “the gesture,” (which I would propose is painting occupying a 3rd status of expressive form in your work – a timely update on the historical binary of representational/abstract) as “giving the middle finger to the submissive nature of illustrative form.” I take this to mean you are, in effect, symbolically reversing the directionality of being forced into the face of the canvas by flying out of the screen and back into the room. The material surface of this picture will not LARP as a sub for the viewer on any axes.

Following this - would it be accurate to say the insistent corporeality inscribed in your painted surface is an effort on your part to substitute the ‘body’ of the painted mark in place of your body as a person, so as to move critical focus onto painting?

AMW: Standing before a painting and thinking, That person made that—when making is never entirely original—raises questions about authorship. Art often depends on a branded association rather than a true engagement with vision.

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For me, authorship resides in the mark—whether a gesture or a method—something no one else can replicate exactly. In past work, I traced historical images, particularly early ethnographic European paintings by Albert Eckhout and Agostino Brunias, focusing on these artists to examine the site where Black and brown figures were first conceptually framed within Western art history. By applying my process to these problematic compositions, I aimed to extract something new. But copying is never neutral—each attempt introduced distortions, revealing the traces of my own method.

Let’s shift the focus to your work. You have an upcoming show at K-TZ in Berlin, where you’ll be exhibiting two series of painting drawn from the gallery’s archive of exhibitions since 2012. Beyond the initial concept of working with the archive, how do you see the notion of the individual, subjective mark translating into these pieces?

PS: The forthcoming show addresses the question of what is authentic and what is fake within the context of the subjective gestural mark, and does it matter, or does anyone care? I’ve recently become interested in what happens to the emotional resonance of a painted mark when I scale it up or down – for example when blown up 1000% a tiny stroke delicately and self-consciously applied with an 1/8” brush becomes an aggressive, improvisational slash of action painting with a housepaint brush. This uncannily jarring reframing bears a relationship to the vulnerable exposure triggered when intricately private information becomes public, such as a personal photo being posted online

I composed a series of traditional paintings by collaging images of artists’ works which have been presented at the gallery since they began – 13 small gestural studies – one for each year. These are on display in a 1/3rd scale model of the gallery displayed on the floor, resembling a dolls house which you peer into almost like a 3D model or schematic layout on SketchUp - the aerial pov the viewer beholds might suggest thinking through memories of past exhibitions in the space.

I photographed this series of small works representing the gallery’s history to compose a second series of works scaled up 300%, and hanging on the gallery’s exterior walls. These paintings present a printed 3D simulation space composed in CG fx software which seamlessly merge passages of the gestural paintings with their photographic image. Significant portions of the original paintings have been lost to photography and others enhanced and reinscribed - perhaps this gets at something that happens when you think back on the past to make sense of your life, or a body of information, in time.

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AMW: Seeing some of the pieces in person, it becomes clear that the material of paint operates as a synthesizer—merging the archive with the specific history of the gallery itself. In several works, paint functions metaphorically, evoking the presence of a viewer navigating a digital archive, moving from JPEG to JPEG. Could paint, in this context, be conjuring a kind of spectral presence—haunting the gap between material memory and the flickering trace of the digital image?

PS: “Haunting the gap” is an excellent description of the status of my painted marks in this show, and similar to the ‘suspended’ status of your paint pushed through the screen. I’ve been considering the viewer’s passage from the looking down on the mini gallery to the real gallery as modelling a transition from private space to the online world of the large works - where a received image can be misinterpreted and blown out of proportion when viewed remotely. I think of the paint in these scaled-up works as putting the paint back into the painting, after the original painting has been lost to time, existing only as an image in memory of what it once was. The show is entitled *Thinking Through (13 Years)*.

AMW: Your deployment of scale as a metaphoric device—to, in a way, personify the brushstroke or mark—is compelling to me. It’s a funny coincidence, too, because I’ve been exploring similar effects of scale on the mark. With my *Ruins* series, I’ve been enlarging Piranesi’s etched marks to distort notions of history and reference. I have noticed that in recent years you’ve really opened yourself up to playing with real space, scale, and the cerebral disjuncting that occurs when all your modes of working collapse together.

This disjuncting feels particularly present in how you’ve structured the exhibition itself. The 1/3-scale painting within the 1/3-scale model of the gallery creates such a fascinating recursive dynamic, where the work exists both as itself and as a reflection of its own display. Do you see this structure as amplifying a sense of simulacrum, where the painting becomes an echo of itself? Or does the shift in scale function more as a way of engaging memory—both personal and collective—by recalling something lost or transforming its presence over time?

PS: The scale shift inherent in the large works weaves handmade and simulated marks to the point where it’s tricky to tell who made what, my hand or a machine - a CG software/printer combo apparatus reinscribing images with my physical presence – once removed.

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I developed this process for my show *Supporting Actor* last year wherein a traditional painting becomes the texture file in a 3D model to depict a different feeling of space. In this show the traditional painting has become a site specific model which functions as a mnemonic device for building a memory to ‘think through’ time, in retrospect. This idea connects to the impulse to write a prompt in hopes of distilling of a body of data, and here I’m working with 13 years of exhibition images displayed on the K-TZ website – a space that has been hugely important for progressive experimentation in contemporary art in Europe and a welcoming community of people I’m continually inspired by who have supported my work for years.

AMW: Looking back isn’t always about a return to—it can be a force that distorts and unsettles. Not in search of a lost origin, but in moving through its remnants—afterimages that fragment and reconfigure in ways that speak to the present. The material life of an image—its form, process, and circulation—determines how history lingers, resists closure, and remains in flux.

Scale plays a role in this too, creating a meta-space that distills one’s cognitive relationship to memory. A space that echoes, both mentally and physically, the presence of an exhibition space itself.

Thinking Through (13 Years) feels like an enactment of this process—working through time, layering eras, and unsettling any fixed point of origin.

There’s an instability here, akin to how memory and the archive overlap and misregister when considering how a space holds time. It gives me hope that painting can function as a recursive system—an image looping back on itself, questioning where the ‘real’ resides. Is it in the archive? The database? Or in the psyche of each person who experiences a space across time?

So maybe looking back isn’t about longing or recovery, but about friction—something to be pulled, pressed, and re-formed. A painting, a space, a memory-image: all of these can be scaled, repeated, reframed—never fixed in meaning. In that sense, painting doesn’t reconstruct the past so much as it makes space for its slippages, contradictions, and refusals. The excitement isn’t in resolution but in the way these shifts keep things unsettled—insisting on movement, on openness, resisting legibility in favor of something more charged, more alive.

PS: I feel this excitement in your new show! I’ve long been a fan of letting go of hierarchies around the indexical gesture and its copy, as the visual (often humorous or terrifyingly so lately) delirium that ensues following the timely question of “Is this real?” reflects back a sentiment unique to our moment. As horrifying as daily life might feel lately, it’s vital to maintain conviction in painting’s ability to communicate these feelings, inside the frame.

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