

Chang, Ian, "Art history meets domestic life in the paintings of Jonas Wood," *Frieze*, Issue 174, September 2015, p. 232-237

# ROOM WITH A VIEW

Art history meets  
domestic life  
in the paintings  
of **Jonas Wood**  
by *Ian Chang*

The paintings of Jonas Wood vibrate with the kind of explicit pleasure that can make a viewer look around the room guiltily. The fear is that someone present might be sober enough to remember that painting's licence to thrill was supposed to have been revoked. With their bright colours and off-kilter intervals, the paintings are richly representational: the evidence of the artist's hand is in every wavering line. They contain only gestures toward narrative, or even human relations, but their pictorialism ought to feel as stagey as an old pin-up. Instead, they are brazen illustrations of the proposition that the way we once thought about painting can be renewed.

Wood's practice divides, consciously if not neatly, into traditional genres: still lifes, portraits, interiors and landscapes. He gleans photographic bits of his life – family photos, vintage magazines, baseball cards, other people's art – as source material that he then carefully splices into large paintings. His bricolage is as formal as it is subjective: he collects variations on pattern and shape – woodgrain, pottery silhouettes, jungle prints – as well as subjects such as childhood, male heroism and the artist's milieu. The context matters less than his attraction. His own past paintings, work by his wife, the potter Shio Kusaka: everything is fair game for cut-and-paste; compositions recur, figures are transposed and pots reappear from one painting to another.

Wood, who grew up literally surrounded by modern art – his grandfather collected works by the likes of Francis Bacon, Alexander Calder and Helen Frankenthaler – has dedicated his practice to the service

of a surprisingly unreconstructed mission of purity and rigour, born out of that modernist inheritance. The goal, he says, is 'chasing painting down', with such practices as drawing and printmaking. Behind his distinctively cheeky style lie the obsessive and dead-earnest production methods of another era – and volumes of studies, cut-outs and collages. Whether you will credit Wood's sincerity may depend, therefore, on how badly you miss the great modernist project of protecting the innocent experience of looking: a quest that would have verged on the sentimental had its results not been so shocking. This project – to which, legend has it, painting was driven by photography, and which Wood seeks to recapitulate – wielded the new against the real, disjunction against decoration, obsession against commercialism, pure colour against local colour, and hard labour against bourgeois complacency.

If you are still carrying that torch, however, beware, because Wood's work may begin to niggle. Your discomfort may start with the way he crops, then shoe-horns, Henri Matisse's famous *L'Atelier Rouge* (The Red Studio, 1911) onto the outside of a pot in one of his giant paintings (*Red Studio Pot*, 2014), setting adrift the original's miraculously integrated components and causing you to wonder: what sort of homage is this? Or it may begin when you notice that, however the paintings are made, their effect is not derived from draftsmanship but photography. They invariably have an intriguing composition and a sense of spatial and chromatic risk. They often have passages of striking power and subtlety – the drawing is, indeed, good – but they are not essentially *experiential*. They

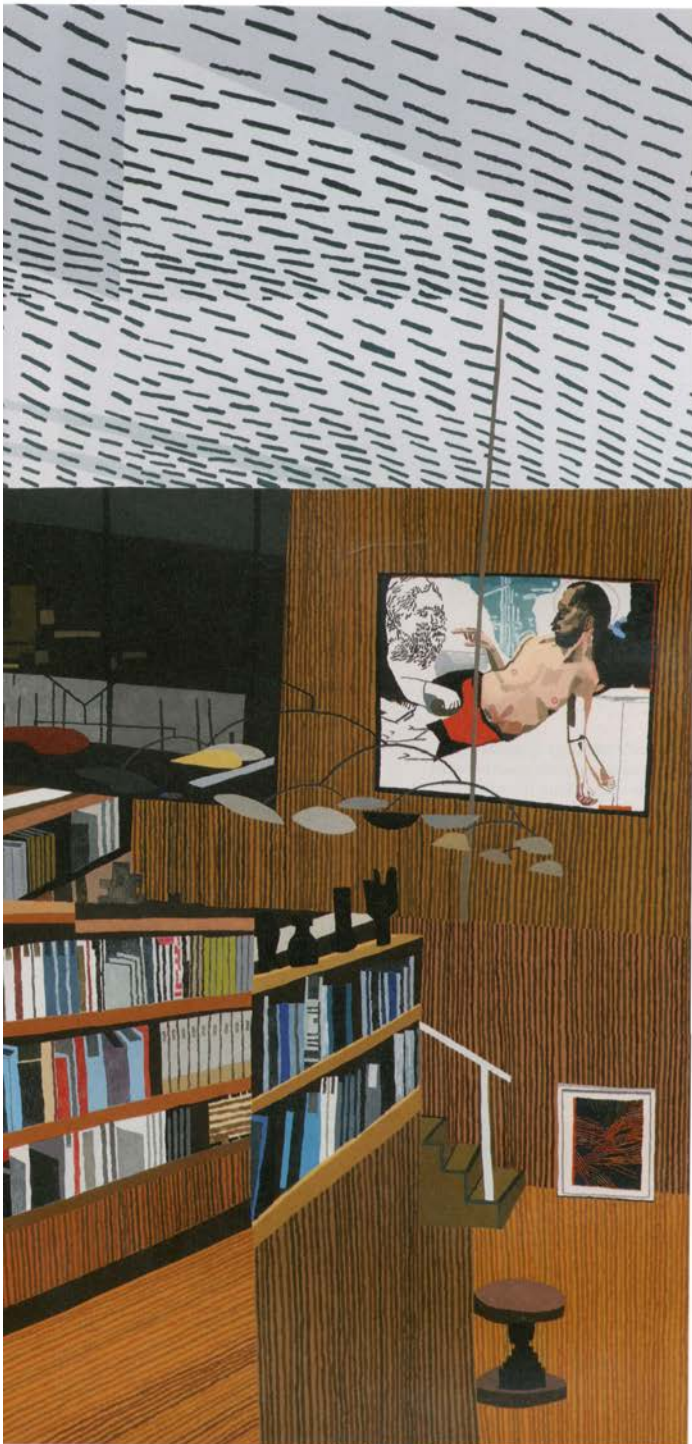
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contain no hierarchy of desire. In them, all visions are photographs, all plants are potted (often succulents and bromeliads – themselves clippings), all space is unstable and a basketball player is no more or less conflicted than a shower curtain. A creeping affect of nervous, winking anomie haunts these images, not quite irony but not quite belief either, suggesting Wood is up to something more current, and perhaps more deflating, than modernism.

His variations in mode and perspective have earned his work comparisons to cubism and pop art. But where cubism deployed shifts to create structure and presence, Wood's distortions, artefacts of photographic cuts and limited palette are agnostic; they confess their vulnerabilities, their artifice, but not while genuflecting to a higher power. Take his portrait of the great ceramicist *Akio Takamori* (2014), in which the artist is depicted at work. The pot he is painting is actually a replacement, slightly enlarged and cropped, of the original in the source photograph. The dropped-in pot is a self-portrait by Takamori, rendering Wood's painting a double portrait in which the ceramicist is upstaged by his own work. Then, one notices that Takamori, with a mottled, painted-on face, is also upstaged by the exaggerated woodgrain of his worktable, the scale and height of the shelves, the words printed on paint labels. He is dwarfed in size and vividness by the very furniture of the world. This is no cubist portraiture: it is something far more dispassionate.

Wood's work also pushes past pop. It ignores hierarchies of high and low, and has no particular fear of middlebrow taste. But, unlike the pop lineage from Richard Hamilton and Andy Warhol to, say, Sigmar Polke, it is synthetic rather than analytic, a peacemaker not a provocateur – if not to

Previous page  
*Schindler Apts*, 2013,  
oil and acrylic on canvas,  
3.4 × 2.8 m

This page  
*Ovitz's Library*, 2013,  
oil and acrylic on canvas,  
2.5 × 3.4 m

All images courtesy  
the artist, David Kordansky  
Gallery, Los Angeles,  
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the point of politeness or naiveté, then at least with a bluff good nature. It does not quite reject authority but ingratiate itself by means of a coherent view. The flatness of Wood's surface, the indelicate reduction of his line, and the summary averaging of his colour do not exactly refer to recognizable modes of production. His source material is often private or murky, the abstraction strictly local to the structures and surfaces of identifiable but mostly unbranded objects. The exception is when he's lifting from famous paintings or sports cards or television stills. In those cases, the pop influence is clearer but also renders the works either slightly callow or niche, as far as his practice goes. Pop is old now and its irony tires easily. Laura Owens and other postmodernists have learned to do without the irony, but they also seem to have little use for the 'unification' – of life and looking – that Wood says he is aiming at. Wood gives due respect to, but mostly eschews, the nomadic branding of Warhol, the cool discipline of Alex Katz and David Hockney, the arch political proteanism of Polke and Gerhard Richter, and even the liberated-from-everything blitheness of Owens.

Thus, Wood's paintings operate in a paradoxically contemporary space between established forces. They want the authenticity of auteur heroics and the currency of a time when neither vision nor technique, no matter how monumental, can much impress. Wood's brushwork, though hand-executed, is more graphic than painterly, and his subjects suggest personality without really containing it. The artist described his subjects to me, referring to the empty rooms in his paintings (which are, as often as not, focused on upper corners, where people not only are not, but cannot go) as 'humanity without the humanity'. This lack sometimes feels less like the absence in a room after someone has left than the view from a surveillance camera with an eye for colour. Interior disjunctions of space – as in *Jeremy* (2014) or *Kitchen with Jade and Aloe Plants* (2013) or, especially, *Ovitz's Library* (2013) and *Studio Hallway* (2010) – reinforce the effect.

This split aesthetic may be why Wood's paintings of people – even the often-brilliant self-portraits, such as *Calais Drive* (2012) or the creepy and monumentally American *The Hypnotist* (2011) – actually seem to discomfit the most. And it also provides a key to why a painter caught between Picasso and Polke might seem so of-the-moment. When paintings advertise an old-fashioned way of looking, it is disturbing to find the painter observing things in the way we look now – at surfaces, surveillance, selfies – and not only finding nothing more alive than information but also not getting too upset about it.

Wood's modernism is a modernism of the screenshot, though it requires neither computer nor camera; the artist, seeing like one, becomes the device. His process takes Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's definition of drawing as 'the probity of art', but uses it to stitch together the wound of our attention deficits, doing its level best (or unlevel, as the case may be, given Wood's style of drawing) to integrate, if not understand, the cropped-out parts, quantized surfaces, fleeting chroma and meta-level disorientation of contemporary life. Though he neither relies on nor explicitly refers to the computer, his brushstrokes resemble bitmap graphics, or Hockney's iPad art. They reproduce beautifully; so long as the machines are properly calibrated, a print is as good as the original, because they are already copies from copies, in process and in essence.

Which brings us back to that pleasure. Only the dourest scrooge won't find beauty somewhere in Wood's work. For me, it started with the quirky engineering of *Children's Garden* (2015), the lovely shadowplay of *Studio Exterior* (2014). Soon enough, even the Matisse references seem like good fun and *The Hypnotist* starts to offer a better riff on *L'Atelier Rouge* than any appropriation. In an image glut, why worry about which ones count? Shape and colour remain fresh even to our jaded eyes, and reality hardly ever seems real anyway. Absorption in looking, even at a flattened world, is joyous. Painting as a kind of plastic Pinterest still satisfies, and Wood's relentless processing does plenty to please. ♦♦

Ian Chang is a writer based in Los Angeles, USA.

*Jonas Wood is an artist who lives and works in Los Angeles, USA. He has had solo shows at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, Anton Kern Gallery, New York, USA, and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, USA, and a collaborative exhibition with Shio Kusaka at Gagosian Gallery, Hong Kong. His solo exhibition at Gagosian Gallery, London, UK, will run from 12 October to 19 December.*

- 1  
Red Studio Pot,  
2014, oil and acrylic on canvas,  
1.8 × 1.8 m
- 2  
Akio Takamori,  
2014, oil and acrylic on linen,  
107 × 91 cm
- 3  
Maritime Sunset Landscape Pot,  
2014, ink, gouache and  
colored pencil on paper, 71 × 56 cm
- 4  
Children's Garden,  
2015, oil and acrylic on canvas,  
2.3 × 2.3 m

All images courtesy  
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