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How Many Jonas Woods Can You See in a Jonas Wood?

Opening January 22 at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, "Plants and Animals" presents Jonas Wood's latest body of work, full of allusions to others. Ahead of the show, the artist speaks to Cultured about the power of storytelling in his paintings.



Photography by Marten Elder, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

Think of paintings of dogs, and what springs to mind? Something by Edwin Landseer or George Stubbs, perhaps? Dogs playing poker? The genre is not known for its artistic depth or profundity, but Jonas Wood has never been afraid of inauspicious subject matter.

Early on, he became known for paintings of basketball players, tennis courts and even golf courses, which he showed alongside domestic interiors, still lifes (often including potted plants), portraits and landscapes. Wood is a stridently contemporary painter who is simultaneously beholden to tradition and the history of his craft.

Wood's new exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery, "Plants and Animals," opening January 22, is his first in his hometown of Los Angeles for four years. Of the various fauna that feature in these new paintings, drawings and prints—including gharials, a deer, a leopard, giraffes and cats—the most frequent are dogs.

"I just like dogs," Wood explained when I met up with him at the gallery during the show's installation. None of the dogs depicted are Wood's own, Robot, who has featured in many of his paintings in the past and sadly passed away last year. Wood found most of his reference photographs of the canines on Instagram.

There is a temptation, when looking at Wood's work, to hunt for biographical insights and private narratives. Many of his pictures are extremely personal—such as *C.M.Z. House on M.V. with Ptolemy* (2021), based on photos taken 40 years ago by the artist's father of the family's cat. Others are not. There's no way, really, to tell the difference.



Jonas Wood, *5 Dogs*, 2019. Photography by Marten Elder, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

"I'd like to think that it's all sort of real. But painting's not real," Wood says. Patterned Interior with *Mar Vista View* (2020), for instance, doesn't show his living room, although he has added a view through the window of his old house. The rest is appropriated from a photograph from the 1980s. Except for the plant. That's Wood's.

I ask if the dreamy *Ravello, Italy* (2021) was painted during a magical pandemic escape? Far from it, Wood replies. The scene comes from a picture his cousin sent him about 10 years ago, when he was getting married in Italy, asking Wood to make a watercolor for the invitation. Wood saved the image (which he does a lot) and revisited it for this painting in acrylic and oils. Only later when Wood did a reverse Google image search did he discover that the photograph is a generic and widely reproduced shot that his cousin didn't take, and likely never even saw. He doesn't mind.

"It's the poignancy and the excellence of the composition and the subject matter that I choose, and how it's all balanced together," he says. Wood is an artist who is committed above all else to what happens inside his pictures. Maybe that's why his work is so often self-referential, as in the mise-en-abyme of *BBall Studio* (2021) which includes a glimpse of *Patterned Interior with Mar Vista View* hanging on the wall.

"I'm like a storyteller," he says. "Some of the stories are true. And some of them aren't true." The important thing is that they feel true.