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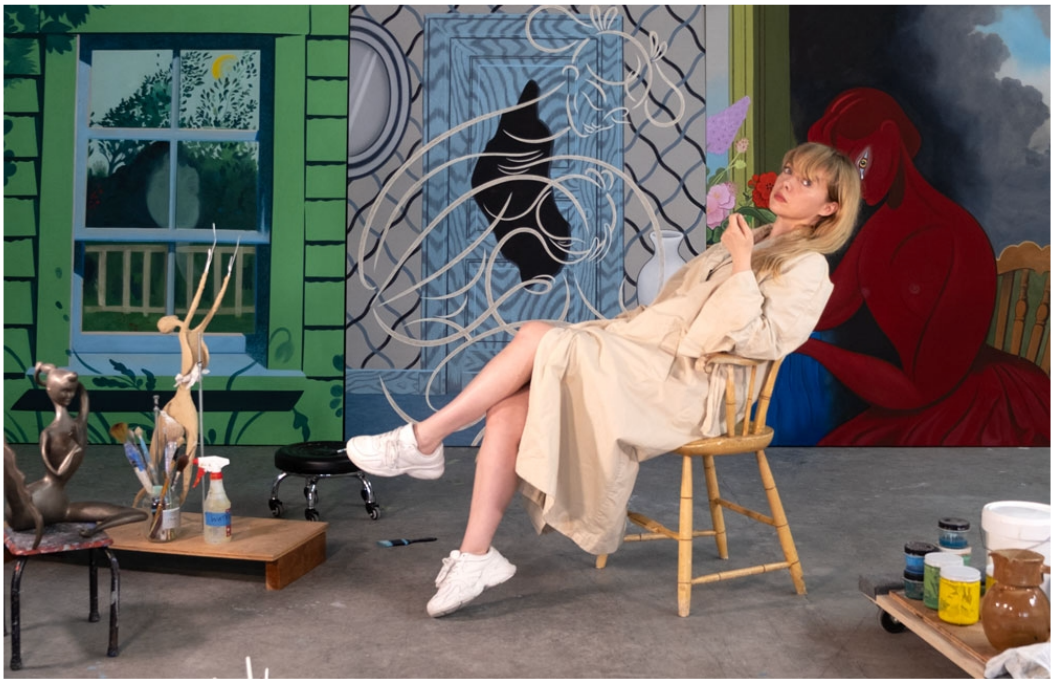
JUXTAPOZ
Art & Culture

Vitello, Gwynned, "The Journey to Lake Margrethe," *Juxtapoz*, August 20, 2024



Koak

The Journey To Lake Margrethe

Interview by Gwynned Vitello // Portrait by Koak

Humor me, Koak. I like to imagine that you are a Pisces, the water sign seductively symbolized by two fish swimming in opposite directions, a fluid hula of fantasy and reality, a healer, feminine, intuitive, and obviously, creative. In abstracting your mesmerizing figures, a universal language is delivered as you imbue each thoughtful subject with a dignified singularity. Fine, spare lines speak directly with the economy of a master cartoonist, while windows, roads and mirrors invite viewers to peer through layered curtains and filtering leaves. And the colors, how deliberately they're summoned, mixed into hues that suffuse the paintings with an ocean of depth. So if not the sun, maybe an ascending or moon in Pisces, definitely the Zodiak's favorite artist. We met for a clearly illuminating chat in the Dogpatch area warehouse studio she shares with her gallerist-husband, Kevin Krueger, owner of San Francisco's Alter Space.

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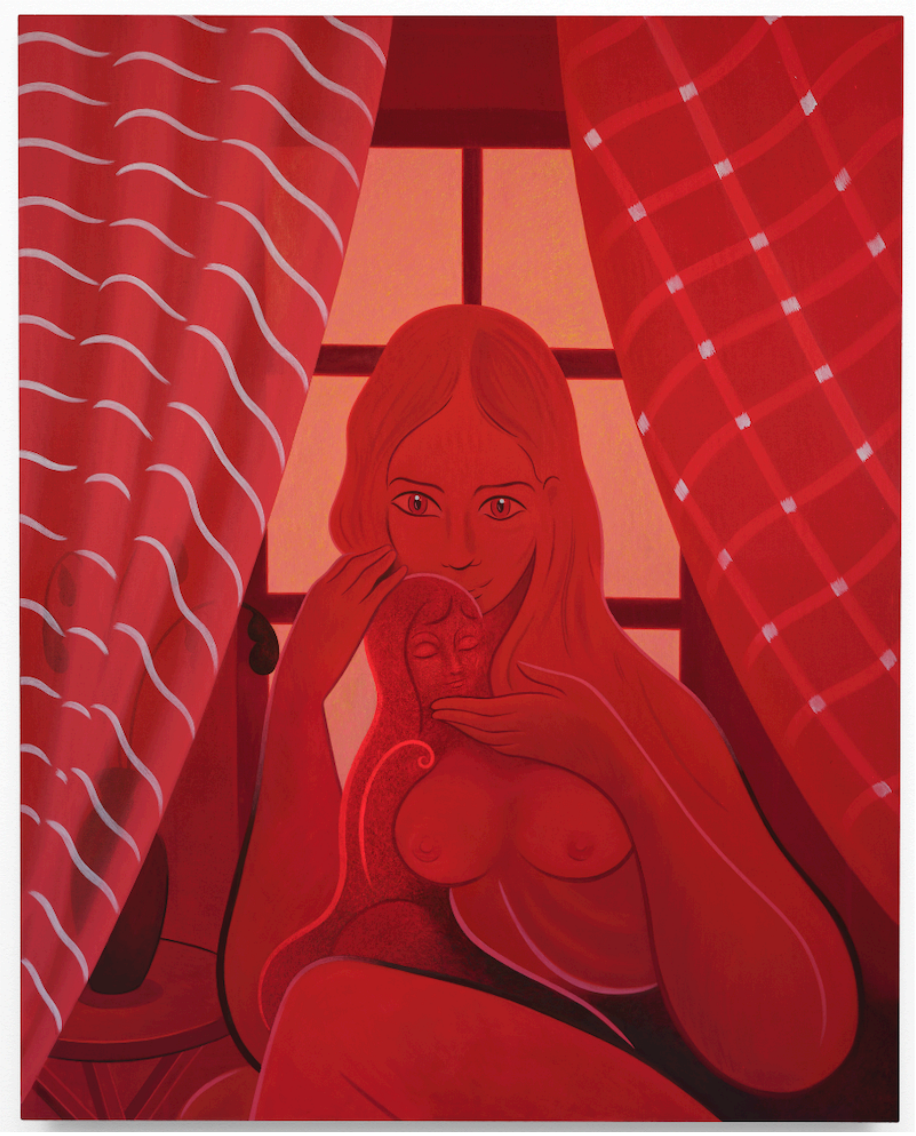
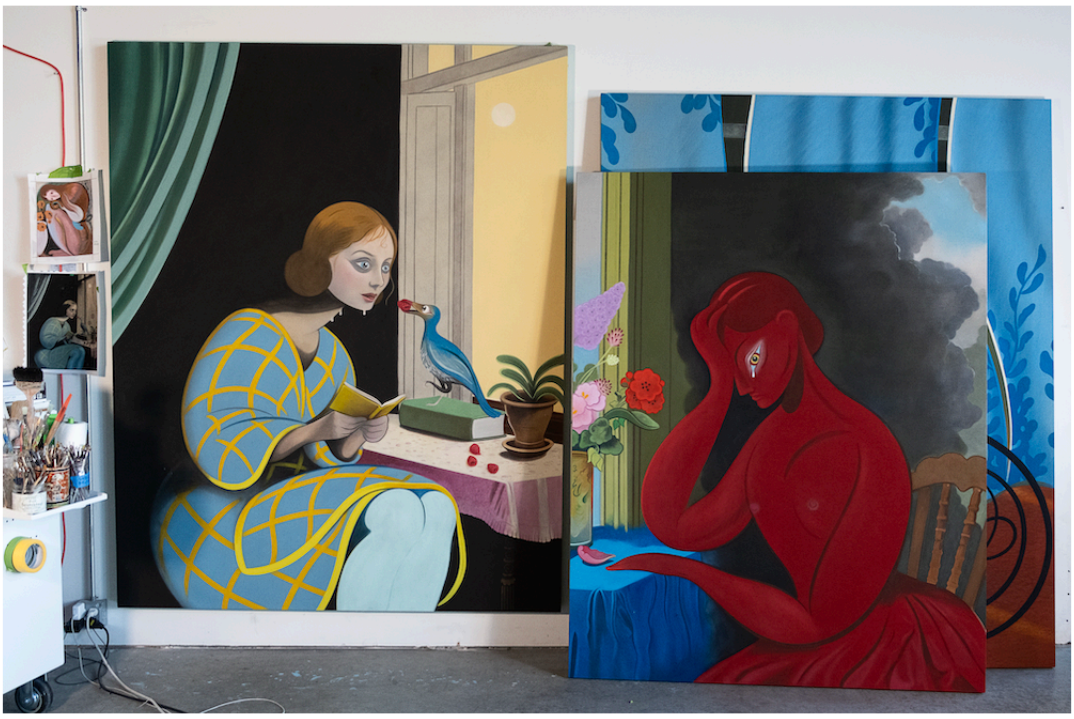


Carmine, 2023-2024, Flashe and acrylic on linen, 59" x 74"

Gwynned Vitello: You've often referenced a childhood illness that confined you to bed as a kind of opportunity to spend time making art, and I realized that several artists I've interviewed have had the same experience. So I wonder if that is familiar to you, and does that interiority invite an early exploration of the body, the self, and the outside world?
Koak: Absolutely. Illness can force you to feel the boundaries of your body more acutely, heightening your connection with the interior, both physically and mentally. Feverish dreams, boredom, and social isolation are fertile grounds for imagination. These experiences shaped my understanding of art as a tool for exploring what it is to be human and as an outlet for self-expression and communication with the outside world. The loneliness of illness almost feels like a dream about how our interior world interacts with people and places that feel distant.

How was the transition from growing up in Michigan to moving to Santa Cruz, California? Was it an adjustment, and did making art help with that?
I was shy and somewhat introspective, so the cross-country move was an adjustment. Art was already my outlet, but it became more urgent as I entered adolescence. I struggled with OCD and was drawn to people and ideas that challenged the constructs of what didn't always feel like a stable world. By high school, many of my friends were struggling with addiction, and I actually lost several to suicide. It was overwhelming and terrifying, so I needed to feel like I had a voice to express what otherwise felt inexpressible.

I was so fortunate to have an amazing art teacher at Santa Cruz High, which, in retrospect, now feels like such a gift given how public art programs have been cut. She had a brilliant way of obliterating normalcy, which you need at an age when so much is in upheaval. With her encouragement, I started doing art shows at local coffee shops and making zines, which gave me a voice and put me in conversation with people who had similar experiences.

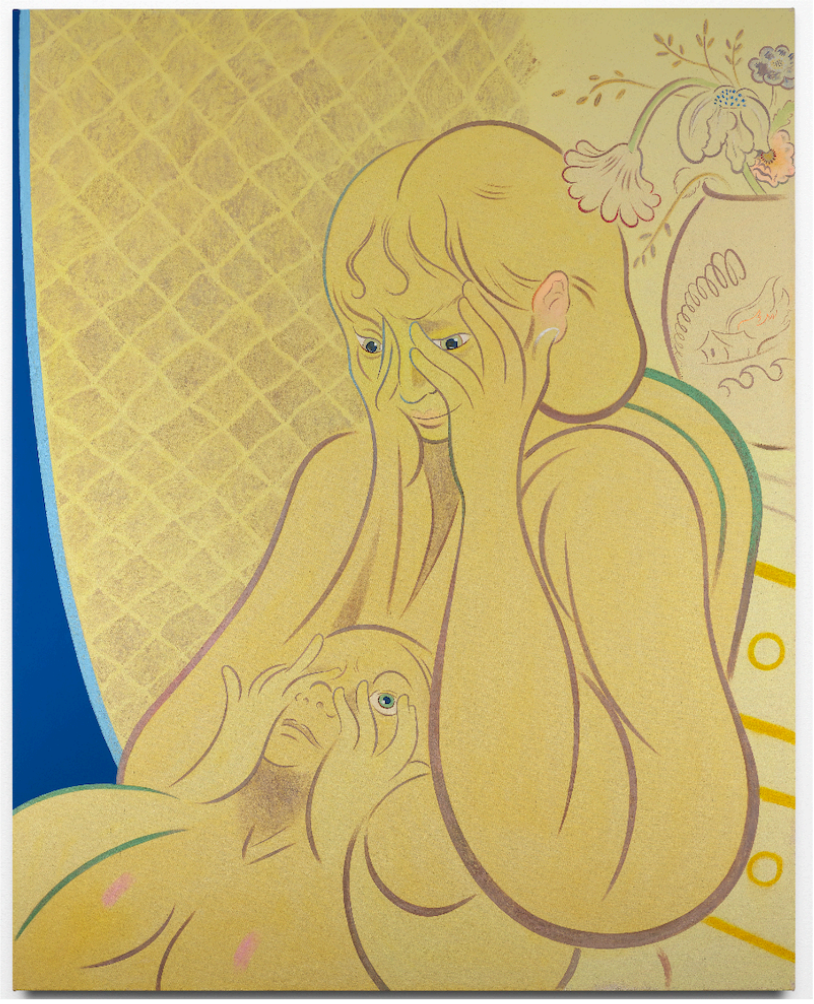


Scenes from Koak's studio in San Francisco, 2024

Was it a given that you'd attend art school, and was it satisfying? If so, what classes elevated your skills and purview?
My art was so intertwined with the personal that it felt vulnerable and intimidating to consider art school. I was accepted to CalArts right out of high school, but I opted to stay with a friend in England and travel with her through Europe. Intuitively, I needed that space to percolate the previous years and process what I wanted to do before committing to a formal environment. I ended up at Cal Arts but became disillusioned with the collective understanding of what it meant to be an artist. Others have had different experiences, but I felt that art was being treated as a performative lifestyle rather than an urgent need. I ended up going to the California College of the Arts, where I found much more clarity and perspective. I was able to craft a program through their Individualized Major that incorporated painting, writing,

printmaking, sculpture, electronics, and, of course, comics, for which I later received a Masters through their Comics MFA program.

Do you conceive your women from a kind of amalgam, or are you occasionally drawn to a specific character from history or mythology?
Yes, but it's a bit deeper in that the reason for creating them is often driven by the desire to present an amalgamation—which feels truer to what it means to be human. We're all combinations of our different parts—parts that are fully ours, parts that are driven by societal constructs or archetypes we've internalized—none of us is succinct. Rarely will figures in my work come from a specific source. I've done a small drawing and print that was based on the story of "Leda and the Swan," and I've made several works of my mother. But even when I create something from a singular figure or person, a large part of my process is in layering that figure with additional nuance, convergent emotions, and elements that tie into larger social narratives.



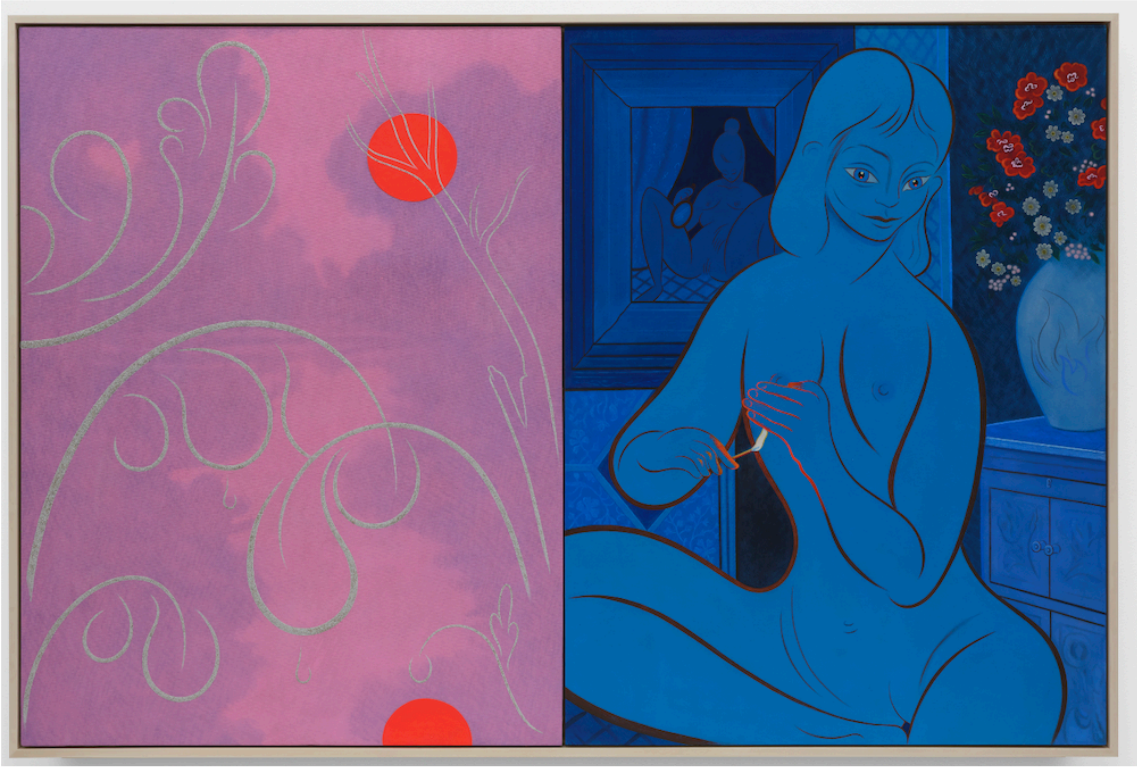
The Beholden, 2024, Flashe, acrylic, and liquid charcoal on linen, 68 3/4 " x 86". Courtesy the Artist and Perrotin.
Image: Chris Grunder

How would you describe your painting practice? Do you start with an idea, with research, and with a line drawing that eventually becomes your completed process? Your method of accentuating the drawn lines in

some of your work is like a magic trick that adds subtle but powerful emphasis. Who would guess that pencil shavings would play a part (and what number pencil)?
There's never a single path. For smaller works or drawings, sometimes it's as simple as moving the pencil until an image surfaces. But with larger works, the process has been more varied for the past few months. I've been in the early stages of planning an upcoming exhibition at Charleston in Lewes, which has come from years of interest in the history of the Bloomsbury Group, but at the moment it exists only in my head as a foggy collection of colors and the idea that the paintings should feel like movement through a busy household. Simultaneously, I'm preparing a painting for Frieze London based on a smaller drawing that I just finished and feel could be explored further in a larger format. I'm also sketching a digital draft for landscape painting that will show at the Kemper Museum this fall. All this to say, each work or body of work has different needs in terms of its beginnings and progression. Some take painfully long to sketch, some are drafted by hand, others digitally, and some feel like a puzzle that doesn't fit until thoroughly explored. The one constant with larger works is that there's generally a long period of drafting, projecting, nudging lines, and revisions before I start physically working on a piece.

As far as material, line is always a key element in my work, but its treatment varies with each painting. If a piece needs to feel tender, I leave areas of the linen exposed or lightly dyed, as in the patterning in Nancy in Blue. For visually layered pieces, where I want to present two images as an overlay and create the sense of coexisting thoughts, I'll build up the lines by sifting wood from my pencil shavings and mixing it into a paint that's then sculpted off the canvas in order to create distance between the lined image and the painted background, as in The Shell and Magritte's Door. It's important to me that my process reflects the essence of each work, and over time, my techniques have evolved to support this.

How long does this take, or do you maybe work on several paintings that become a larger opus?
Generally, I'll work on a body of work collectively so that each piece informs the others. There might be one that acts as an initial catalyst, but it's always quickly followed by works that I feel have to exist in tandem. It's like the first piece operates as a question, and the following works are answers, but at the same time, they are all iterations trying to say the same thought or mood in a different tone. For example, the first work for an upcoming show at Perrotin was Margrethe Summer, a painting of a wide-eyed woman sitting at a table, tongue out, and ready to receive a raspberry from an equally wide eyed bird. The work reflects both my childhood in Michigan and an idyllic connection with nature, though there's always an underpinning of feverish worry. The sketches for the following works build on this in the form of repeating imagery: nature represented as shadows and silhouettes; doorways or windows as portals between the world of the interior and nature; and spirals symbolizing both loss of control, internal safety, and retreat, like a shell.

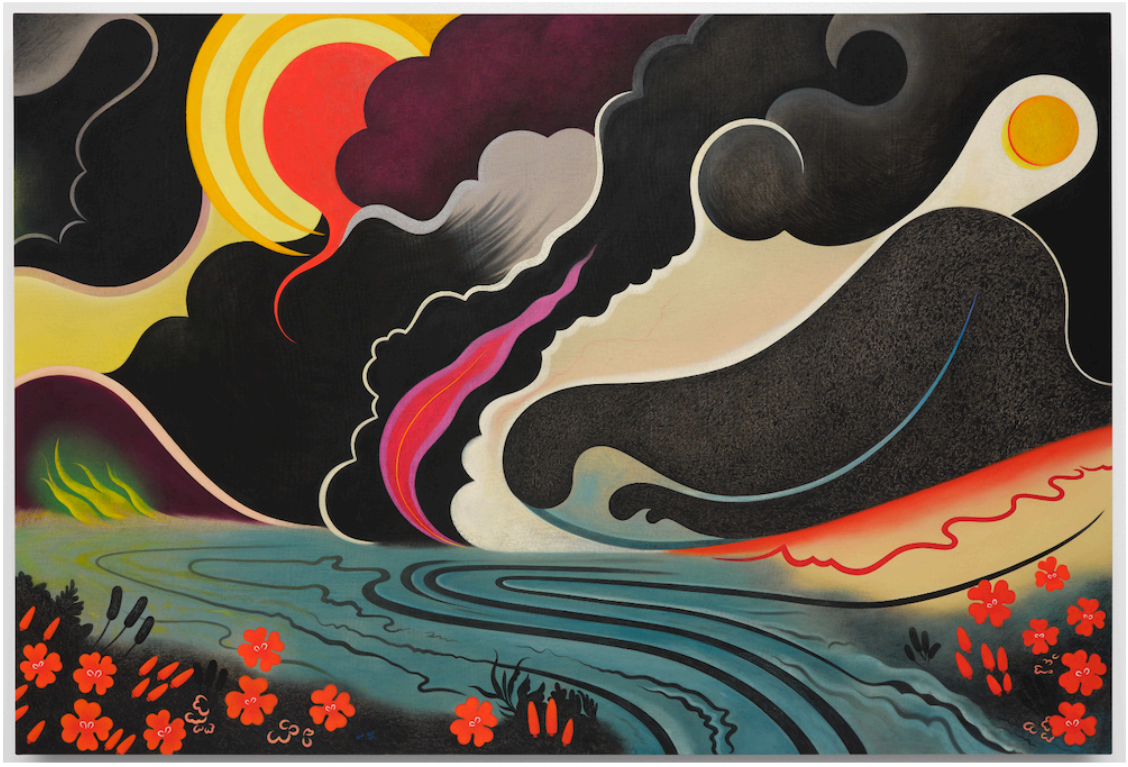


Below Here a Deep Well, 2022, Flashe, acrylic, charcoal, and chalk on linen mounted to panel, 66.5" x 50". Courtesy the Artist and Altman Siegel. Image: Chris Grunder

How has your color palette changed, and do you have favorite colors or one at the moment? Are there colors that hold a personal resonance or that feel representational of time, place, or mood?
The show I'm currently working on began as a ruination on the color green, which historically in art has captured both life and death within its range—from green fields to the sick bed. I thought it would be interesting to do for a Parisian show, considering the history of Paris Green, a paint developed in the 18th century that, despite containing arsenic, gained wild popularity during the industrial age as people sought nature amid the era's grayness. It was used in paintings and household wares, such as wallpaper and fake foliage, and ultimately led to much illness and even death. The story of arsenic green captures the absurdity of human nature. The duality of the color also reminds me of my grandmother, who passed away over a decade ago, and of the tenuous balance she navigated between her life and illness. This brought back memories of my childhood in Michigan, where green encapsulates both the vibrant woods around my grandfather's log cabin and the green waters of Lake Margarethe, where we swam each summer, unaware it was poisoned by runoff from the nearby military base.

Expanding on this, I noticed during my studio visit that each of the paintings in progress were dominated by a particular hue? Did you have that in mind at the start, and how does it tell the story of the show?
It comes back to the idea of not being able to untether the works from one another, and the sense that individual paintings come from a collective work, with each one altering the pace or emotional impact within the show. But it's also about pushing the boundaries of that color. When you're working at something that's predominantly monotone, the hues within want to escape. Light pinks and water green become white when they're surrounded solely by their counterparts. In an entirely green painting, viridian mixed with white becomes pale blue, and spring green reads as an

acid yellow. It's a practice in creating boundaries to see nuance; trying to find subtle ways for something limited, when given time, can feel expansive. Similarly, I'm always looking for nuance in the movement or curl of the line work and in how those subtle changes affect impact. Limiting color gives me more control in harnessing the emotional impression, making subtle shifts in tone to subvert that meaning into something new.



California Landscape #2, 2023, Flashe, acrylic, and charcoal from the California fires on linen, 104" x 70". Courtesy the Artist and Altman Siegel. Image: Chris Grunder

As someone who loves zines and comics, and from what I've seen, a master of figuration. Has it always been your choice? Have you ever dabbled in abstraction?
I've always worked with the figure, something I've gravitated towards as my most direct mode of connecting with the viewer. That said, abstraction plays an important, though not always apparent, role in my work. My primary language of interest is emotion, and balancing the play between realism, surrealism, and abstraction is maybe the easiest way to portray a more subtle emotional impact.

And you also create sculptures. Of course, it's a very different process, but how do the concepts that start and end a piece share methods and concepts? Do you feel that sculpture can communicate an idea in a different perceptual way than painting?
Sculpture has always been a part of my practice, but it wasn't until the last six years that I had the opportunity to work in traditional materials like bronze or wood. I do feel that it encourages the viewer to engage with the work in a more physical and immediate way. It can also provide a direct reference to specific cultural objects that have deeply ingrained meanings. I've made several works under the title Modesty, which plays on and subverts the utility of the traditional dressing screen. Instead of concealing the body, the sculpture celebrates it by presenting twenty-one drawings of nudes suspended in translucent plexi.

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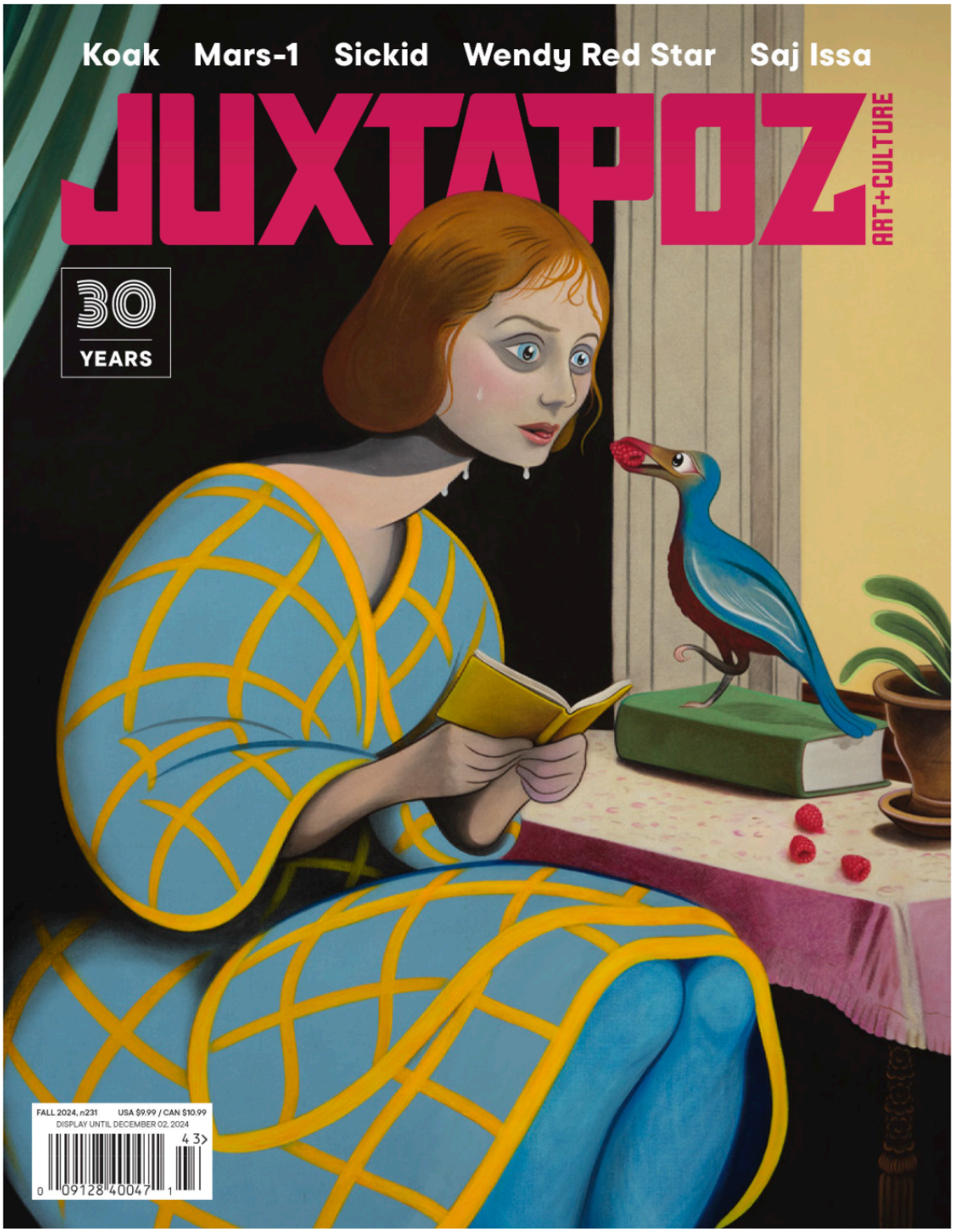

Fall 2024 *Juxtapoz* Quarterly Print Edition, featuring cover art by Koak