

NATALIE WESTBROOK



Natalie Westbrook received her BFA from The Cooper Union, her MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies from the University of Louisville, and her MFA in Painting and Printmaking from the Yale University School of Art where she received the Robert Schoelkopf Memorial Travel Grant, and the Carol Schlosberg Memorial Prize for Excellence in Painting.

Westbrook has exhibited internationally, including shows with Rarity Gallery, Mykonos, Greece; Galleri Golsa, Oslo, Norway; Artformosa, Taipei City, Taiwan; Paris Contemporary Art Show, Paris, France; Robert Miller Gallery, New York, NY; CRUSH Curatorial, New York, NY; Interstate Projects, Brooklyn, NY; the B3 Biennial of the Moving Image in Frankfurt, Germany; and Wonzimer Gallery, Los Angeles, CA. The artist's work is held in private and public collections, including Markel Corporation, Red Bank, NJ; Capital One, Richmond, VA; and Art Bank Program, US Department of State, Washington, DC; and Haleakala National Park, Maui, HI.

Westbrook was appointed Lecturer in Painting at Yale University 2010-2019, and currently teaches at Carnegie Mellon University where she lives and works in Pittsburgh, PA.

Things fall apart, release, break, separate, go to pieces, and abstract. The moment before it happens, they hold on gripping in low traction. My work inhabits the slippery spaces between form and dissolution, sensation and representation. This investigation occurs within the confines of a singular canvas, and across my practice as a whole.

The malleability of paint naturally expresses the mutability and fragility of the human body. In the natural world, organic forms replicate, mutate and multiply. The proliferation of organisms presents a Baroque horror vacui of fecundity. We project and reflect our own bodies in the colors, patterns and shapes in the natural world. Similarly, I consider my paintings as mirrors for the viewer — like mirrors, my paintings acknowledge both a material surface for reflection and a deep pictorial illusion. The slippage between surface and perception elicits surreal discovery.



Natalie Westbrook

Natalie Westbrook's paintings hinge on a craftsmanlike ambiguity. However bold, colorful, or allusive her paintings appear, they always conceal something about their origins and ends. This sense of "in-betweenness"—a crepuscular realm, both brilliant and obscure—liberates her work from the plague of binaries that too often overtakes artists and their work. It also makes her connection to art history as freewheeling as her application of color across each canvas.

Throughout her current exhibition, *Surface Tension*, Westbrook is engaging in what might be called serious play. There's always an element of detachment in her work, which doesn't preclude consummate emotional investment in any single painting. Simultaneously, there's also the aegis of formalism—borrowed from design as much as resources inherent in the history of painting—which allows her work to boil over like an alchemical experiment. This latter "experimental" quality contributes to that air of detachment, of objectively registering the internal relationship between disparate pictorial elements.

John Cage famously defined "experimental" as an action for which "the outcome of which is not foreseen." For Westbrook, I like to think, her outcomes are not so unforeseen to herself. Her allusions to elements of graphic design (to name only one thing) belie this. But as a pictorial gestalt, the directions she takes her work are almost certainly unknown to the viewer. In a single painting there can be a labyrinth of aspects which tease out one impression, while giving way to another entirely.

A painting like *Ripen*, for instance, is marvelously balanced while alluding to myriad approaches to lineation and form. On one plane, there's the lips. They seem inspired by graphic design, reminiscent of a cartoon visage on a child's trapper keeper. But Westbrook owns them in their fire-apple redness. In the same painting, on an entirely separate plane, she makes allusion to gestural painting and graffiti. That all these elements should be resolved in a single canvas, which flirts with maximalism with the utmost tastefulness, is nothing short of terrific. Yet all this blooming, buzzing confusion, these textures and visual noise, can just as well reduce itself to a grid of vertical and horizontal lines, like a maelstrom drawn against Cartesian coordinates.

This is what makes Westbrook's works so rewarding. While not deceiving the viewer, they bring together opposing elements, generating a fluorescent spark that flies across the canvas like a tapestry of girandoles. Melding a kind of garish Neue Wilde sense of color to mathematical rigorousness is only one accoutrement Westbrook carries in her arsenal of tricks.



Insofar as a thread of surreality runs through *Surface Tension*, one would do well to recall the inspiration Comte de Lautréamont provided the early French Surrealists: “...as beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella.” This random association of two functionally unequal objects, in a spatial context that (linguistically, at least) seems to be splitting itself apart, is duly echoed in Westbrook's more figurative paintings.

In another work dating from just this year, *Lumen*, a clay-like figure seems to recline in an otherworldly Mar-a-Lago. Floating leopard prints and vegetation, grouped together in this gray-scale tableaux, seem as little related to each other as the disparate objects de Lautréamont referenced. And yet the painting doesn't end here. The folds in the reclining figures' belly, the pinstripe planes that resemble roads, weave a surreptitious narrative that can only be classified as mysterious—however many interpretations the viewer might read into the work. In its orchestration of elements, *Lumen* is both concrete and abstract, open-ended and thoroughly finalized.

All of which leads us back to the exhibition's title: *Surface Tension*. While Westbrook's surfaces give way to prospects that sometimes allude to the materiality of paint and pigment, and, at other times (sometimes within the same canvas) to more illusionistic modes of representation, one often feels that some surreptitious source material is implied. A totem of heads; snow panther patterns; lipsticked mouths adrift in cyclonic space—however dissimilar these elements might seem, the surface of the canvas allows for them to be brought into relationship with one another.

Such is the pleasure of Westbrook's experimental modality. Her paintings confront the limits of what painting makes possible. By saying this, I don't mean to suggest that her paintings readily conform to some postmodern archetype (although they do allude to this, on occasion), but that they personalize how art history can become assimilated into the workings of an individual artist. For all her experimentation and detachment, Westbrook's heart is laid bare in these works. Her surfaces are less surrealist inventions, than the mindful discoveries of a flâneur who notes a certain slant of light scintillating against a florist's window display, offset by police sirens tolling a lysergic knell.



NATALIE WESTBROOK

EDUCATION

- 2010 Yale University School of Art, Master's Degree of Fine Arts
- 2004 University of Louisville, Master's Degree of Fine Arts, Critical and Curatorial Studies
- 2002 The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, Bachelor's Degree of Fine Arts

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 *Surface Tension*, **Freight+Volume**, NYC
- 2020 *Natalie Westbrook*, Rarity Gallery, Mykonos, Greece.
- 2018 *Hunger*, CRUSH Curatorial, New York, NY.
- 2017 *Quagmire*, Norwalk Community College, Norwalk, CT.
Rising Tides, Amy Simon Fine Art, Westport, CT.
- 2014 *Canopy*, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA.
- 2013 *Diamond Head*, Interstate Projects, Brooklyn, NY.
Deluge, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA.
- 2012 *Natalie Westbrook*, Interstate Projects at Bushwick Basel, Starr Space, Brooklyn, NY.
- 2011 *Natalie Westbrook: Paranoia Peppermint*, Interstate Projects, Brooklyn, NY.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys*, Freight+Volume, New York, NY
- 2021 *Summer Exhibition*, Rarity Gallery, Mykonos, Greece.
Irreverent Objects, Wonzimer, Los Angeles, CA
Possession, Chashama, New York, NY..
- 2020 *Hungry Dog//Chopped Liver*, Wonzimer, Los Angeles, CA.
Mill Street, 26 Mill Street, New Haven, CT.
- 2019 *ART FORMOSA*, YIA Art Fair, Taipei City, Taiwan.
P/CAS Paris Contemporary Art Show by YIA Art Fair, Paris, France.
GIFC, Galleri Gosla, Oslo, Norway.

- 2019 *Summer Exhibition*, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA.
Odds and Ends: Book Fair, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.
- 2018 *Odds and Ends: Book Fair*, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.
Summer Exhibition, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA.
Boston Design Market, Reynolds Gallery, Boston, MA.
The Raft, Yale Center for Collaborative Arts and Media, New Haven, CT.
LABYRINTH, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland.
On Desire, B3 Binnial of the Moving Image, Frankfurt, Germany.
- 2017 *The Sands*, Essex Flowers, New York, NY.
Reynolds Gallery Boston, Reynolds Gallery, Boston, MA.
Odds and Ends: Book Fair, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.
- 2016 *Odds and Ends: Book Fair*, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.
Off the Cuff, Reynolds Gallery, Boston, MA.
- 2014 *Shrink It Pink It*, Cathouse Funeral, New York, NY.
Paint Skin, Institute Library, New Haven, CT.
- 2013 *SUDDENNESS + CERTAINTY*, Robert Miller Gallery, New York, NY.
The Delightful Land, The Horticultural Society of New York, New York, NY.
Strange Natures, Institute Library, New Haven, CT.
- 2012 *Co Lab*, Art Platform Los Angeles, Interstate Projects, Los Angeles, CA.
Material Frequencies, Davenport College Gallery, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- 2011 *Chain Letter*, Samson, Boston, MA.
Half Empty, Vaudeville Park, Brooklyn, NY.
Fresh Paint, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA.
- 2010 *The Gloaming*, Collarworks, Troy, NY.
MFA Thesis, 1156 Chapel Street Gallery, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- 2009 *Peering Into The Future*, 1156 Chapel Street Gallery, New Haven, CT.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2020 Slattery, Brian. "Mill Street Exhibit Makes It Local", New Haven Independent, 25 Feb.
- 2017 Panko, Ben. "Reach Out and Touch This Virtual Reality Art Installation", Smithsonian Magazine, Aug.
 Sutton, Benjamin. "A VR Exhibition Pays Tribute to a Long-Gone Vegas Casino", HyperAllergic, 9 Aug.
- 2013 Galgiani, Allison. "Five Shows That Are Bound to Get You Out of your Winter Slump", Bushwick Daily, 21 March, Brooklyn, NY.
 Seely, Thomas. "Art Uncovered: Diamond Head", Interview, BreakThru Radio, 9 April, New York, NY.
- 2012 DeYoung, Johannes, and Westbrook, Natalie. "Sandwich Isle Romantics: Deeper, Deeper Diamond Head", Title Magazine, 14 March, Philadelphia, PA.
 Graeber, Laurel. "The Paper Bag Players Laugh! Laugh! Laugh!", The New York Times, 26 Jan, New York, NY.

- 2011 Seely, Thomas. "Art Uncovered: Natalie Westbrook", Interview, BreakThru Radio, 10 May, New York, NY.
Tran, Audrey. "Bushwick Open Studios", Arts in Bushwick, 29 May, Brooklyn, NY.
Haines, Chelsea. "Brooklyn Art Incubators", Blend, 22 Aug, New York, NY.
- 2009 "Prana, pure solid and true", ROJO Magazine, June Issue, Barcelona, Spain.

HONORS AND RESIDENCIES

- 2021 Visiting Artist Colloquium, University of Wisconsin, Madison
- 2019 Visiting Artist, Yale University School of Art
- 2015 Panelist, *Gender, Identity & The Artist's Career: A Conversation*, Yale School of Art
- 2014 Teaching Artist in Residence, Hui No'eau
- 2013 Artist in Residence, Haleakala National Park
- 2011 The Drawing Center Viewing Program, Curated Artist Residency
- 2010 Nominee, Rema Hort Mann Foundation Grant
Carol Scholsberg Memorial Prize for Excellence in Painting, Yale University School of Art
- 2009 Robert Scholkopf Memorial Travel Grant, Yale University
- 2006 Soaring Gardens Artist's Residency, Ora Lemon Trust Award
- 2005 The Cooper Union Summer Artist Residency
- 2003-04 Graduate Teaching Assistantship in Art History, Hite Art Institute of University of Louisville

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Markel Corporation, Red Bank, NJ.
Art Bank Program, US Department of State, Washington, DC.
Capital One, Richmond, VA.
Haleakala National Park, Maui, HI.