

# TWO COATS OF PAINT



January 6, 2018

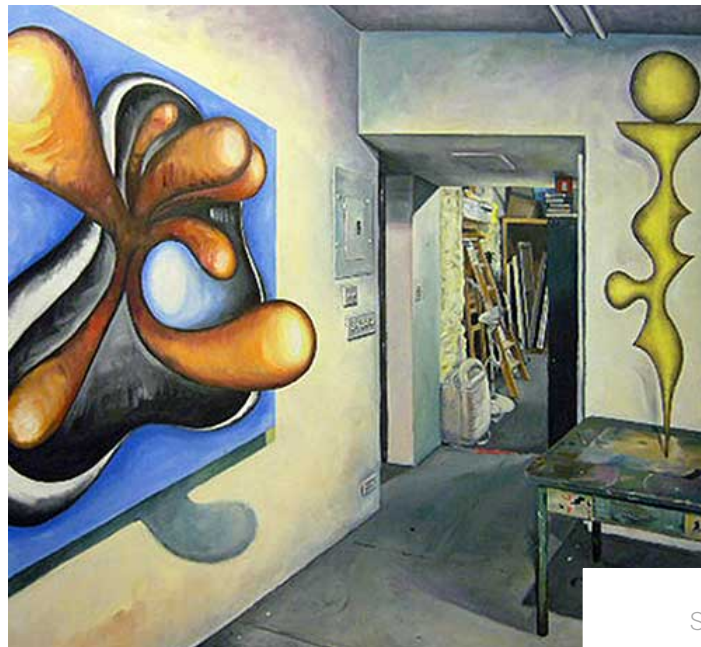
## Studio Visit: James Rauchman

1:07 pm by Editor



*James Rauchman in his studio.*

Contributed by Sharon Butler / We were born several years apart, but [James Rauchman](#) and I have the same severe late-February birthday. Babies born in the northeast during the dark, cold winter months are a hearty breed, and when I stopped by his Morningside studio in December, he and his partner had just bought a house in Vermont, where the weather is even more punishing than it is in New York. Nevertheless, he's eager to turn the outbuilding on the property into a studio and begin painting. His remarkably fluent, expressive, and eclectic paintings document his life and freely cross genre boundaries. Some are realistic paintings from life, as in a series depicting his studio and images of travels in Cuba, while others record surreal fantasies of his interior life and still others are small-scale abstractions. His most recent canvases feature Riverside Park at night.



*James Rauchman, Attraction, 2014, oil on canvas, 54 x 50. Image is from website.*

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**SB: Your paintings have a playful sense of reality and fiction. This series of paintings of your studio – they include images of your previous work. So when I walk into your studio, I see abstract paintings on one wall, and then the realistic studio paintings that include images of the abstract paintings. And then there is a clay model for one of the shapes in the abstract painting. Did that clay model come first, or did you make the sculpture from the shape you discovered in the painting?**

JR: The painting of that shape is the last of a long abstraction series. I started with line and wanted to see where the line would go and eventually the line turned into biomorphic cubist-y patterns. I wasn't sure what was in front, what was in back. I was interested in playing with the idea of form and space and how they change places throughout a canvas. As I worked on the paintings, I wasn't sure how they would develop, but I was originally interested in the line in space. Eventually I started making a big form, shape, creature, whatever it was. And this one came out with the egg-shape behind it. These are very psychological – I'm always finding myself again and again. This creature is my exemplar. I made the painting first, and then I wanted to sculpt it and get a sense of the three-dimensionality, to see what it would look from behind. I took a clay class at the Art Student's League and then I sculpted it. I want to cast it, but one of the pieces broke off so I have to fix it first.



*Rauchman made a small sculpture based on an image in one of his paintings.*

**SB: I love the sculpture – that it is still on the working base, the strut is included, and part of it is broken off. What a great idea to make some of these shapes that appear in the paintings into three-dimensional objects. You know what I love about your paintings, though? Your brushwork. And the way you use subtle black line to define the forms.**

JR: When I was really little, about five years old and drawing, doodling, all the time, I had an uncle who was an intellectual – like he knew who Matisse was! – and he said to me one time that I had a wonderful sense of line. And it hit me like a thunderbolt.

**SB: Right., And then you started thinking about line from that point on. Which came first? That your lines were special, or that you started thinking of your use of line as special and then you cultivated your skill using it?**

JR: Well, we all start out drawing. No one starts as a painter. Painting is a constant pain in the ass – to drawing, is where I feel safe.

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**SB: (Looking around) But you don't seem to draw much...?**

JR: Under every painting is a detailed charcoal drawing. All these paintings have very detailed drawing charcoal drawing on the canvas, and then as the painting.





*James Rauchman's studio. On the back wall he is working on paintings of Riverside Park.*



*James Rauchman's studio. Watercolor paintings of Riverside Park.*

**SB: These paintings of scenes from Cuba, unlike the studio paintings, are based on photographs.**

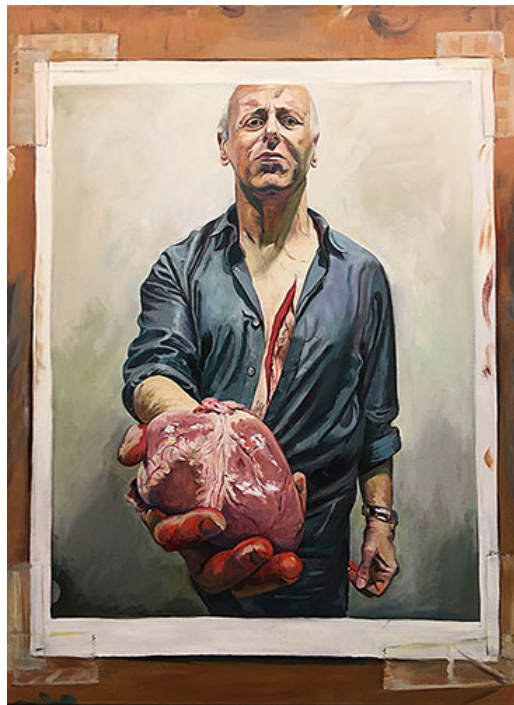
JR: Yes. Photographs are a compromise. When you want to be out in a park and study nature, it's too |  
easel out, and then it's cold, windy. How did Monet do it? In the snow! Someday I may be able to paint  
why I started working from photographs. And these images from Cuba are self-consciously painted fr  
photographs, because they are snapshots from a trip that was a very heavy situation for me. But I was  
my feelings, through the paintings. Sometimes, if I want to work from life, I'll set up a still life that incl  
one image.

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James Rauchman, *Alex's Apartment*, 1999, oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches. Collection Paul Hertz. Image is from the artist's website.

**SB:** Maybe when you move your studio to Vermont you can set up a permanent outdoor painting space, like **Sylvia Plimack Mangold**. She set up a huge outdoor easel at her upstate house and made paintings of a big oak tree throughout the seasons.



James Rauchman, *Have a Heart*, 2016, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches. Image is from the artist's website.

**SB:** I'm wondering who taught you to paint. Artists of our generation tend to be self-taught because our instructors, many of them older abstract painters, liked to talk about content and form, but not necessarily about how to paint. In beginning painting classes now, students want to learn *how* to paint. They expect a much more instructive experience.

JR: Well I took many courses – at Philadelphia College of Art and then in the MFA program at Columbia – but no one ever taught me how to paint. Painting for me is about seeing the world and capturing reality now, but while we were in school this kind of experience wasn't really valued. Approaches were more conceptual and painting from life just wasn't in vogue, it was considered something of the past. There was no reason to paint realistically when you could take photographs! But I really wanted to learn how to paint realistically, to form my own view of the world. Coming from a place of psychological turmoil, painting gave me a way to make sense of the world out there. Just trying to see and capture what is in front of me gave me hope about being able to move around in the external world.

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**SB:** It takes you out of your own head and at the same time reveals something about your internal world.

JR: Maybe now, with all of the online media, we are moving too fast, beyond our own senses.



**SB: People might begin moving away from the Internet now that Net Neutrality is in question. Some say what happens on the Internet is not real, but the feelings that result from online interaction are very real. Especially for teenagers.**

JR: I don't know. Painting gives feelings a home. I love Facebook – I will fight to maintain my online communities because they have been so important to me as an artist, as a way to connect with other artists.

**SB: Your sense of humanity and your interaction with people is vital to your work. A few years ago you were focused on a series of self-portraits that were both playful and, at the same time, disturbing.**

JR: Oh, that was a very difficult time. I won't go into the details, but I was having family problems. All the images are related to awful family issues with my siblings, my cousins, our inheritance and so forth. The story is like something you would read about in a bad novel. I dealt with it – the guilt, the emptiness, the shame – through this series of tortured self-portraits. The experience almost shattered my faith in human nature.

**SB: I'm struck by the diaristic impulse in your work. The paintings are so personal, which in this era is less fashionable. Political content is often touted over personal storytelling. For instance, an artist is more likely to suggest that his work is about, say, Fake News than about the time a specific person told a lie about him, right?**

JR: Absolutely. But I'm influenced by many women artists – Sarah McEneaney, Alice Neel, Elizabeth Murray, Louise Bourgeois – they all put themselves front and center. Because I think, like gay men, women are trying to locate themselves in the culture, as their identity and as individuals. Where am I? Maybe we don't see ourselves in the culture.



*James Rauchman, Untitled, oil on canvas, 2017.*

**SB: You also have spent time making small abstract paintings and now you are working on nighttime landscapes – images of Riverside Park at night. I can see the shapes from the abstractions creeping into the shadows in the landscape.**

JR: I start these new paintings with watercolor sketches from photographs of the park, and I try to figure out how to translate them into larger canvases, although I'm running out of space, so I'm not sure how many large ones I will be making. I like working at this scale, but I'm running out of space.

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**SB: Well you'll have much more room when you get settled into your new house and studio in Vermont.**

JR: Yes. We needed to buy the house to store all my paintings!

SB: Hey, thanks for letting me invite myself over.

JR: Anytime!

James Rauchman's work is on view at:

**"FOTG: 25 years at Mitchell Albus,"** Mitchell Albus, Soho, New York, NY. Through January 7, 2018. **NOTE: CLOSING PARTY TODAY, January 6, 2-5pm.**

**Free and open to the public.** Artists include: Joshua Abelow, Gene Beery, Dan Burkhardt, Neke Carson, Mathew Cerletty, Whitney Claflin, Arthur Cohen, Colette, Magalie Comeau, Tom Evans, Scott Grodesky, Janice Guy, Matt Hoyt, Mary Jones, E'wao Kagoshima, Tillman Kaiser, Dennis Kardon, Steve Keister, Elisabeth Kley, Jill Levine, Liz & Val, Megan Marrin, Juanita McNeely, Dave Miko, Morgan O'Hara, Mark Prent, James Rauchman, David Reed, Ira Richer, Walter Robinson, Julia Rommel, Nicolas Rule, Francis Lisa Ruyter, Kerry Schuss, Stuart Servetar, Mark Sheinkman, Peter Soriano, Walter Steding, Harold Stevenson, Taro Suzuki, Betty Tompkins, John Tremblay, Kiyoshi Tsuchiya, Arturo Tulinov, Alan Turner, Jeff Way, Alexi Worth, Mie Yim and John Zinsser.

**"James Rauchman: Portraits,"** La Fabrica de Arte, Havana, Cuba. April 2018.

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## 10 thoughts on "Studio Visit: James Rauchman"



**Melodie Provenzano**

January 6, 2018 at 2:05 pm

Very inspiring interview, thank you!



**Dorothy Cochran**

January 6, 2018 at 3:15 pm

Hi Jamie! So happy to see this interview and conversation. I have always had great respect for your work – its integrity and expressiveness. Carry on my friend! Thank you for your thoughtful questions Sharon.



**James Rauchman**

January 7, 2018 at 12:09 am

Dorothy, Your words really touched me...thanks so much.

Wish I could give you a big hug right now! xxxxx, J

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**Michael Gnat**

January 7, 2018 at 2:57 pm

Hi Jamie,

Great interview! It is courageous to delve so deeply into your self to create your art, and so honestly share your self, your process and your artistic vision. I love your new works, especially Attraction, 2014, and Riverside Park at night, 2017.

Thank you!



**James Rauchman**

January 8, 2018 at 10:53 pm

Blushing! Thank you Michael...xxxx



**Holly Friesen**

January 7, 2018 at 7:42 pm

Wonderful interview – Great to have gained some new insights into both the artist's process and actual artwork. I love the diversity of images and styles that seem to come together effortlessly as one seamless body of work – not an easy thing to achieve. Bravo Jamie!



**James Rauchman**

January 8, 2018 at 10:59 pm

Oh Holly- Thank you so much. Did you know this blog before? I was late to the game – but Sharon Butler is extraordinary, and I owe this to her...

Miss you, btw...



**Mary margaretten levai**

January 9, 2018 at 4:36 pm

If I did not know you, and I was speed-perusing through an art museum, your paintings would stop me in my tracks. Cousin Mary



**Marjorie Kramer**

January 15, 2018 at 9:48 am

I like those drawings of Riverside Park, remind me of Stanley Lewis. My husband and I live in Vermont and NYC, northern Vermont is probably far from you. But welcome to Vermont our gorgeous north country.



**Allan Johnson**

January 16, 2018 at 7:33 pm

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They are very beautiful and genuine works of art I hope to be able to make several of this Museum that will start in February of this year, with works by artists like Jordi Machi, Din Giráldez, Guillermo Pérez Villalta I love the idea.

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