

On getting out of your own way to allow for magic



Visual Artist Reginald Madison discusses his early artistic discoveries, the importance of good energy in the studio, sticking with it, and why passion is everything.

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As told to Annie Bielski, 2737 words.

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What were some of your first experiences with paint and material?

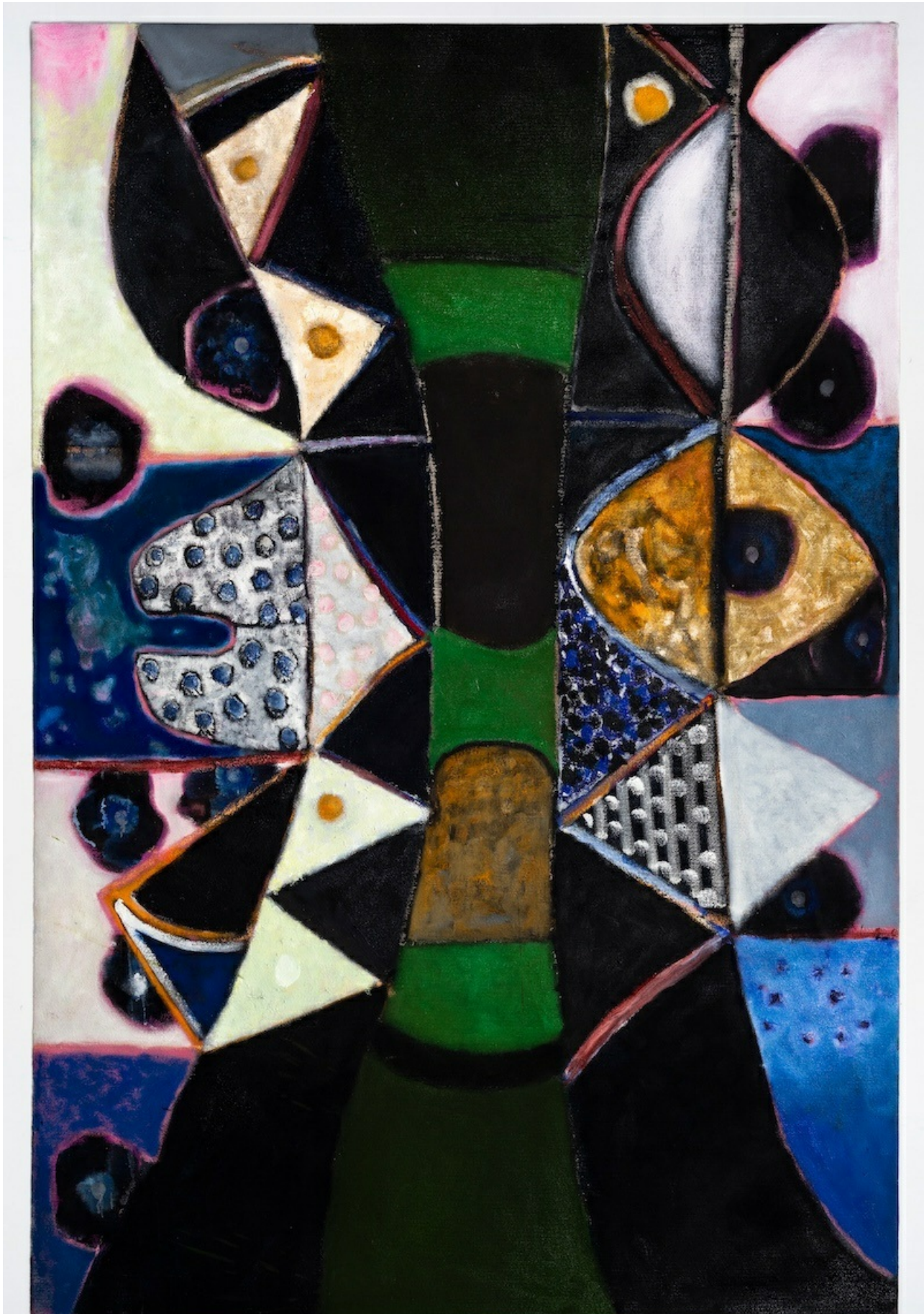
I found some paints in a waste-basket when I was on my way to the beach, me and another kid. Wow. It looked like the artist had gotten disgusted, threw the shit in there. And so, I picked it up. I don't even know how long I had it, probably a couple of years, a year. And then one day I started playing with it, and it was probably on from that point on that I was trying to discover, figure it out. So, that led me to step in. But, always, I was afraid of letting other people see it because I didn't have what you call visible talents. I wasn't a great draftsman. I knew nothing about paint. So, everything was pretty awful that I did. I had to keep it away from other people. I worked in secret for a long time, I worked in secret for a few years at least. And then I started showing people around trying to find other artists who could help me, because by that time, I was a married man. I had no time for going to school. So, I tried some of the local artists, "I'm trying to paint now. Can you help me?" And I sort of went from there.

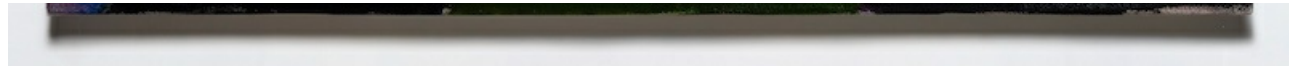
Visiting the Art Institute of Chicago was sort of my training. As well as [The Harry Who](#), they were a big influence. They were figurative artists, all of them, and at that time, the New York art scene was all Abstract Expressionists. But Chicago really had.. I think it was a real intention to bark back at New York, like "So you do it abstract, we're doing figurative," and stay with it, and it really remained part of the culture. And so, I absorbed some of that, not consciously, but figurative work was more in my lane.

And you spent some time looking at art in Europe?

As a young man I quit my job and I went to Europe. I thought that's what you had to do to be an artist. [laughs] You know what I mean? You got to go to Europe. Europe is where it's at-Picasso, all that stuff. But in fact, by that time, which was the early '60s, the art scene had shifted to New York. It was no longer, Europe was a powerhouse. Pollock and those guys were major.

I went there for the first time because I had an informal letter from an art school in Munich. This person said, "Contact these people." I never really followed up. Well, I did, but I didn't like Munich. It turned me off in a day, and so that was over. And then I traveled to other places. I went with my young wife, young kids. I didn't know what I was doing. Just out there. And so, I met artists. I worked with a couple of artists, but I wasn't there that long to get what I call an education. Only thing I found out was it was all happening in the United States.





Make Do, 2022, oil on canvas, 77 x 51.25 inches. Courtesy the artist and SEPTEMBER Gallery. Photograph by Pete Mauney.

In your backyard, essentially.

In my backyard. I went to Peggy Guggenheim's house in Venice. And wow, there were all these great Jackson Pollocks. And then other places, major museums would be Andy Warhol. They were red-hot at that time.

Back to Chicago, Hyde Park. What were your earliest art influences growing up?

I guess I was first really influenced by people, artists. I was more influenced by artists because I knew nothing. There were no artists or art being practiced in my family, so it was never a focus. But in our neighborhood, there was an overflow of aspiring artists, musicians, writers. And I just thought they were the hippest, coolest people on earth. *Oh, yeah, that's me.* And that got me first interested to paying attention to art. My following experiences that got me to act on it were sort of serendipitous accidents of life. So, there was no strong hankering at first. I just found myself down with it and so on. Thereafter, I got the bug and it just stuck. And I knew, that's what I wanted to do.

What was it like to work in Chicago during the Black Arts Movement?

There was a cultural movement of Black artists, mostly working in a more political way. The times were pretty volatile, the Civil Rights Movement. It was a volatile time and so, the work often was reflective of that. It had messages, and images and so on, that was fully grown. I was rejecting that early on. *These guys did this already. They've been doing this for centuries.* But I didn't know how to replace that. I just decided I didn't want to do what I would think of as propaganda. Art as propaganda. *I'm trying to learn how to paint, how to be an artist.* The message has to come later. But anyway, it took years for that to evolve.

But yes, there was a strong movement of mural artists. Now I'm talking early '60s, late '60s into '70s. That was prevalent. There was a group called the AfriCOBRA. Very strongly leaning toward political messaging, political identity, Black identity, and so on. I struggled a bit with the confines of that, and I had other artists, older artists, telling me that it boxed you in. That meant you could be a great Black artist, you couldn't be a great artist. It's like saying, you're a great woman artist, but you'll never be what Pollock is or what Picasso is. And that was part of my rejection. I had been told by other guys, "They're going to put you in this box." The politics was always there. But my end of politics has always been more practical, more realistic. I'd rather throw a rock, break a window than paint a picture of something. It's significant. At least it says something, where this other thing says nothing for me.



Hot House #2, 2006/2024, oil on canvas, 90 x 99 x 2.75 inches. Courtesy the artist and SEPTEMBER Gallery. Photograph by Pete Mauney.

A few fantastic paintings in your last show were started in 2006 and finished 2024. Tell me about that process—where were you when they started, where were you when they ended, and what happened in the middle?

I started those things in '06. I had a studio in Athens, New York. Those were certainly the biggest paintings, still some of the biggest paintings ever. I thought, "I got plenty of space," just a gigantic, beautiful studio right on the Hudson river. It was fabulous. I ultimately had many floods because that was right on the river, and I lost a lot of work from the floods through moisture and so on. And so, I started those paintings and never finished because in between, I had to pack everything up, get it out of the flood zone. Over the years, it's been in storage and actually I had rolled them up. I didn't know what they were, I thought it was something else. And then when I looked. *Oh, wow, I remember these.* So, I sort of finished them accordingly. I pretty much stayed true to the figures, to the subject. I changed the colors quite a bit.

It's like collaboration with a nearly 20 years younger self.

Yeah, absolutely. I think it's like that. Or I also look at it that many years later, as found objects. I just

found these things and now I moved from there. Just like I do with materials. I get materials and they dictate something on their own. They dictate their own story.

That was a good discovery. Have there been times when you've looked back on previous works and thought they were shit?

Absolutely, absolutely. I am very critical. My paintings now, I realize often only get made after over painting, and painting, and over painting out. It's just, much of that is how I paint. Leaving things from the past, taking things away. I am accepting that's how I actually make paintings. Over painting, over painting, under painting, take it out, put it in. And because of poverty and years of not making a living as an artist, I couldn't afford to buy materials a lot of times. So, if a painting wasn't quite good, I just painted over it. Primed it out, and painted over it. So, yeah, I've done that over and over again. Probably made many mistakes. I've had experiences with [gallerist] Kristen [Dodge]. I think I look at something and say, "Yeah, I'm going to get rid of that one. I'm going to paint over there." And she said, "No, no, don't do it" And we had that conversation. And she's been right several times. We are often too close to our own work, don't you think?

Absolutely. And I like what you said, "I've come to accept that that's how I make things." That push-pull and tension within its creation—I relate to that way of making.

Yeah, something of a struggle. It's important to at least satisfy your own eye about what you do.

That's also something I really respond to in your work. The built-up mark making, your sense of color and material. They're usually matte—

They're always matte.

They're always matte. You don't like the shine.

I hate the shine. I hate the shine. Years ago I used to add varnish and so on. And then I felt, I don't know, I got in my head that it was like store-bought, and sealing in or out the truth with that surface. Sort of, okay, here the painting is, okay, now put this gloss on.



River Blue, 2006/2024, oil on canvas, 90.75 x 77.5 x 2.5 inches. Courtesy the artist and SEPTEMBER Gallery. Photograph by Pete Mauney.

What's a good day in your studio?

Well, it could probably have a thousand faces. One day is one thing, one day is another. I guess I'm a big believer in good energy in the space. I feel like I work hard at filling the place up with good juice. And [my assistant, artist] Rick [Letendre] and I talk about it. It was very difficult for me even to have him here

because I work alone. If you got any bullshit, please don't bring it here. I don't need it. A good day is just being productive and getting it done. That's it. Now, a good day comes out all kinds of ways. I don't know. I couldn't prepare the day to happen. I really am very much by the moment. Experience, spontaneous, improvise. I very much live with that. And so, I don't have a formula for anything. I wish I did. I wish I knew how to make magic.

You do.

Yeah, but I don't know how it happened. My favorite thing to say is the magic happens when the magician disappears.

Oh, I love that.

Yeah, and it does. Once I get out of the way, the magic happens. It's so infinite until you label it, and then it has a ceiling, a defined ceiling. But it's infinite when you leave it wide open.

What do you do when you feel stuck?

I'm not sure that I have a method or formula to deal with that. Sometimes you wait it out, sometimes you just make shit until it turns into something else. That's a possibility. I don't know how to approach this thing as formula as, *this is how you do it*. It just is always different.

A mark you've used in your work is your handprint. I love that choice. When I see it, I think *this is what it's all about-making art, existence-and it reminds me of the caves.*

Yes, yes, yes. The hand for me was part of a thought. And some of that thought was, if I take this hand, and dip it in paint, and put it on the surface, that's okay. It's not a drawing of a hand. It's a hand as a tool for me. It's a hand as a tool. So, I still consider that abstract because I didn't draw a hand. I just used my hand to apply the paint. And that's what I started out with. I put on one color with my hand, and right over that, put another. So, it was almost Pollock-esque, except I left the hand intact.

Interesting, you're using it like you would a rag or a brush.

Exactly. It's my tool. See those hands? Look how messed up they are.

Those are beautiful hands! How did they get like that?

Look at those hands. They've been beat. I've broken them and broken them. I used to do hard work. I was in the house demolition business. I was selling antiques. And what I preferred to collect was doors, windows, iron gates, fencing, slate roofs, house parts. So, that's what that is, taking houses apart. So, I always consider my hands as tools. These are my tools. And I use them that way.

What wisdom would you share with your younger self, or younger artists out there?

That experience is a real one in me right now. I've had a lot of experience with at least sharing it with younger artists, which is the equivalent of myself. That's how I see it, about how to proceed making art. So, I got to go deep on that one.

You know if it's for you, if you stay with it. If you don't, it wasn't for you. That really has been my stay to it statement because now I've had other young artists who come to me and that's what I say to them. Let's see what you're doing in four years. And if you're still painting, now we can talk. But before that, I can't tell you anything because I don't know how you feel.

What happened to me was, in my neighborhood when I was asking older artists about painting. You know the answer I got? Come back to me after a couple years or after you've been painting. It was good advice. It was great advice. But it broke my heart at the time. I thought, "They could help me. Why won't you help me?" And they're saying, "If it's for you, it'll stay with you." And it's true. It's true. So, I guess that's my number one thing I would say is keep at it. If it's for you, you'll make a way with it. And otherwise you won't. I'll admit it, but I probably shouldn't admit it, I don't have what I'd call skills or talent. I don't have any of that shit. Nothing signified that I should have gone in this direction. I do have passion and that has been my thrust all along. I've always been passionate about it, struggling with it. And for me, passion runs right through skill and talent. Any of those things without passion is flat. Passion is the thing. It's what makes you go. It fills it up. Otherwise, you're just making marks.

Reginald Madison Recommends:

I am very partial, in terms of music, to Eric Dolphy's Last Date. It was the one of the last recordings he made. I love it a lot, it's beautiful. He didn't know it was one of his last but it turned out to be that.

The work of Thornton Dial. I love his work.

I really like being something of a mentor. I love that role. It's a big part of how I want to function.

One of my favorite and most frustrating things is architecture. I thought I was going to be an architect. I just never got there, but I still love the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, and many other great architects. Architecture is my love.

Name

Reginald Madison

Vocation

painter and sculptor

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Carlos Javier Ortiz