

# IN CONVERSATION: with Drew Englander

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## On art and life

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**I read that you went to art school in Denver. Please could you tell us more about your path to becoming an artist? What motivated you to take the leap?**

I've always had an obsession with practicing and trying to get better at whatever I was doing, whether it was drawing, music, skateboarding, etc. As far back as I can remember I've had the compulsion to make things. I think my mom facilitated quite a bit by have drawing supplies around at all times so thank you mom! I grew up in a family of musicians so it was definitely a creative environment. Also, I didn't have the happiest home life as a kid and since we were pretty removed from cities and people most of the time (I grew up in a rural part of New Mexico), art and music were my outlet and escape; where I felt good. I lived in my mind/imagination so much of the time and I suppose I still do in a lot of ways. My mind loves to picture things and work them out; pick apart the details; see how to pair this or that thing together and give myself a surprise. It's kind of like a little rush to find something novel in that way. Sometimes it makes me smile or laugh. So, anyway, I wouldn't say it was a leap to become an artist, it's just always been something I've been obsessed with doing and had to find a way to do. It's my favorite thing. I've worked plenty of "crappy" jobs to facilitate it along the way and it has been one of the few constants in my life.

**How has your art practice developed over the years?**

It has changed quite a bit in the last few years. I actually didn't really paint in undergrad. Drawing has been my main tool for most of my life, sometimes watercolor or gouache but not much large format painting. I tried a bit of everything at school - photo, video, new media, performance. After undergrad I put most of my energy into making music for a little while. I never stopped drawing and writing ideas down though and I still was always thinking visually. I experimented with the figure and abstraction and did some conceptual pieces too. Then, in the last four years or so I started to become really enamored with the everyday stuff. I realized that my immediate surroundings contained everything I had been searching for in all the other places. All the depth in the world could be found just by taking a look around. So I started drawing my surroundings.

I also got an iPad with this drawing app around the same time and it immediately clicked with the way I had already been drawing, except now I could be even more gestural and play with color all day. That was huge. I loved the way drawing with my finger on the iPad made the images look - loose but clean and vivid. And it's just so immediate, translating an idea into a picture in this way. So I started using that as my main tool and I still do.

**How did the *REAL LIFE* series come into being?**

A lot of little elements have come together in the last four years to make this series. It started with the observational style, which was a way for me to connect with and make sense of my life; to just remember it even. The distorted perspectives were always there to some extent but I started leaning into them more as I went along and related to the feeling of fluidity. I also got an airbrush

right before I started preparing this show and it gave me so many new ideas, such as bringing in the Impressionistic blurry backgrounds and doing more realistically rendered portions of the paintings. Exploring new tools is a really exciting part of making things for me.



**How would you describe your art? And how would you describe yourself as an artist?**

I would describe my art as thoughtful, innocent, playful, joyous but melancholy, sentimental but sometimes cold in its isolated viewpoint. For me it is very much emotional. I'd describe myself as a quiet person of solitude who loves repetition and long meditative tasks, practicing and refining things. I obsess over details (to my own detriment in some cases). In general I guess I'd say I'm just someone trying to make sense of my world and share something with people; create connection, warmth and familiarity in a world that feels increasingly disconnected. I think my first desire as an artist is to find a way to make myself feel a little better, and then invite other people in with the hope that they feel a little better.

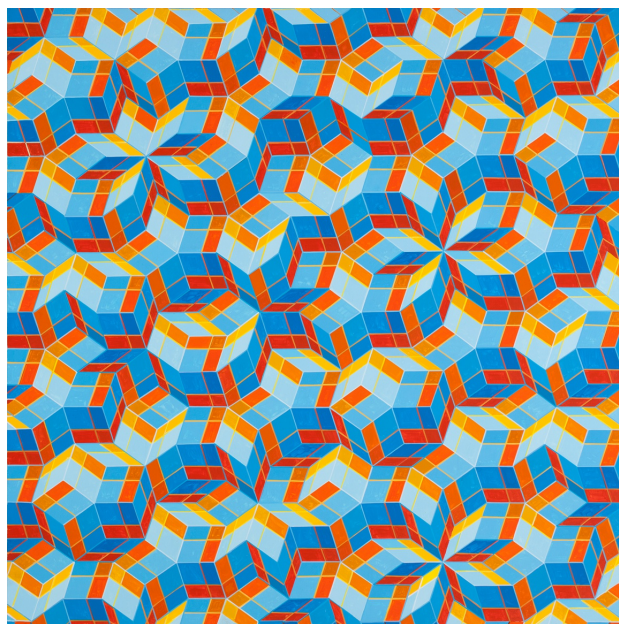
**Please could you talk about some important inspirations or influences on your life as an artist?**

I loved graphic novels growing up so that was what I emulated in childhood. I did this Stan Lee comic book class through the mail at one point. I've had a few excellent teachers that really inspired me - Gary Myers in high school, Clark Richert in undergrad. I think my first real exposure to painting was in high school. My first favorite was Monet. Then I also really liked Francis Bacon. Then later on I found Hockney, Matisse, Bonnard, Magritte, Van Gogh. These are all still my favorites. I love Impressionist and Surrealist ideas but I don't really want to make that work exactly. I like to combine a lot of things.



**Gary Myers, "From a Distance" (2021)**

**Courtesy of Principle Gallery**



**Clark Richert, "Wittens Complex" (2015),  
Courtesy of Gildar Gallery**

**Could you walk us through your day-to-day? Would you describe your lifestyle as regimented?**

Very regimented! I love routine. I wake up and spend time with my girlfriend and our two cats, Goose and Swan. I make a smoothie, read a book, do emails. Then I head to the studio and work from 12pm to 7 or 8pm. I eat the same turkey sandwich everyday for lunch. Then I come home and cook dinner with my girlfriend, watch a movie, usually play guitar or draw for an hour or two then go to bed and do it all over again. Pretty much the only deviations from the routine are when I go surfing or skateboarding (once or twice a week if I'm lucky), or go to an art opening or a movie. My brain struggles when I break the routine for too long.

**What have you been listening to or reading as of late?**

Right now I'm reading "Sometimes a Great Notion" by Ken Kesey and "The Bell Jar" by Sylvia Plath. Recently finished "A Little Life" which was incredible and so heavy. I love novels. I usually prefer to absorb themes through fictional stories as opposed to non-fiction. I think a relatable story

sticks with me and changes my life more, although I also go through periods where I'll listen to tons of self-help books while I'm working.

My music listening habits are all over the place depending on my mood. Lately I've had Pink Floyd and Smashing Pumpkins albums on repeat. My favorite instrument to play is the guitar so I like a lot of guitar music. Early Built to Spill and Modest Mouse, Pixies...the new Alex G album is great. I go through phases. Last week it was NOFX and Jay Z on repeat.

## On music

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**I heard that you used to be a musician, R E A L M A G I C. Can we talk more about your musical journey – how did that happen?**

I've always played/made music. My parents and stepbrothers were musicians and they gave me a guitar at an early age. I never tried to do it professionally or anything but it was always a huge passion. In undergrad I got a computer program called *Logic* and realized how easy it could be to make an entire album that didn't sound too bad. You have all the tools you need. I was part of a community in Denver surrounding a DIY space called Rhinocropolis and it was incredibly inspiring. People trying all sorts of different things in a radically accepting environment. I was in my first band at that time and we basically just made rhythmic noise and yelled. At the same time, I was writing kind of singer-songwriter songs and I decided to try to put the two ideas together and it came out as **R E A L M A G I C**. It kind of sounds like this weird depressed crooner character singing over synth pop. I can't listen to it now but it was so fulfilling to make at the time, ha! I also got to tour all over the States with it for a couple years, which was such an insane experience.



***Drew in his R E A L M A G I C days, 2013***

**Images courtesy of the artist**

**Are you still making music?**

I still play guitar almost everyday and record things here and there for fun and to soothe myself. Sometimes nothing feels as good as music to me. I may do something with it in a more serious way in the future but right now it's all painting all the time.

### **How does your art practice influence your music? How does music-making influence your art practice?**

I think of both similarly. I work on them in the same way, really: building them up piece by piece and giving a lot of attention to little details. Turning them over and over in my mind. Both are emotional for me. Music is often more immediate in the way it accesses emotions, but they both give me a similar sense of touching something outside of myself. On a different note, I think they each do a great job of distracting me from the other just the right amount if I'm mentally spiraling with one of them, getting lost in the details or obsessively overthinking. It's great to move back and forth between the two because they lessen the weight of each other in my head, meaning that I don't give absolute importance to either, which keeps the joy in both of them (most of the time!).

## **On relationships**

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### **I heard that your other half [Laura Burke] is an artist too. What's it like being one half of a creative couple?**

Mostly it's great because we are so similar in the way we approach the world and live our lives. We're both pretty goofy with each other most of the time and we really cherish our downtime together. We definitely inspire each other and talk a lot about what we're working on. We probably talk more about our cats and our childhood issues though.

### **Do you share a studio or keep your practices separate?**

We keep separate spaces. We each value our alone time quite a bit so it works perfectly. It makes us value our time together even more too. Lately we don't get enough because we've been working like crazy!

### **How have you influenced each other?**

We both live in our imaginations and have similar ideas about the compression of space, and using the everyday as subject matter. Maybe the biggest influence we've had on each other, aside from making the more obvious visual comparisons, is just being advocates for each other and cheerleading. We have this common interest that we both believe in and we're both pushing each other toward it, giving support during times of doubt and keeping the inspiration going.

## **On the future**

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### **What are your plans for the future?**

Keep painting and evolving the practice. Try to make myself more vulnerable and generous, in life and in painting! I'd love to release music again sometime. Maybe find a nice escape from the city on the coast somewhere where I can set up a studio and paint and surf everyday.

### **What are you working on next?**

Next will be a show in Berlin with DUVE opening 17 February 2023, then a residency with Plan X in the spring followed by a solo exhibition at their Capri gallery.

**Thank you for your time Drew!**

**WOAW Gallery is pleased to present *REAL WORLD*, Drew Englander's first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, from 9 December to 10 January 2023.**

***Interview by Marian Ang***