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Capturing the Intangible:  
Austin Eddy Interviewed by Margaux Ogden

Aug 2, 2021



Austin Eddy, *A Sickly Dawn And Its Red Rising Sun Whisper Over The Hills*, 2020–21, oil and flashe on canvas, 96 x 34 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Austin Eddy and I met in his Greenpoint, Brooklyn, studio to talk about the paintings in his current exhibition, [A Place for Dreams](#), at Berggreun Gallery. We discussed the formal and symbolic importance of the birds in his new work, the need for limitations in painting, and why he can't shake the real world. His new paintings appear simplified yet laborious, fresh and free, like birds, but built up and worked over. The birds, which Austin insists are not just birds, are stand-ins for the intangible.

—Margaux Ogden

## Margaux Ogden

For as long as I've known your work, you've straddled the line between abstraction and figuration. Can you talk about where you are now with these new paintings?

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## Austin Eddy

I started reintroducing representational elements into the paintings around 2018. I was experimenting with how to blend abstraction and thinking about *painting* painting versus drawing-based painting. Really exploring surface and color. I think in these recent paintings I'm finally reaching a point of understanding those things. I've always wanted to be an abstract painter, but I'm so hooked in the real world that I can't let go of it entirely. My hieroglyphic paintings, which I started around 2015, were the closest I could get to pure abstraction, but I was still relying on language and abstracting the body.

## MO

Right, there was always something the viewer could point to and recognize. Were those elements just a structure to build an abstract painting from or was the symbolism important?

## AE

The symbols were important and so were their meanings. I was dealing with narrative painting, but I was trying to abstract the narrative as opposed to abstracting the figure. The paintings in *A Place for Dreams* are taking that abstracted narrative and making it more of an open-ended conversation that you can apply to something more akin to emotional states. There's an ambiguity to them, but in that they are also very specific.

## MO

The birds are formally interesting, but they have so much symbolic significance. Is it important that they're read that way?

## AE

I think of them more as metaphors for the human condition, so they exist as a window for understanding the self. The birds here are about romantic relationships—the longing for one or the longing in one. I have been thinking about people relying on each other in a different way during this past year. Lately, there have been more pairs of birds in the paintings.

## MO

In previous shows you've had very specific palettes, but they're specific to a suite of paintings, so a show will have a distinct feel based on a consistent palette. In these new paintings, a palette's mood and specificity is unique to each painting.

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Austin Eddy, *Passing Overhead On The Back Of An Afternoon Light*, 2021, oil, flashe, and paper on canvas, 28 x 17 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

## AE

With those older works I was working with Shiva's "traditional palette" to make "non-traditional" paintings. I was trying to figure out how I wanted to paint and who I was painting. Now it is less about me and more about what the paintings can do for themselves. I'm more interested in describing the mood or the tone with the palette. I'm trying to bring in colors from nature instead of relying on catchy, synthetic, high-key colors.

## MO

But invention seems very important to you. Birds in nature have brilliant colors and patterns, but you're not relying on those.

## AE

Right, it isn't like an observational painting of a parrot. It is more like seeing the parrot and wondering if I could apply the colors of the parrot to a painting of a pigeon or using that bird to describe the light at sunset. It's describing a combination of times and places, as opposed to one specific thing. With this show in particular, the colors explore more of a range. You'll have the morning painting, and then you'll have the midnight painting, and then you'll have the time in between. There are also different times of day being painted in one painting. I never really think about the afternoon, but painting the afternoon seems like an interesting idea because it's the most boring part of the day.

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**MO**

Do you find your compositions as you're painting?

**AE**

I do a lot of preparatory drawings, often monochromes, which help determine where things sit in the painting. They get built up tonally or are pattern-based. Lately, in scaling them up, things get readjusted and omitted. The painting is really about simplifying the idea. I'm interested in active decision-making as opposed to executing predetermined decisions.



Austin Eddy, *Together On The Bank Of A Lonesome Lake, Mid-Summer*, 2021, oil and flashe on canvas, 43 × 43 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**MO**

There's a seriality to your work, and yet looking at them it feels as if the paintings stay open for you up until the very end. They never feel fixed. Like if you set out to make a bird painting, then you're just left with a bird painting. But that's not what it feels like here.

**AE**

Part of what makes them challenging is that they're not really bird paintings. In this small, blue painting I'm trying to paint the feeling of loneliness, so I'm painting an abstract idea or feeling, an intangible thing, and relationships become the narrative in a way. That's why I feel like they're not

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really representational paintings, but they're relying on the tools of the world to describe abstract thoughts or conditions.

**MO**

I know you paint with both oil sticks and brushes. Do you have a preference? What does the oil stick allow that the brush doesn't?

**AE**

The oil stick feels more like drawing. It allows a looseness that my facility with a brush doesn't. The moon in *The Silence Of Night* (2021) was painted with an oil stick, and it feels more liberated, less contained. I knew I wanted the moon to feel loose because there's so much rigidity in the rest of the painting. I guess it's just confidence in application.

**MO**

It's funny you describe them as rigid because they don't feel that way to me.

**AE**

Rigid in the sense that the shapes contain the color. There's no blurring between the two. I don't know why, but it makes me so uncomfortable. I enjoy it in other people's paintings, but I can't do it. Lately, I've been trying to use black outlines because I've always had shapes meet shapes. Interjecting black into the paintings—which is always a brown or a blue, but it feels black in relation to the other colors—is new to me. I've been thinking a lot about those kinds of painting decisions.

**MO**

Have you always taken one idea, like a bird, and set it as a limitation, or is working within very specific parameters new?

**AE**

Self-imposed rules have always been important, mostly so I can focus. That's why pure abstraction is so hard for me, because you can do anything. In college, I wanted to paint portraits, but I didn't want to paint people, so I painted chairs to describe the people who would sit in them. When I first moved to New York, I only used black and white; I could paint whatever I wanted, but it had to be black and white. There is always some limitation so that I don't feel so overwhelmed.

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Austin Eddy, *The Silence Of Night*, 2021, oil and flashe on canvas, 72 × 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**MO**

It is amazing how limitations allow you to be so free. These paintings really do feel free.

**AE**

I think that's a huge part of painting. I don't want to feel trapped, and I don't want the viewer to feel trapped. They're not overly specific in the description, but the tone encapsulates a general idea, a feeling.

**MO**

You're giving them the mood, but they're not didactic.

**AE**

The mood, not the narrative. I think that was my problem with figure painting. All I could do was tell a story. That's why abstraction has always been so interesting to me. It allows you to feel a story. With an abstract painting, viewers create their own narratives. I think it's about trying to meet viewers halfway and not give them everything.

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**MO**

Is the type of bird important to you?

**AE**

Sometimes it is. I was thinking about painting the seagull because they're out so far in the ocean, and they exist alone in a way; or pigeons because in the city they're always together; ducks mate for life. Things like this are important. It is more the ideas of the birds and what characteristics describe them. The look of the specific bird doesn't matter.

**MO**

Do you look at birds differently now that you're spending so much time with them in the studio?

**AE**

I bought binoculars to go birdwatching upstate. I'm going to do plein-air painting and will try to paint birds from life. Living inside your own inventions all the time can get redundant.

**MO**

I'm curious to see how they change when you're painting from life.

**AE**

A lot of blurred edges, I think! The goal of it is to really re-navigate the way I paint. I find it helpful to do something uncomfortable in order to get to the next step. I've never really painted from life, and it might be a total failure, but that's fine.

Austin Eddy: *A Place for Dreams* is on view at Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco until August 13.

*Margaux Ogden is an artist based in New York City. Solo exhibitions include Rental Gallery in East Hampton, NY (2018); Embajada in San Juan, PR (2016); ltd los angeles in Los Angeles, CA (2015); and Freight & Volume in New York, NY (2015). She received a BA from Bard College in 2005 and an MFA in Painting from Boston University in 2012. This fall she will be an Abbey Fellow at the British School at Rome. Residencies and awards include the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and Yaddo.*

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