

**WWD**

# Jonas Wood on ‘Plants and Animals,’ the Artist’s First L.A. Show in Four Years

“Plants and Animals” is exhibiting now through March 5 at David Kordansky Gallery.

By Ryma Chikhouné | January 28, 2022



Jonas Wood COURTESY/AUBREY MAYER

In his first Los Angeles exhibition in four years, Jonas Wood presents “Plants and Animals,” showing now through March 5 at the David Kordansky Gallery.

Originally from Boston, Jonas moved to L.A. in 2003 and has since become a prominent name in the art world. Prolific, displaying his work all over the globe, the 44-year-old stayed put at home amid the pandemic, with artist and wife Shio Kusaka and their two young children. Naturally there was a shift in his routine. But the work never stopped.

With his newest show, Jonas explores recurring themes — paintings and drawings — framed in interiors and exteriors of various scales, inserting family members, the natural world and elements of pop culture, as well as his love of sports. It’s the longest he’s ever worked on a show for a gallery, he said. “It’s the accumulation of the work that I’ve been working on for the last three years.”

Here the artist gives a glimpse into the making of “Plants and Animals.” It all began with “Three Dogs” and “Deer and Picasso,” two works created in 2019 that he held on to, he explained.

**WWD:** What made you hold on to those two pieces?

**Jonas Wood:** I thought they needed to be shown in the right context, at Dave’s amazing gallery, and to have a longer interaction with it. There are two options, it seems, in the art world — I guess three — [you] show something at an art fair, show something on a PDF, or show something in a gallery, or at least for me. It seems like those are my three options right now. And then with the gallery, there’s a whole opportunity to have a time for people to see it a little bit longer. And also, just the theater of a bunch of paintings together in the space. And I think that’s really important...I wanted to be able to show them together, to bring their powers together and show them at the same time.

**WWD:** When you reflect on all the work in the show, what aligns them?

**J.W.:** Working on these current paintings, and I guess always, I just have enough kind of things I want to work on a painting, and it seems like when I get to the end of that list of things, I end up looking at it isolated and see if I just notice anything that isn’t balanced right. And then I hang out with it and if it doesn’t seem to bother me too much, I don’t paint on it anymore.

But what connects all these works? I was thinking a lot about mark making and line and color, and how those things can all collide and make an image.

**WWD:** I've read that you've called your work a visual diary. Is that accurate to say?

**J.W.:** I think it's a visual diary, as a view open to some pages of a diary. But I think, maybe, at least I want it to feel like it's something really important to me, like I lived there. Is it a personal diary? A diary, you'd assume would be full of truths, and I think a lot of my work has actually happened in my life — and a lot of the other half hasn't. It's just based on image making and images that I like, and how I see painting ideas in images that I'm looking for and want to try to paint them in my kind of way, knowing how I want to approach building them. Just as almost like an abstraction, like big shapes to small shapes and lines. I can build anything. In a way, my diary is full of everything, but the things that I pick from that diary are the ones that I think either are close to me personally or just close to me in a painting sense. And it's a challenge, and I want to make you believe that this is somewhere that I was or am or is, but you don't really have to know if it's my wife or my dogs or not my dogs and not my wife. Is that my son? Or do I know the person making the painting in the Hawaii painting? I know some of those people, and I don't know some of those people. And I don't really need you to know the difference, at least when looking at them without any knowledge of my work. I think about painting as if the person coming up to it knows nothing. They haven't read a press release. They don't know who you are. And that's OK. They should still be able to know something about my story, even if that story is fictional or non-fictional.

**WWD:** It's pleasing as a viewer to be able to view a piece without any prior knowledge and create your own opinion. But then there's a fascination and you want to dive in and know more about an artist's work, their process. After the fact, do you enjoy or care to make those distinctions, between what you consider truth and not?

**J.W.:** For sure, verbally or written, if it was talked about. Or if you see it in the title, sometimes it's given away. But in this case, like if I told you, the painting called "Future Zoo" with the Indian River gharial reptiles floating in it, those are just two

pictures I found of the zoo that I liked how they looked, and I put them together like two pictures. I like that they all have their own histories of how they're made. They're not a lie. You can find out if it's related to me or not by asking more questions. But I do think there's a poignancy to painting my kid or painting my mom or painting my wife or painting my family or painting a space that I've lived in. The depths definitely maybe draw me in, more emotionally, and then potentially, maybe that projects out into the universe with its energies to the viewer. Or not. I want there to be a distinction sometimes. But in the idea of painting, I would want a still life to be just as powerful as a portrait. But sometimes things probably transcend those things. And that's OK, too. Painting is elusive, and you hope you're trying to paint a masterpiece every time, but you know you really can't paint the one that has the most emotion or the one that has all the truth. You know? But maybe sometimes you hit it.

**WWD:** Have you always been a collector of imagery? How far back can you remember collecting?

**J.W.:** When I started painting and kind of knowing that I wasn't a painter from life, like a plein air painter. Even though I'm obviously a figurative painter and I paint life, parts of life that we all know, it's not photorealist. I can draw and paint from life



"BBall Studio," 2021, oil and acrylic on canvas, 110 inches x 104 inches COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY. PHOTO: MARTEN ELDER

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if I chose to, and I learned how to do it, and I kind of forced myself to do it when I was in school. I was taught that in grad school, that figurative painting is something where you look at something in real life and paint it. But it turned out to be like, "Oh, I look at photographs." I use a photograph as a source, but also something I look at. I collect pictures. People send them to me. I find things I see with my own two eyes. And I have stacks and stacks of pictures, thousands and hundreds of thousands of pictures inside digital devices. And then I do research about what I want to paint. I have too many painting ideas, so that doesn't seem to be that difficult...I have rooms in my studio where there's tons of pictures pinned up on the walls, and I have stacks of photos that I go through.

**WWD: What makes you want to return to certain imagery and motifs? Is it instinctual? Do you not question it?**

**J.W.:** Well, I probably question it too much. I definitely paint in lots of different typographies, and then there's these other, bigger things I keep going back to. Still life doesn't really change that much. It's always a still life. I guess I do use a lot of similar kinds of characters, and the characters are like developing the pots and the plants, and how I set them all up. It's a certain kind of challenge of painting. But then there's portraits or interiors or landscapes or exteriors, or object paintings, too. I think it's just a way to practice painting and all these different types of paintings I like to make. And then, hopefully, they're continuing to evolve, and in a challenging way for me. Also, I make a lot more stuff than I just showed. A lot of smaller works and works on paper and medium-sized paintings...There's a much bigger universe.

**WWD: We get a glimpse of that universe by seeing both a painting and its drawing on display. What was the process of making "BBall Studio"? It seems, in one, to capture many different elements of your work.**

**J.W.:** It's my studio. It's real life. I took a picture in my studio. It was a real picture...I didn't really manipulate much. A lot of the pots were empty, and I added plants that I had made from a show in Hong Kong with all these different clippings, and I sort of placed them in there. I have painted my studio a couple of times before, so that's not really a new idea. But this is a new studio. It's a different studio. And it's a whole new vibe. And it's also the idea of surrealism. Is it real or is it not real? Is this real life? It is real life. The zoo thing, that's not my life, but it's an idea that I wanted to paint. I like that part about how I can tell a story, that you wouldn't know if it's real or not until you know. But it should feel like it's possible.

**WWD: I could look at that painting forever. It's so fascinating to me.**

**J.W.:** I kept that one for myself.

**WWD: Why that one in particular?**

**J.W.:** I always keep a painting or two from every show. I really wanted to keep that pattern couch painting ["Patterned Interior with Mar Vista View"]. I lived with that painting for two years, and it was a really joyful experience to live with it in my studio. And then I finished "BBall Studio," that and "Future Zoo" are the last two paintings I finished leading up to finishing the show. I was thinking about keeping this giant painting ["BBall Studio"], and I was like, "Wow, I can't believe I really want to keep this." And maybe this is the one I should keep, especially because the couch painting is in it, unfinished on the background, and so I can kind of keep both...It feels like a good self-portrait and a time capsule of my life as a painter.



"Patterned Interior with Mar Vista View," 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 100 inches x 87 inches COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY. PHOTO: MARTEN ELDER