

Sight Unseen

STUDIO VIS RYAN WALLACE ARTIST

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Photos by [Mike Vorrasi](#)

To get an idea of how [Ryan Wallace](#) approaches materials, look no further than one of the walls of his studio, which is paneled with the kind of slat that a Chinatown souvenir shop uses to stack metal shelves full of New York T-shirts. When Wallace found the studio last year, it was a perfect otherworldly space above Paulie Gee's pizza parlor in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, right next to his apartment. "At first I thought the wall was kind of gross," he says, "but he slowly began to accept it as a purely functional level; the things could be hung at different heights, which was ideal for a paint thought, 'What can I do with something like that that gets planted in the head, and eventually it finds its way into the next thing I'm doing'."

If this open-minded approach to materials is the foundation of Wallace's work, an interest in existential and scientific questions is its overriding concept. Growing up on the East Coast, Wallace was not particularly spiritual or religious, but he always found himself reading special editions of *Time* magazine about the latest theories of the universe. He received formal education at RISD only to find that artists and scientists are more alike than not. "We're on some sort of quest for discovery," he says. He's been fascinated in recent years by the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, which serves as an inspiration point for his one-man show at Morgan Lehman Gallery this year. For "Cusp," he created three new series of abstract paintings — Glean, Atlas, and Tablet — which, as their names suggest, meditate on information overlaid on geography, and data in different visual ways. From a material perspective, they use soft sculpts like oil, enamel, ink, graph paper, Mylar, artist tape, and cut paper stretched and bound and scored into a four-cornered object. As physical objects, they are layered and compress so much visual data that they, as Wallace puts it, "a surface stores information."

To create the pieces in his n



Tablet series (far left), Glean series (middle), and Atlas: "I started out making maximalist narrative paintings, but the backgrounds became more interesting to me, and eventually they became the painting. That's what the *Glean* and *Atlas* paintings are. At first, the *Atlas* paintings were easier to make on wood panel, but I wanted them to be on canvas, so that they'd stay within the canon of painting on some level. Plus, old ladies like their oils on canvas, so I was trying to find a way to make them on canvas that wasn't just for 'marketing' purposes — certain collectors just won't touch wood panel. I had to think about why these paintings needed to be on canvas if it's easier on panel. Then I thought of slashing the surface — Lucio Fontana would be the obvious example — and that led me to cutting them and pulling them and then it just became a whole new body of work that had to be on canvas."

series, Wallace began cutting the paintings and building them the inside out. The collage-like paintings consist of a fastidiously arranged arrangement of hundreds of tiny pieces of paper and tape left from other projects. A sheet is glued over the whole thing leaving random-looking air bubbles and pockets over the piece. "The gives this kind of neurotic precision an element of total chance," "If it was just little things arranged on a surface, it would be too design-y for me." But it's consistent with his process. "I use anything the right way," "You're definitely not supposed to wrap a canvas in Mylar."

Using materials the wrong way however, seems to bring serene results. A series of freestanding vitrines for his show at Morg Lehmann used automotive tinted one-way mirror film to raise plaster casts he'd made of rocks to the status of sacred objects. "My work's not sarcastic in that but I'm using stuff that people put on their Civics to be macabre," Wallace says. "And at the end of the day, I also think they're really beautiful. Whenever I go from painting to printmaking to sculpture it's always about what can that medium do that that medium can't do."

For Wallace, a little discovery like how his Mylar paintings having a waxy surface texture result in an entire body of work even found a couple of 4x8s in a studio's god-awful paneling in a stairwell of the building early this year, and he's now begun to make pedestals. He even began to like it. "It's so industrial," he says, listing off a few adjectives he considers compliments. "And it's got that design element to it, but it's a crummy one. That balance of elegant and crum is really important."

Last May, he founded the East gallery Halsey McKay with the Hilary Schaffner. On September they'll open the newest exhibit the space, a two-person exhibit works by David Kennedy Cutler and Elise Ferguson. For a closer look inside Wallace's own world, read on.

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