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# Artist Interview

## CONVERSATION

### CLAY JOHNS

Mark Moore Fine Art

Statement

Works

Step inside the studio of artist CLAY JOHNSON with us in this exclusive Artsy Interview. As part of the Mark Moore Fine Art In Conversation Series, we'll get an inside look at the artist's process and newest work. On a sunny summer day in Laramie, Wyoming, we had the opportunity to catch up with Clay and discuss his latest series, STRATA. Here is a glimpse into our conversation.



Clay Johnson  
Tophat, 2021

US\$12,000



Clay Johnson  
Untitled (#698), 2020  
US\$1,600

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“The result in Johnson's

paintings is a narrative that infers the artist's personal history written into the process of the painting itself.”

-Susan Moldenhauer /  
University of Wyoming Art  
Museum

Johnson's "Strata Series" is a stunning collection of abstract paintings and works on paper that capture the essence of memory and the human experience. Moving to Wyoming, known for its vast open spaces and breathtaking landscapes, served as a major inspiration for his work. While the paintings may not have overt references to the natural world, they convey a powerful sense of the wide-open space and the ever-changing formations of the land.

Johnson views his paintings as collections of moments and experiences that have been collaged together. This mirrors the way our minds construct memories, with layers of different moments and experiences blending to create a representation of a person, place, or idea. In a similar way, Johnson

layers many sections over one another in his paintings, keeping the parts he likes and painting over or modifying the less memorable elements. This process of editing and layering reflects the way our brains forget certain experiences and focus on others, creating a distorted but meaningful representation of our memories.

Upon first glance, the "Strata Series" paintings may appear chaotic and busy, but upon closer inspection, the layers reveal a carefully crafted composition. The many layers are distinct and yet seamlessly blend together to create a cohesive whole. This perfectly captures the complexity of human memory, where seemingly unrelated moments and experiences come together to form a unique and meaningful representation of our lives. By incorporating this concept of memory within his paintings, Johnson invites viewers to contemplate their own memories and the ways in which they construct their own realities.

Clay Johnson was born in Durham, North Carolina, where he studied art and art history at Duke University, receiving a B.A. degree in 1985. He then worked for several years as assistant to the painter Robert Natkin in Connecticut and New York City. He began showing paintings from his first series of mature work in 1998 and has since exhibited in galleries across the United States and in Europe. His work is represented in collections around the world.

**Tell me about your artistic education. Did you go to art school?**

I majored in art at Duke University, but the art department there, at that time, was humble. There were some good instructors, and I was fortunate to have a great mentor there, but I

learned very little about painting. However, the advantage to that environment was that it was inviting and welcoming. College afforded me the time to experiment and to get more comfortable with the idea of being an artist — of daring to be an artist. I spent a lot of time in the library looking at art books.

# And what came next?

I was really lucky, fresh out of college, to land a job as Robert Natkin's assistant. Bob was such a talented painter and a generous person. That experience was transformative. Most of what I know about painting, and about how one goes about being a professional artist, I learned from Bob. And in many of his paintings there is a palpable sense of space and atmosphere, as if you could just step into that alternate universe that's hanging on the wall. I love that.

Clay Johnson in his Laramie, Wyoming studio (2024)

## Which artists have influenced you the most?

Oh everyone from Velazquez to Kiefer and beyond. The one I should single out, though, is Richard Diebenkorn. When you look at an Ocean Park painting, most of the decisions that led to the work's final state are right there in front of you. And that story isn't just background information, it's part of the work. I relate to that idea that great beauty can be created from a series of questionable decisions, transformed through hard work and perseverance.



Clay Johnson in his Laramie, Wyoming studio (2024)

## Do you think of yourself as a landscape painter?

I don't. My paintings are not consciously inspired by landscape, and I don't make associations with landscape when I look at them. But other people do, and that's fine. I do, however, appreciate the spaciousness that results from horizontal divisions of the picture plane. With sections of the painting extending the full width of the surface, the feeling of the space stays very open and luxurious, and I like that.

Clay Johnson in his Laramie, Wyoming studio (2024)

## How would you describe the change in your work over the years?

Well, I would like to think that it's gotten a little less polite. A little rougher around the edges. I feel like I'm pushing a bit harder against this compositional system that I've created. I've always been very interested in the idea of laying down a structure, rules, or guidelines, and then working within or on top of that framework, and playing with variations in how closely (or distantly) the action sticks to the plan. I'm an improviser by nature, but there is a method to my madness.

CLAY JOHNSON, A Walk in the Park, 2021 / Acrylic on panel / 48 × 60 ins

## Where do you see the work going from here?

I'm interested in opening up the space in the work even more; finding a bit more freedom in there. I'm working on that. I also have begun another series of work called the Atomic Paintings, which is based on the interactions of atoms and molecules, but really extends to how any group of elements (people, animals, things) relate to each other. And then I've been experimenting with text in paintings, in ways that I've not seen done before. I'm excited about that, so stay tuned.

CLAY JOHNSON, Untitled (#736), 2024 / Acrylic on paper / 22 × 30 ins

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