

# Shotgun Review

## James Chronister: All We Ever Wanted Was Anything

by Jake Longstreth

ELEANOR HARWOOD GALLERY

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*Untitled (Dark Forest)*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 57 x 57 inches.

James Chronister's solo debut at Eleanor Harwood is a collection of seven monochromatic paintings. Five are depictions of dense forest interiors, two are pictures of Keith Richards and Mick Jagger. To call these paintings landscapes or portraits would be misleading. These works are mediated, *pictures-of-pictures* that complicate the question of subject matter. Using source photographs found in nature calendars, photo books and the 1972 [Rolling Stones, An Unauthorized Biography](#), Chronister works within the tradition of artists utilizing the visual detritus of popular culture to fashion his paintings. Though reminiscent of such postmodern masters as Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans, Chronister has devised a painterly language much his own. Working with a tiny brush and one dark, neutral color on carefully hued, off-white canvases, Chronister achieves a startling range of tonality and depth. Viewed up-close, the paintings are constructed by a series of small, discrete marks: a binary system of data--like type on a page--that results in a surreal density of information. Step back, and the pictures cohere. The eye and mind struggle to reconcile the illusionism of these paintings with the narrow,

restrained means of their technique.

Chronister's large paintings--the forest scenes--are his strongest. At 66 x 66 inches and 57 x 57 inches respectively, they give the viewer the best opportunity to experience the strange transformations that occur when viewing them at varying distances. The larger paintings also go the farthest in moving past their source photographs to infer the encompassing silence that one feels standing in an un-populated forest. To that end, each forest work has a unique sense of light and atmosphere, giving the series a complexity that prevents it from sliding into nature-calendar kitsch.

Correspondingly, it seems that Chronister is careful in selecting what vistas he paints. There are no images of mountains, lakes, valleys, vistas or even skies; all are dense, nondescript forest interiors. Not quite majestic, not quite banal. One forest painting depicts velvety ferns in a soft, slightly ochre tone. Another, *Dark Forest*, is done in high-contrast, with a cooler black, evoking bright sunlight penetrating a dense thicket of branches. Strangely, Chronister's paintings, in spite of their detached fascination with image-making and systematic, mechanized technique, seem to acknowledge the beauty of the world. They are not cynical works. However, they create a tension between depicting and not-really depicting that reveals the core of Chronister's practice.



*MJ*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches.

Which brings me to the Rolling Stones paintings. That completely unrelated subjects could hang next to each other on a wall and not conjure a sense of judgment, confusion, conceptual contrivance or implied meaning goes to the heart

of Chronister's practice: they are all of a piece. Everything and nothing at once. The show's title, *All We Ever Wanted Was Anything*, seems fitting here. This everything-can-be-flattened-into-subject-matter approach is Warholian in nature, and Chronister's contribution to this sensibility is rare in its poetic and painterly sensitivity.

Chronister's paintings function both within the dialogue of contemporary painting and outside it as well. My grandmother would have liked them. The "other" art worlds, unaware or alienated by postmodernism, would enjoy them. To what extent is this significant? These are nourishing works, easy and fun to theorize about in the context of painting today. Ultimately, though, their significance lies in their self-sufficiency. "Generosity" is a word that gets thrown around a lot in discussions of contemporary art, and I would submit that Chronister's work epitomizes this virtue; his paintings meet us more than halfway. Easily grounded in broad dialogues around both historical and contemporary art, his canvases invite reflection on themes of mediation and process, but are not contingent upon them.

James Chronister, *All We Ever Wanted Was Anything*, is on view at [Eleanor Harwood Gallery](#) until April 18.



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