

# COLORFORMS AND BEYOND PAUL WACKERS

INTERVIEW AND PORTRAIT BY **AUSTIN McMANUS**

IT WAS AT A 2007 GROUP EXHIBITION AT PARK LIFE IN San Francisco where I first became familiar with Paul Wacker's work, becoming an instant fan. My initial reaction was that he had crafted his own visual language, discovered a unique sensibility and was proficient with the tools that are required to make memorable paintings. His work was also easily distinguishable, especially at that time, in the San Francisco Bay Area. Comparing his paintings then and now, there's been an undeniably vigorous progression, including successful exploration of new mediums. Knowing how many hours Paul regularly clocks at his studio, it's no surprise that he's advanced to where he is now. Having been thoroughly galvanized and captivated by his most recent exhibition at Morgan Lehman Gallery, this felt like an opportune time to ask Paul interrelated questions on various topics such as reincarnation, hiking, Brooklyn, plants, residencies and what comprises a perfect day.

**Austin McManus:** Your studio houses more plants than any other space I've visited, and your work almost always includes some sort of foliage. What is it about plants that has held your interest for so long?

*Paul Wackers:* I do have a lot of plants in my workspace. I think they are really nice to have around to soften the space and allow for something interesting and ever-changing to look at. They are also a great bit of source material for when I am placing plant life in my work. I can get more natural and sometimes unexpected lines and shapes from the plants themselves. They can have quite a lot of character if you take the time to see how things move and change.

**Are there particular plants you favor more than others?**

I don't think I have a default favorite. When I look for new ones or see things out in the world, it's always just some new leaf pattern or texture I encounter that gets me excited. That said, I really enjoy painting my rubber plants, even though they have such a simple shape. The leaves can make all sorts of strange shapes when you let them overlap and build in density, or leave them sparse.

**If you could be reincarnated as a plant, which would it be?**

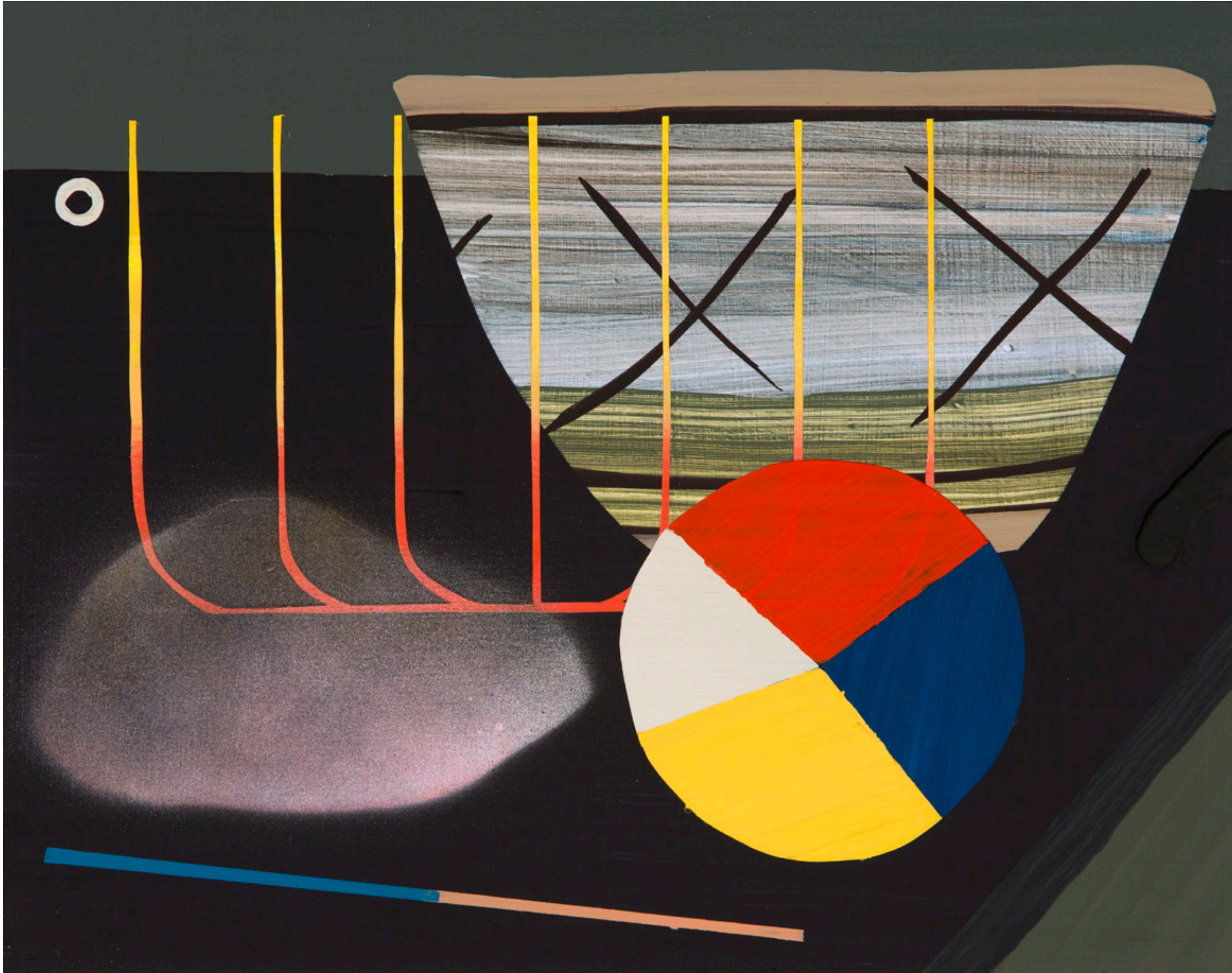
Poison ivy/oak or soothing Aloe? I have never actually thought about this prospect. Are mushrooms plants? Does fungus count? That would be cool, but then I guess you would not eat them if you were one. I think I would want stay on the side of plant fan over becoming a plant, to be honest.

**In the last few years, you've ventured into ceramics that are exhibited alongside your paintings. I think you picked up on this fairly quickly, true? What does clay offer that painting doesn't, as far as conveying concepts?**

Ceramics has been a fun addition to what I do every day. I did pick it up with some ease, but I think having spent a few years painting things that had a ceramic-ness to them helped me have a sense of where I wanted the clay work to move. It's funny that the clay pieces I have made are sometimes based on things I have painted. I wanted to see if it were possible to make them in the real world. I have also found shapes in working with clay that became big, recurring characters in the paintings.







**“...IT ALSO ALLOWS FOR SO MANY NEW THINGS TO HAPPEN: NEW SIGHTS, SOUNDS, SMELLS, AND THE UNEXPECTED MATERIALS THAT YOU CAN FIND IN A NEW PLACE.”**

People got to see a broader spectrum of what you can do with clay at your most recent exhibition, *Thank You For Being You*, at Morgan Lehman. The work was eclectic, yet still felt cohesive. I was struck by the work that was all black because it strayed from your usual vibrant palette. Is there any significance, or is it just part of the larger puzzle? Thanks! I am really proud of the work I presented in that show. It felt like it was the first time I was able to show such a range of work and not have one thing feel like support material for the other. I really like how the sculptures could keep the viewer's interest as much as the paintings or the drawings. It was a nice challenge to make a painting built upon a dark base and try not to have it feel overly dark or burdensome. With that piece, I had to use the contrast and shifting colors to bring the lightness of the objects to the forefront. I do think this is just another piece of the puzzle and one that I am not finished figuring out. I am always looking for new challenges.

**Having participated in several art residencies over the years, what do you enjoy most about that type of creative environment and process?**

I was lucky enough to receive the Tournesol Award and spent a year working in a studio at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin County, California. I was working in Norway at Nordic Artists' Centre Dale for the winter of 2014. I also spent a month at Byrdcliffe in Woodstock and am currently in residence at Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts in Maine. It's funny to me that I have gone to so many because it can be a stressful thing to show up in a new place and produce work as if everything is normal. In the end, it really forces you to figure out what you are doing, how you do it, and sometimes throw it all away and start over. It also allows for so many new things to happen: new sights, sounds, smells and the unexpected materials that you can find in a new place.

All images courtesy of Morgan Lehman, NYC, Alice Gallery, Brussels, and the artist

Starter Kit  
Acrylic and spray paint on panel  
14" x 11"  
2015





*An Object Studied Becomes Invisible*  
Acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
48" x 40"  
2015

**What are some of the ideas you were thinking about for the show you just finished at Alice Gallery in Brussels? Did you plan anything special while visiting?**

The show with Alice is really a continuation of the work I presented with Morgan Lehman. I reworked a few themes with what I learned from the NYC show, pushing a few of the perspective issues that were alluded to in the exhibit. On a few pieces I really wanted to exploit some of the color things I was dealing with in the black painting, and also wanted to see how the image changes when I try to compete with a fire-orange base. There will not be any 3D work, but lots of paintings and drawings. I think we shipped about twenty pieces over, and I am really excited to see them away from my studio clutter. I will be in Brussels for a month and will be making a few more paintings and possibly some sort of

Risograph, Xerox book or print edition.

**If there were no financial or spatial restrictions, do you have any ambitious projects you would like to realize?**

I would like to put together another book soon, since it's been six years since I did the book with Seems Press. It is really fun to see how many different people get their hands on those sorts of things, and my work has changed a bit since then. Also, I'd like to just continue working in the scale the last few shows have allowed. Working on surfaces over five feet is very freeing and exciting.

**Regarding your recent exhibition, *Forever Beta*, at Water McBeer, did you face any challenges or unforeseen obstacles working in this unique gallery space?**



from left  
*A Way That It Will Be*  
Ink and spray paint on paper  
38" x 50"  
2015

Words  
Acrylic on canvas  
48" x 60"  
2015

It was the first time I had attempted to make a sculpture that would almost overtake the entire space, which was a new challenge, for sure. But I think I approached it with a very similar sense of purpose as I do any other show, even with the special challenges that this one provided.

**Brooklyn is currently home to a creative, dense and ambitious community of artists, especially painters. Do you find inspiration or camaraderie being in such proximity to so many likeminded individuals?**

Yeah, there are a lot of us. It is a real mixed bag. I like the atmosphere of people all around me working on these intensely personal and creative things, but with that comes some of the guarded posturing where people try to size you up or dismiss something you have been up to. I try to edit those people out and stick to my artist friends that will only talk shop when appropriate or asked for. I already spend 90% of my energy making and thinking art, so when I get a beer or food with some buddies, I want to explore other interests and just know that we all understand how crazy it gets in our heads, our studios and beyond. I hope that does not make me sound bitter, but it is interesting knowing that on any day, there are so many people I could call up and ask to see what's going on in their studios. That is an exciting thing about Brooklyn: if you want to engage in it that way,

it is readily available, and I think most people are pretty friendly about studio visits.

**As someone who thoroughly enjoys camping and hiking, what are some of your favorite locations? Do you go primitive, car camping style, or does it depend on the company?**

It's a shame I don't make it out more than I do. I find New York to be a hard place to leave. It really depends on the company you are with and what they are comfortable with. I always love spending a few days under the stars in Joshua Tree or going deep into the woods in Big Sur for a string of days. I love California for outdoor stuff, but I do want to see more of the Southwest, and everywhere, really. A few years ago, I spent a few days hiking along the GR-10 in the Pyrenees, and that was a really beautiful experience that I want to do again.

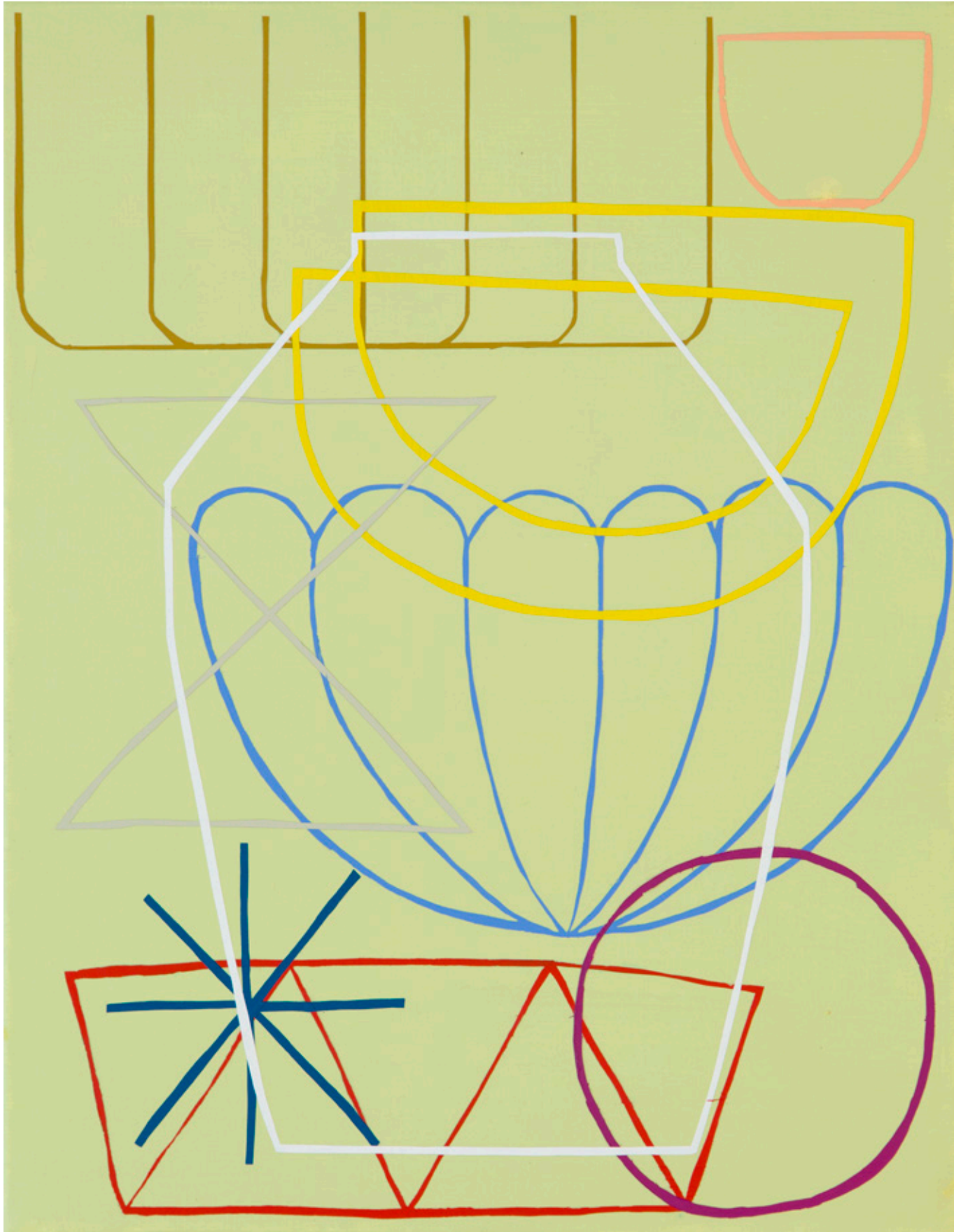
**Can you recall the last time you saw a piece of artwork where you felt a deep connection, or were genuinely inspired?**

That's a hard one. I think I feel pretty inspired to paint every time I go see art, either because it challenges me to be better, or even if I hated it, might force me to make sure I don't do what was turning me off. Recently, I went to the









previous spread (from left)  
*Look At What It Did Now*  
 Acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
 40" x 48"  
 2015

*Which Way'd They Go*  
 Acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
 40" x 48"  
 2015

this spread (from left)  
*I Wanted Everything*  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 20" x 24"  
 2015

Installation view  
*Thank You For Being You*  
 Morgan Lehman, NYC  
 2015



Albert Oehlen show at the New Museum, and that got me really excited about working out some new ideas on how or what needs to happen for a picture to hold itself together or fall.

**Are moments of satisfaction and accomplishment few and far between? Are you hard on yourself as most artists tend to be?**

I don't know if I am the best judge of that. I tend to work all the time, so I don't dwell too much on that stuff. When I am working on something, I change what I don't like. I guess I am not so hard on myself, or at least I do my best to be satisfied before I am overwhelmed with crushing self-doubt. But, like I said, after a bad studio day, maybe a close friend might have another take on my moods.

**Was there ever an alternative to being an artist? Did you have any other occupations in mind, and was there a turning point where you realized that you could actually support yourself being an artist?**

I remember thinking I wanted to be an artist at around age

eight. There was a time in elementary or middle school where I wanted to own a skateboard shop or something like that. And it is still a crazy thing to do to make a living. I would not change how things are going for anything, but I wonder if you ever get to a point where it seems sane. I will keep on trying to find that.

**What's an ideal day on planet Earth for Paul Wackers?**

Make, read, cook, sleep, sometimes socialize, and have a dog with me in the studio

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*Paul Wackers' exhibition, New Alphabet, will be on display at Alice Gallery in Brussels, Belgium through October 24, 2015.*

[paulwackers.com](http://paulwackers.com)



