



Harold Ancart Brings His Kaleidoscopic Trees to Chelsea
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The Belgian artist has a new exhibition of large-scale paintings at David Zwirner Gallery that shows the natural world in and out of focus.



The artist Harold Ancart in his Bushwick, Brooklyn, studio. Aundre Larrow

The Belgian painter [Harold Ancart](#), 40, lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, but spends his days in Bushwick, Brooklyn, in a ground-floor studio strewn with errant bits of clothing, Ping-Pong paddles, tomato plants and astonishing quantities of oil sticks, his medium of choice. On a recent visit, one corner held several plinths topped with cast concrete reliefs of miniature swimming pools. (Colorfully painted, they appeared like three-dimensional riffs on Josef Albers's squares.) On the walls hung massive canvases depicting individual trees, and two sprawling triptychs — a mountain scene and a seascape, painted in homage to murals by the Swiss-Californian artist [Gottardo Piazzoni](#) (1872–1945). Ancart saw them a few years ago in San Francisco at the de Young Museum and was moved by what he described as their “naïve, quiet beauty.”

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Two of Ancart's large-scale tree paintings, both untitled, hang above freshly cast concrete pool sculptures, yet to be painted. *Aundre Larrow*

Much of this work will appear later this month in [“Traveling Light,”](#) the artist’s first New York solo show with David Zwirner Gallery. The exhibition’s title is a triple entendre that references Ancart’s preferred mode of travel (carry-on only); his effort to shed the “heavy luggage” of art historical precedent in his work; and the physics of how light carries color from a painting’s surface to the eye. Movement is a theme in Ancart’s art and in his life — from his decision to immigrate to the United States after art school in Brussels to his breakthrough body of work, a series of drawings he made in the back of his car while on a cross-country road trip, which were later exhibited at the [Menil Collection](#) in Houston (some of the pieces for this show was created in Los Angeles, where Ancart temporarily decamped during the Covid-19 pandemic). He compares making his paintings to taking the kind of walk where you don’t chart a course, and on his studio door he’s stenciled the words “Grand Flâneur.” It’s a sort of self-imposed nickname — not, as he puts it, in the “19th-century lazy dandy” sense, but rather as “one who walks around and tries to isolate poetic moments out of the everyday urban landscape. I think that’s how I’ve learned to be an artist: walking the streets, not torturing myself in a studio.”

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The artist smokes Marlboro Lights, but not while he paints. "I need my hands. I like to smoke and look at the paintings." Aundre Larrow



Oil sticks, Ancart's preferred medium, don't require him to use turpentine or noxious sicatives. "I want to be a painter who is still capable of smelling his food," he says. Aundre Larrow

That wasn't always the case. Ancart's early love of drawing led him, in 2001, to enroll at art school at Belgium's *École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Visuel de la Cambre*, where postconceptualism was in fashion and his teachers insisted that painting was dead. He now laughs at the notion — "if painting died, it was for two minutes between 1981 and 1992" — but it took him years, and a trans-Atlantic relocation, to deprogram. These days, he rejects the notion that his art should have to mean anything at all, a philosophy firmly rooted in the belief that there's nothing new under the sun. "The idea of wanting to do something new," he cheerfully declares: "I find that pretty stupid." When it comes to painting, Ancart seems both intense and playful, the latter impression reinforced by the fact that he often spends his days on the floor, scribbling on his canvases with souped-up Crayolas. His compositions seem to take a page from Pop Art, or at least from the comic books he's read since elementary school. But his surfaces, smudged and gouged with the imprint of his oil sticks — he likes that the medium offers "nowhere to hide" — have none of Pop Art's factory-smooth flatness.

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For Ancart, subject matter is just an “alibi” for making pictures, an excuse to work the pigment. For a while, he made paintings of flickering flames and extraterrestrial nightscapes, exhibiting them at the Bushwick- and Brussels-based Clearing Gallery. Then, inspired by his freezing apartment, he turned to [icebergs](#), which he showed at David Zwirner in London in 2018. Last year, he was commissioned by the Public Art Fund to paint [a handball court](#) in Downtown Brooklyn, which he transformed into a double-sided color field painting, an unpopulated landscape that provided an opportunity to reflect on the way that urban infrastructure’s natural deterioration mirrors painterly abstractions. (“Abstraction comes from reality,” he likes to say.) Soon, he began painting scaled-up matchsticks, monoliths set against milky firmaments or sparking against color-blocked grounds. It’s easy to connect that top-heavy shape to his new tree paintings, which came to him “like some sort of miracle” one day last summer as he drove on a highway through a forest in France, noticing the way light and sky flashed through gaps in the foliage. He kept returning to the memory, capturing the sense of rushing movement by rendering the crowns of his trees as splotchy patchworks of color, by turns backlit, illuminated and pierced by equally variegated skies. Ancart’s palette is nature on psychedelics. His handling of light is startlingly realistic. But if you were to eliminate the sliver of tree trunk at the base of each painting, his image would lose all legibility.

He enjoys exploding that division between figuration and abstraction. “Once you free your mind from painting having to be a certain way, you can do anything you want,” he remarks. “That’s called freedom. That’s what they can’t teach you at school. You have to find it for yourself.”



The artist in front of one of his new tree paintings. The series is on view this week at the David Zwirner Gallery on West 19th Street in Manhattan. Andre Larro

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What is your day like? How much sleep do you need? And what is your work schedule?

I get my best hours of sleep between 5 a.m. and 10 in the morning. I go to bed before that. I always open my eyes at 5 and think, Ah great. I can sleep until 10 because I don't have a job. Then I wake up. I make the coffee. I go straight to the studio. And I work pretty much all day. We make a big lunch at around 2. Some friends may come. And we do that every day of the week. I leave the studio at around 7:30, 8 — try to have dinner with a friend, drink a glass of wine and go to bed at around 1.

I spend six months of my year working like an animal. And then the rest of the time I like to travel or wander around. The studio schedule is like a rhythm that shouldn't be broken, because that's how I get into making good work. Consistency is very important.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

When you're a creative person you never stop. You're probably a creative person when you dream.

What was the first piece of art you ever made?

I think it was in elementary school. They gave us gouache. I think I drew a guy who had like 12 fingers and there was a little house behind and it looked like any kid's drawing or watercolor. Most of the time, kids are very, very good because they don't care about what they do. It's only when you get older and you want your My Little Pony to look exactly like My Little Pony that like you become less good.



Ancart scribbled down this play on words, then someone else found it and stapled the paper to the wall. "Sharpie on envelope," he jokes. Andre Larrow



Newly stretched small canvases. Ancart prefers to paint on cotton, but for a bit experimented with linen. Andre Larrow

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What is the worst studio you've ever had?

My first studio in New York. It was very small. It had no sink and no bathroom. They would shut down the heat at night and there was a gap between the window and the wall that let in the frozen wind. If I stepped on a chair in the corner, I could see the top of the Empire State Building, though, which would give me a lot of hope, you know?

Wait: If there was no bathroom, where did you pee?

In Poland Spring bottles. I had a collection of Poland Spring bottles of pee that I kept from one studio to another. Then when I had my first assistant and we moved to a third studio he said, "Please, Harold, can I throw that away?"



The studio has a lofted office and skylights throughout. Aundre Larrow

What is the first work you ever sold?

When I was 15, I was good at making drawings of naked girls. Most of the time I would add a gun. I liked that the naked girl had a gun in her hand. Guys who were 17 or 18 couldn't buy porno magazines and there was no internet, so it was very complicated for them to find kinky stuff to get excited looking at. I would trade those naked girl drawings for protection. And Mars bars. Stuff like that.

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When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step?

Most of the time I make a very simple drawing. And then I start distributing color. Then it looks like crap and at some point it looks great, but it's far from being done. That's when you have to be very nonchalant in the way you find your way out. You find a way in, and that's easy. But then you have to find a way out. It's a little more complicated.

How do you know when you're done?

When I'm ready to start another work. You find a way out of one painting to find your way into another one.

How many assistants do you have?

Two, three sometimes. Maddie is fantastic. She's from Winnipeg, she's a poet. She takes care more of the administrative part. And then Loup is French. He was at Cooper Union. He called me three years ago saying, "Man, I can't find a job." I'd never had an assistant before, but I love him because I never had to tell him what to do. And this summer now we have Nick, a sculptor, who just started. You've seen the size of these things: We have to frame them, we have to move them, we have to store them. They weigh a ton. You need manpower, womanpower, whatever.

Have you assisted other artists?

When I first moved to New York in 2007, I asked everyone in Belgium, Do you know someone I could work for? This teacher of mine said, Oh, you know, there's Art Diary International, this book that was like a yellow pages of the art world. I bought that and then I made a list on the plane. At the top of the list was Richard Serra. So two days later I knocked on his door. Someone got sick or something, and on the third day I started working there. Sometimes, I would go to galleries to ask for a job. They were not nice at all. But studio people were always super cool. I started making friends. I met a guy who was working for Jenny Holzer, so sometimes I worked for Jenny, too. And then in the summer, when there was no work at all, I would sell vegetables at the farmers market in Downtown Brooklyn.

What music do you play when you're making art?

I have the Endless Playlist on Spotify. Nothing on the Endless Playlist bothers me. There's a lot of jazz, things that are more abstract. We do Madonna Fridays, which are insane.

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Ancart installed this "cool, very cheap" bamboo screen for privacy so he can leave the wall gate facing the street up in the summer. Aundre Larrow

When did you first feel comfortable saying you are a professional artist?

When everybody was calling me a professional artist. When one person says you're a painter, you may be a painter but you may not be. But then if two people say it, you're more a painter. And then when it's like 10,000 people saying, Oh, you're Harold Ancart: You're a painter. You say, yes, well, that's clear.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

We cook what we receive. Food comes from a farm upstate, every Monday, I think. In the winter, we have a lot of roots and carrots and stuff that keeps you warm. In the summer, we receive tomatoes and cucumbers, vegetables that are filled with water to refresh you. If you eat things that are in season, you can't really go wrong. Also when you haven't cooked a tomato for months, you're so happy to cook a tomato.

Are you bingeing on any TV shows right now?

I've been rewatching all of Takeshi Kitano, the Japanese filmmaker and actor. He's very well known for this movie called "Sonatine" (1993). It's extremely poetic and introspective, almost like a Japanese *nouvelle vague* from the '80s.

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On one wall, a painting of the facade of a house hangs over Ancart's cast concrete pool sculptures, two examples of the artist's fascination with the way the built world becomes a canvas for the natural world. *Aundre Larrow*

In the summer, when the studio is hot, the painter works in shorts and a plaid apron that "looks like a napkin." *Aundre Larrow*

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

Why don't you ask what's the coolest object? I have this Panasonic electric pencil sharpener from the '70s. It's fantastic!

How often do you talk to other artists?

I'm friends with a lot of other artists. I guess maybe every day. Loup is an artist. Maddie is an artist. I find that writers also are artists. Filmmakers are artists. Curators sometimes are artists too, when they're not too attached to the scientific approach of curating.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

What is ... procrastinating?

What's the last thing that made you cry?

Probably a girlfriend who didn't want to hang out with me?
Because I'm crazy.

What do you usually wear when you work?

In the summer when it's like 200 degrees in the studio, I have these tennis shorts, and then this little apron that opens at the back. It looks like a little skirt. It's questionable.

If you have windows in your studio, what do they look at?

The sky.

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Ancart produces new work faster than Soho Art Materials — the Brooklyn outpost is down the street from his space — can deliver stretchers. Aundre Larrow

What do you bulk buy with most frequency?

Oil sticks. I could open a store. And I bulk order stretchers to paint on. I paint faster than the guys can make the panels. Soho Art Materials are my neighbors. They walk across the street to deliver to me and they're like: Man, you're a machine! You're insane.

What's your worst habit?

Picking my nose.

What embarrasses you?

Sometimes I lose it and scream. I think one should never yell. The last time I yelled at people I was in Italy in a very nice place on the Amalfi Coast. I was having lunch on the terrace alone. It was a very nice hotel. And then there was this group of people. I think Americans — sorry! — talking very loudly. I could see the waiter was not happy with them. And at some point one of the guys burped. I turned and I said, Man, don't you have any sort of education? What are you doing? You are being loud! I don't care about your life. You're burping! Please! You're ruining my time. Shame on you!

I felt a little embarrassed, but people were happy that I did it.

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Do you exercise?

I paint all day. I consider it exercise. I used to run. At some point, I even had a personal trainer who was making me do push-ups and situps and would scream at me. I was in very good shape and then I dropped it. It's very difficult for me to combine my activities as a painter with other activity. It makes me anxious.

What are you reading right now?

A comic book by Joe Sacco published in the '90s called "Palestine." He's a journalist. It's trying to see where we went all wrong without taking a position.

What is your favorite artwork by somebody else?

There's a painting by Picabia: "Catch as Catch Can" (1913). It is so good. It's insane. You know what Picabia once said? "Our heads are round so our thoughts can change direction." I find that beautiful.

This interview has been condensed and edited.