

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Elliott Green's Voyage of Self-Discovery

Green has attained something that few artists accomplish in their lifetime:  
he reinvented himself.

By John Yau | 13 June 2020

Whoever puts together a survey exhibition of Elliott Green will have an interesting time. Born in Detroit in 1960, and essentially self-taught, he began showing in New York in 1989, with a debut exhibition at Hirsch & Adler Modern. For the next 20 years he continued to exhibit regularly in the city, but for nearly a decade, between 2009 and 2017, he refrained from solo shows. When he did begin exhibiting again, it was with a body of work that was completely different from what had first gained him attention. He had attained something that few artists accomplish in their lifetime: he had reinvented himself.

There were a variety of reasons for this long hiatus, including moving out of Manhattan to Athens, New York, in 2006, and receiving the 2011 Jules Guerin Rome Prize at the American Academy, which allowed him to spend a year in Rome. The radical transformation that took place in his work, however, had to do with methods of application, materials, and content.

In fact, the metamorphosis that Green's work underwent during his solo hiatus between 2009 and 2017 is one of the most radical that I know of by an artist of his generation. I think one reason for this is because, as a self-taught artist, Green remains someone who is constantly testing things, as well as learning how to draw and paint. There is no claim to mastery, only to setting out and discovering what is possible.

Green did more than shift from abstraction to figuration or vice versa. In fact, I would not call it a stylistic change, but a complete revolution. In the earlier work, Green depicted cartoony figures engaged in a mysterious interaction. In the drawings, the figures emerged from a process of making and erasing lines. Over time, the figures, with their elongated appendages and oddly shaped bodies and heads began to become more abstract and organ-like, evocative of the late work of Arshile Gorky.

In the works done during the first phase of his career, the emphasis was on contour drawing and the paint was thinly applied, often in large flat areas. The interactions he depicted were often sexual and the humor often scatological, odd. The logic they followed was not immediately transparent to the viewer, which suggested at the very least that they took place in a seemingly complete, imagined world. The viewer was an unacknowledged witness, an outsider who was largely unnoticed.

Even now, years after he stopped working in this way, I am struck by the unity of Green's vision and how the paintings and drawings from this period are unlike anything else being made at the time. In that regard, the work remains fresh and bold. Exploring sexual interactions can be tricky ground, where one often reveals deep-seated insecurities and aggressive fantasies.



*Two Trees*, 2006-2020, graphite pencil and oil paint on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

Aggression is certainly one of the themes in the drawing “Baby Bird” (1990), but it is hard to say exactly what is going on. This is a narrative in which the details are clear but the sum of the actions remains beyond comprehension.

Green’s vision is humorous and disquieting. You never know what is motivating the figures’ high jinks. At the same time, there are moments of tenderness that never devolve into sentimentality or cliché. I am thinking of “Forgivable Kindness” (2000, alkyd and pencil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches).

The year Green spent in Rome had a profound influence on the direction his work subsequently took. Open to change and experimentation, he painted his first landscape there, and began moving decisively away from his earlier work. I first noticed Green’s new direction in the 2015 *Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts* hosted by the American Academy of Arts and Letters (March 12 – April 12, 2015), and saw it again in *Objecty*, a group show at Tibor de Nagy (June 22–July 29, 2016).



*Forgivable Kindness*, 1999, pencil and alkyd on canvas, 40 x 30 inches

This is what I wrote about Green’s work at the Academy:

*It was the first time I had seen work by Green in some years. He combined ravishing brushwork with mysterious, Xanadu-like landscapes that emerged, radiant, out of the undulating applications of paint. Rainbows, clouds, jagged mountains, verdant hills, pastoral lakes, and, most importantly, changing light in a panoramic view – it was all there and it was just paint.*

As this description indicates, Green went from drawing cartoon-like figures engaged in inexplicable behavior to painting landscapes that exist somewhere between memory and dream, settling uneasily on a threshold that merges the actual landscape with the ones found in art, from both the West and the East. As with his earlier work — and this is what I want to call attention to — the worlds he creates feel complete and unlike anything else in contemporary art, particularly in landscape painting.

This is how I described the work in Green’s show at Pierogi in 2017, his first solo New York exhibition since 2009:

*He places all the evidence in front of us, even that which he covers over. He uses different tools to apply layers of creamy paint to the canvas, as well as scrape it off. I am guessing soft bristle brushes and paint scrapers but I would not be surprised if he used other tools, including some of his own devising. Depending on what he uses, the marks vary — from wide, grooved brushstrokes undulating across the surface, like a banner or Chinese dragon, to staggered slabs of paint reminiscent of geodes and rocky inclines and outcroppings. He can also smooth the paint down, like a plasterer.*

I went on to write:

*What distinguishes these views from other landscapes is that Green’s paintings are essentially abstract; they approach the pictorial but never tilt over into that domain of quick legibility.*

More recently, I contributed an essay to a monograph *Elliott Green: At the Far Edge of the Known World* (Pierogi Press, 2020). (Other contributors include David Ebony, Jana Prikryl, Arne Svenson, Gary Lucidon, and Michael Rubiner).

This is what these two very different bodies of work have in common: they resist easy visual consumption and the literal world of soup cans and hard-edge stripes. At the same time, they are not obscure or brimming with allusions to Pop culture or arcane bodies of knowledge. I think this resistance is important and that few artists do it well. It is what Green and Thomas Nozkowski have in common, and helps explain why the older artist championed and supported Green's work.

Given the current pandemic and the fact that I can count on one finger the number of friends and colleagues that I have had a direct mask-to-mask conversation with in the past few months, I decided to check in with Green and see what he was up to.



*Odd Tree*, 2006-2019, graphite pencil, wax pencil, watercolor, and oil paint on paper, 8.5 x 11 inches

We quickly caught up. It seems that after the pandemic started, Green had stopped painting for a few months and began research Covid-19. More recently, he had started working again, including a new body of work using monotyping. As he explained to me in an email dated June 8, 2020:

*When I make those graduated colors, as I usually do in the skies in my paintings, I blend two or more colors on plexiglass or glass or on disposable palettes by moving the brush in strokes back and forth and slowly up and down, then I transfer the tone to the canvas.*

*There was always leftover paint that I cleaned up and threw away—until two years ago when I had the idea to press paper onto the wet paint, and it looked like a print, because of the indirect unified texture. I make the impression by pressing over the back of the paper with a drywall knife—it works better than the rubber roller the printmakers use. Sometimes the remnants of my brushstrokes actually look like woodcut texture.*

In the body of work currently underway in Green's studio, the artist is printing over drawings dating from 2006. In these works, he seems to be trying to merge two parts of his practice — drawing and painting — through the use of printing. The drawing peeks through the layer of paint, as well as help define the forms we see.

Green's printing tools include a rubber comb, a drywall knife, and other unconventional ways of applying pressure to the paper. While the rubber comb can be used to imitate wood grain, it can also evoke graduated wave forms. By uniting organ-like forms and allusions to landscape, Green has again embarked in a new direction while engaging in a different way of applying material to a surface. Drawing, painting, and monotypes — each of these processes has led to a different body of work.

What I find interesting and inspiring is that shortly after his monograph appeared, chronicling more than 100 paintings made between 2012 and 2019, Green, in the midst of a quarantine, social distancing, and a deadly pandemic, found a way to remake his work anew.