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MAGAZINE

Seeking Sanctuary In The Unearthly Paintings Of Wendell Gladstone

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Wendell Gladstone, *Peacock*, 2020, Acrylic on canvas 84 x 84 inches.

The brilliant work of [Wendell Gladstone](#) is both complex in subject matter and form, as the artist renders twisted, radiant bodies that almost glow, and also layered in psychological tension and emotion. Gladstone's unearthly bodies bend and reach to embrace, to touch. Their fingertips stretch outward towards one another—the human need for contact, our undying drive for connection. However, other figures peer out from a window, looking out from behind blinds or a tree. As Gladstone explains, his subjects are all “seeking sanctuary in the face of looming predatory threats.”

Throughout Gladstone's intricate paintings are translucent elements that shine like stained glass, as if pigmented gel has been smeared across the compositions, completely transforming the figures. These planes of pastel form kaleidoscope scenes of green and gold, creating a sheer, glass-like barrier between us and the figures, or the figures and each other. In other instances, these transparent shapes create luminous shadows, as if the figure itself is splitting into two, three, or four other identities in pieces like *Double Dutch*. Together each larger-than-life painting creates a world where connection is dire, touch is essential. A world that is, in the end, not unlike our own.

Join me as Wendell Gladstone and I discuss his recent solo exhibition [Safe Haven](#) at [Shulamit Nazarian](#) gallery in Los

Angeles, where the artist currently lives and works. In the interview, the artist generously shares insight into his thoughts and intentions when creating this undeniably exceptional body of work.

All images courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.



"Safe Haven" at Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

Congratulations on your solo exhibition *Safe Haven* at Shulamit Nazarian gallery! Tell me about the work in this exhibition. The title *Safe Haven* seems to relate to our current times, as we all try to hunker down and stay 'safe' during the pandemic. Can you talk about your title choice and this topic's relationship to your paintings?

Thank you! Titles can be tricky. You want to provide context and a point of entry without boxing things in. "Safe Haven" nicely corrals a lot of disparate ideas under one umbrella. Once I had a chance to come up for air, after months in the studio with blinders on, I started to see parallels among the works. The paintings fell into two groups: figures perched high up in trees above the fray looking down at vulnerable counterparts, and groups of intermingled bodies sheltering in animal shaped wire and stained glass cocoons. Both shared common themes of seeking sanctuary in the face of looming predatory threats. Overlapping all of that is a softer current of tenderness, flirtation, and collaboration that permeates the entire body of work.

As the figure is historically one of painting's oldest subjects, it is not easy to create figurative paintings that are completely unique. Can you tell me a bit about your journey creating your distinct style?

I had a roundabout path to painting and that probably helped me quite a bit with that. Sometimes it's beneficial to approach a subject from an indirect angle and I came to painting from a background in sculpture. My 3D practice involved lots of cast figures arranged in modular networks. Those then evolved to include paintings that mirrored and mapped the 3D forms into a flat geometric language. After a few more iterations, eventually the pendulum swung

completely and all of the 3D elements were sucked into one independent painting plane. The mixture of sculptural methods in the form of bas-relief with more traditional painting techniques allows the work to hover in an unusual intersection between the two mediums.



Wendell Gladstone, Support System , 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 66 inches.

There are several paintings in the show that focus heavily on touch, such as *Support System* and *Peacock*. Would you consider intimacy an important element in your work?

Themes of emotional and physical intimacy, or a longing for it, pop up throughout the show. Sometimes the connections are visceral and direct like in the pieces that you mentioned. In those, bodies are woven into choreographed networks where limbs contort to lift and support each other, all working in tandem towards a common goal. In other paintings like *Perch* and *The Lookout*, figures longingly gaze at each other at a distance. Intimacy is less explicit and more psychological. Their physical link is distilled down to singular flirtatious connections between tips of fingers and toes, collapsing the isolation between them.

I've noticed that pale greens and yellows dominate the palette in your recent work. Does this hold significance for you? Was this a conscious choice?

It's something I was drawn to unconsciously. I didn't even realize the tendency until mid way through completing the body of work. At that point I experimented shifting the atmosphere by altering the palette. I couldn't fend it off, though. They just crept their way back in. The greens and yellows in some of the paintings are earthier and give the impression of a patina. Paired with the golden bronze hues

of the figures, they touch on qualities of past histories, art deco, and classical sculpture. In others, there's a play between intensity and saturation. Areas with more acidic colors, like the hyper green and orange leaves, push the natural settings towards a more contemporary artificial environment. It allows the work to sit in a space between naturalistic representation and plastic artifice. Scale shifts, minimal stylized figuration and compressed compositions also enhance a slightly off kilter feel.



There is a motif that is present throughout your most recent body of work: transparent, film-like colors that are not unlike stained glass. Can you speak to this reoccurring aesthetic choice? How do you create such a mesmerizing affect?

Transparency is something I've been interested in for a long time. The method of application itself is pretty simple: acrylic paint and mediums layered on thickly with a palette knife. But it offers a lot of complexity and versatility: functioning representationally as a window, stained glass, ice, rain, etc., or atmospherically through tinted glazing techniques that affect light and depth. It also allows for rendered ghost-like forms and subtle textures that are only made visible by certain angles of light. In relation to other underlying elements, there is a push and pull that allows two different scenes to exist simultaneously on a single plane. Narratives shift and dialogue with each other between opposing weights and mass.



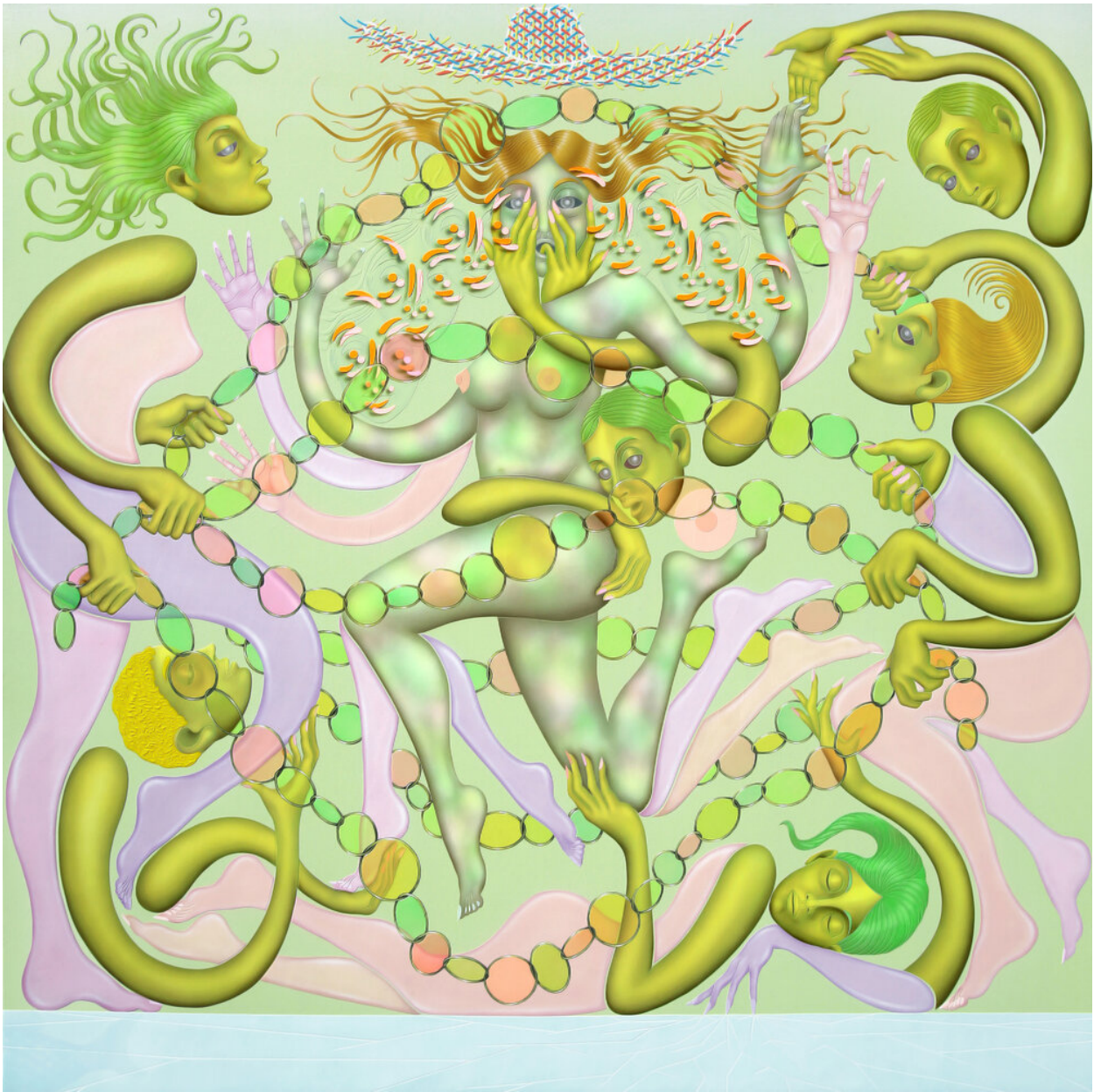
Wendell Gladstone, *The Lookout*, 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 60 inches.

Where are you from originally and what brought you to L.A.?

I was born in Boston and mostly grew up in Rhode Island. After undergrad, I followed my older brother out west where he was starting to study design at ArtCenter in Pasadena. I went to nearby Claremont Graduate School and ended up sticking around. My initial plan was to head back east to NYC after graduating, but new friends and the opportunity for way more studio time in much less expensive LA made the decision to stay an easy one.

Who are some of your influences, artist or otherwise?

It's goes back and forth and changes over time, Picabia, Polke, Ensor, but early on I was heavily influenced by the way Matthew Barney constructed narratives by collaging disparate sources and infusing them with personal experiences. Lari Pittman was also a big one, opening up my world formally with his strangely flat decorative painting style. Recently, I've been interested in Jung's processes that lead to his Red Book, and the parallels with my own creative approach, mining the unconscious and honing those images into narratives.



Wendell Gladstone, Double Dutch , 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 84 inches.