

MULTI -PLO



JJ Manford

JJ Manford

There is an organic integration between abstraction and figuration in the oeuvre of JJ Manford (Boston, Massachusetts, 1983). From early works, recurring distinctive elements such as the figure of the dog, the cat, the moon, the sun, or spirals that mark the beginning or end of a process are observed. The evolution from outdoor landscapes to indoor scenes shows interest in the passage of time, contemplation, and inner self-knowledge. The compositions, influenced by the pointillist and impressionist style, denote a great mastery of drawing, the use of color and light.

Manford uses materials such as burlap (jute), whose fiber enriches texture. His knowledge of the linear field offers him tools that are implemented, especially, in geometry and perspective. The formal elements are connected within a spiritual cosmogony as mediators of a visible or invisible message. There is a connection between the natural quality of the support and the visual representation of the setting, emphasizing the importance of coexistence. The rooms, more than living spaces, are depicted as a mixed place between reality and imagination, giving rise to a free interpretation of the narrative and the meaning of the composition. Objects that can be identified with Western or Eastern culture (collective memory) and at the same time constitute a source of personal information (individual memory).

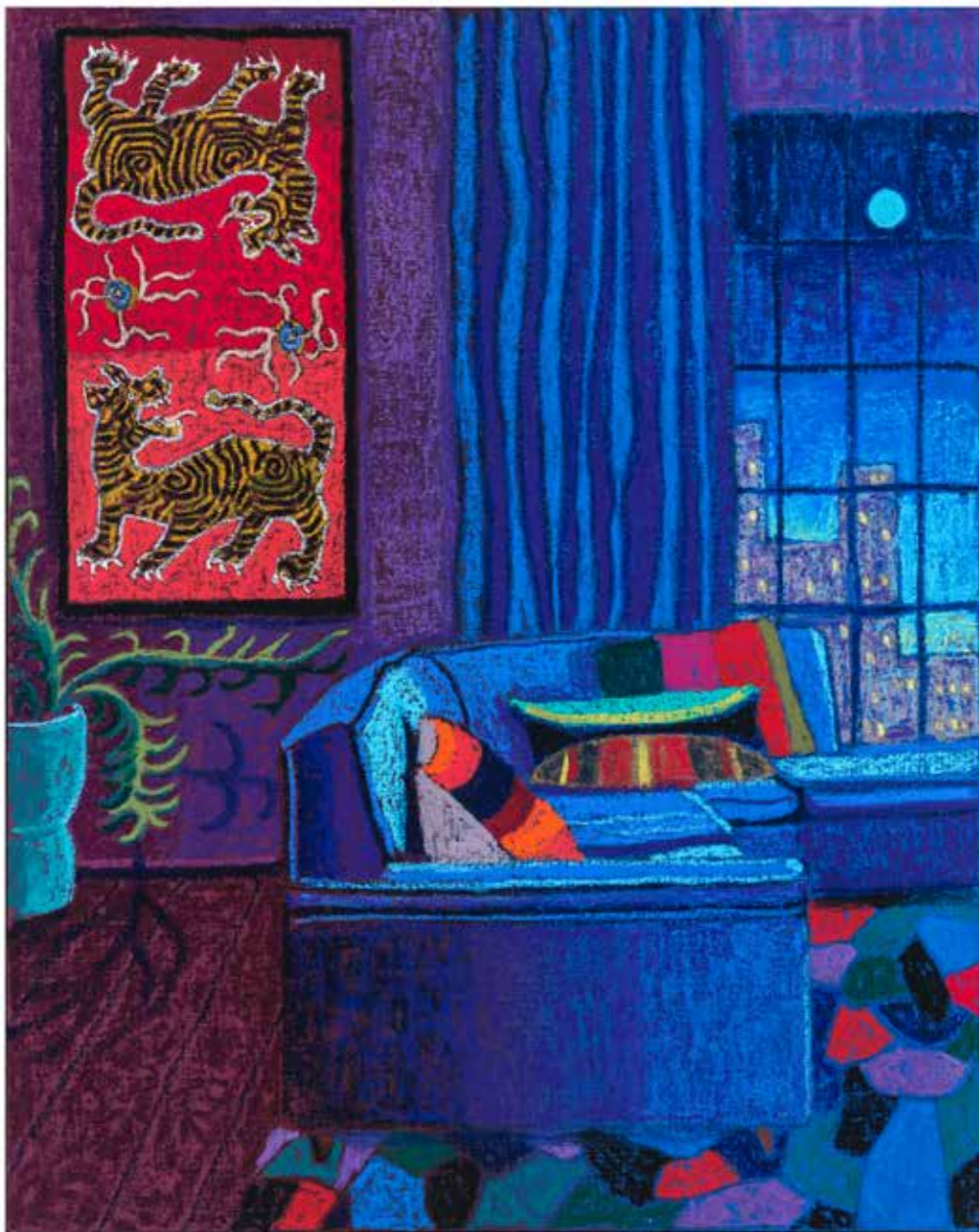
Graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2009, with an MFA from Hunter College in 2012, Manford has developed his career for more than a decade with distinction in the mastery of detail, textures, and tonalities. His work has been included in multiple public and private collections, such as the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami, Florida. In 2013, he co-founded Underdonk, an artist-run exhibition space located in Bushwick, Brooklyn, the same neighborhood where Manford currently lives and works.

NYC Interior with Tibetan Tapestry

55 Color Silkscreen Print, 27 3/8 x 33 in (69.5 x 83.8cm)
Produced on Canson Cotton Paper 300g

Edition of 50

Signed and numbered by the artist



We are happy for our first collaboration with artist JJ Manford.

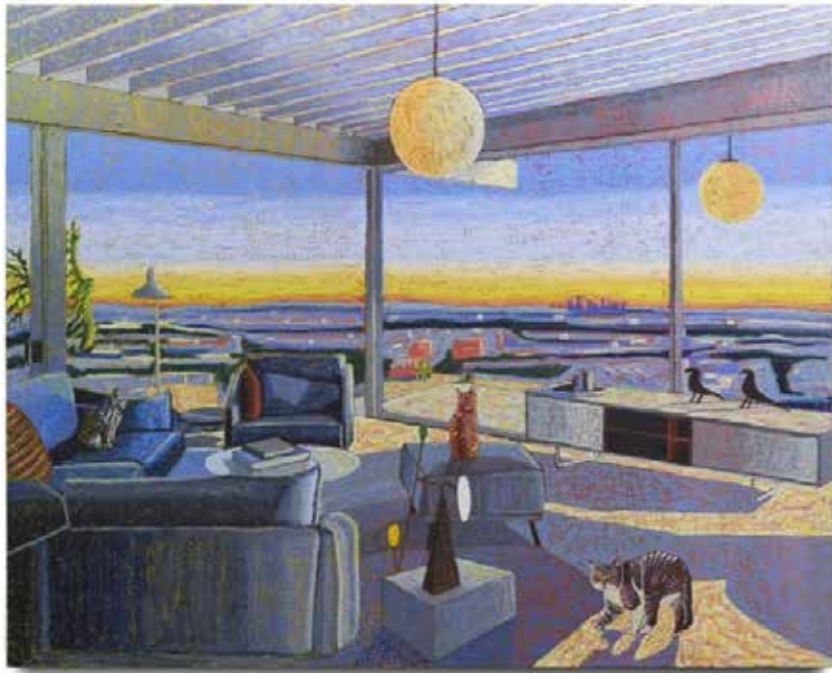
NYC Interior with Tibetan Tapestry is a limited edition 55 color silkscreen print of 50. 27 3/8 x 33 in (69.5 x 83.8cm). Produced on Canson Cotton Paper 300g.



Press

2023

JJ Manford. In a Western Town



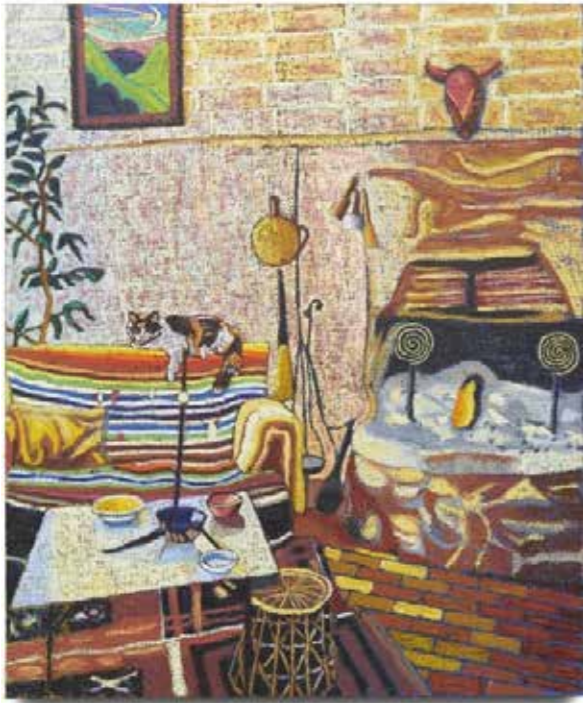
BERGGRUEN

www.berggruen.com

Berggruen Gallery is proud to announce *In a Western Town*, an exhibition of recent paintings by JJ Manford. This show marks Manford's first solo exhibition with the gallery. *In a Western Town* will be on view from March 30 through April 29, 2023. The gallery will host a reception for the artist on Thursday, March 30, from 5:00 to 7:00 pm.

JJ Manford layers oil pastel and oil stick over Flashe on burlap or linen to construct vibrantly animated paintings that explore concepts of transcendent self-discovery and collective fantasy. *In a Western Town* presents thirteen new paintings inspired by the rich architectural landscape of California and the West. From ruminative renditions of Paolo Soleri's experimental neighborhood of Arcosanti, Arizona to a kaleidoscopic depiction of the William Westerfeld House in San Francisco's iconic Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, this new body of work reflects Manford's interest in interior design and the intersection of structural landscapes and human life.

A salient feature of his work, Manford often includes art historical references in his imaginative dwellings. Nods to Bay Area artists, such as Joan Brown, Richard Diebenkorn, and Ruth Asawa can be found throughout this new body of work, as Manford pays homage to the greats of modernity. Elaborately patterned textiles, checkered rugs, mid-century furniture, and lush houseplants adorn these effervescent rooms, their decorative objects carefully curated by the artist to create culturally rich domains. Glowing sunsets, sublime blue skies, and verdant foliage seen through windows give glimpses into the outside world, though it is what lies within these abodes that facilitates moments of reflection, existing in a dreamy haze somewhere between comfort and chaos. These whimsical rooms lack human inhabitants, rather this void is filled by the presence of charming animals such as cats and foxes. This liberation from human occupancy creates a tranquil moment for the viewer to contemplate the demeanors of the hypothetical residents, perhaps even projecting themselves into the illusory space.



Another defining feature of Manford's work is the prominent texture of the burlap and linen materials. Adding depth and dimension to the surface of his compositions, this masterful use of texture uniquely underscores the material presence of Manford's work. As he intuitively layers oil stick and pastel, Manford is succinctly aware of the intrinsic malleability of color and light. Paying close attention to the saturation, temperature, and tone of his pigments, his constructed environments reflect a playful spirit and a vivacious ambiance, resulting in a dynamic visual experience. Imbued with fervid optical colors and tactile warmth, Manford's art maintains a refined psychedelic aura. A vibrational current seems to echo throughout the cultivated interior environs, leaving viewers to find themselves within a dream world that is both familiar and surreal in equal degree.



JJ Manford was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1983. Receiving his bachelor's degree from Cornell in 2006, Manford went on to obtain a post-Baccalaureate certificate from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2009, graduating with his MFA from Hunter College in 2012. Manford's work has been exhibited in New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Chicago, London, Rome, Copenhagen, and Puerto Rico. His work has been included in multiple private and public collections, including the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, Florida. Manford is currently an adjunct professor at Pratt Institute. In 2013, Manford co-founded Underdonk—an artist-run exhibition space and collective located in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. Manford currently lives and works in Brooklyn.

In a Western Town, March 30 – April 29, 2023. On view at 10 Hawthorne Street, San Francisco, CA 94105. Images and preview available upon request. For all inquiries, please contact the gallery by phone at (415) 781-4629 or by email at info@berggruen.com.



Hi JJ! Can you tell us a bit about what led you to pursue a path as an artist? Do you have any early creative memories?

I think it was the positive reinforcement; I was one of the kids that was "good at art", or could draw Batman or a Ninja Turtle and make it look sort of realistic. I was lucky that my parents encouraged this. Growing up is rough, so it brought me comfort and confidence to feel like I had a skill that not everyone had, or was interested in. We had to paint a famous artwork onto the top of a stool in fourth grade, and I chose Cézanne. The process of copying one of his still lifes generated my first real art crush. Later in life, I remember going to see the Basquiat retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, and that's when it solidified in me that I wanted to be an artist, in the life-pursuit sense of the word. This was in 2005, I guess, so I must have been in my early twenties already. Everything I painted for the next three years looked like a Basquiat copy.

You often work on burlap which lends a rough, tactile, earthy quality to the surfaces of your paintings. What draws you to burlap as a material? What are some of the limitations of working with burlap?

For a while now, I've been interested in optical mixture in my paintings, which is very much an Impressionist and Pointillist method of capturing the evasive quality of light in painting. A big revelation for me was when I looked up close at a Seurat painting and realized that he wasn't stippling obsessively, all the time, but dry brushing top layers over a very toothy linen. I took this idea and applied it to the burlap: The stretched burlap has many raised areas, which act as 'points', or peaks, that catch the oil stick as I drag it across the surface. This top layer then vibrates with the "valleys", which are the underlying colors, painted in Flashe, that reach the more recessed areas of the material.

The limitation of burlap is that it is a very unruly surface to draw on. It's sort of like off road biking; my hand is going every which way over the bumpy surface, and I just need to keep it steady. I like how this can sometimes disintegrate the image, so maybe that also qualifies it as an advantage.

Your work is sometimes likened to 'psychedelic art' though you have said that isn't necessarily your intention. Is there anything in your background that might relate to that type of work, such as a love of the Grateful Dead, or a cultural moment that may have inspired your work?

Well, I've always been in the chromophilia camp, and I am assuming a lot of the psychedelic read comes from my use of color, though I know a lot more about how I want to use color now than I did even four years ago. I may have said something to this effect in previous interviews, but for me, the term psychedelic has come to represent a way of being, and seeing, rather than a shorthand narration of a drug experience. Making something that is destabilizing, that might even frighten you a bit, and that does not follow a conventional mind set...that for me embodies the psychedelic and visionary in a more relevant way. My favorite art almost always has this element.

Can you take us through the process of making a painting? Do you look at any references when working?

There's a lot of stretching, wrapping, prepping and priming that goes on before I even start painting. Then I make an underpainting with Flashe, and begin mapping out the structural elements with charcoal, gradually moving towards the figuration. A lot of the time, the composition just comes to me through a sort of synesthetic feeling I have toward the background colors: whether it's an interior or exterior, whether it contains cats, flowers, chairs, etc., ends up feeling inevitable, the longer that I stare at the underpainting. I look at references some of the time (I keep a folder, of sorts, of various objects, patterns, or color arrangements that I would love to find context for in my paintings), and also paint from life or from my head.

Does drawing play a part in your practice?

Yes, drawing plays a huge role, though nowadays, most of the drawing I do is directly on the painting. I was making smaller pastel drawings on paper for awhile (and I still do make thumbnail sketches to plan out most paintings), in order to think through certain formal ideas for the paintings, & realized that there was a certain quality to the drawings, which I really liked, that was not translating to the paintings that I made traditionally (with a brush). Discovering oil sticks, which sort of occupy both painting and drawing realms, felt like a big deal for me.

You incorporate quite a bit of plant life in your work. What is the significance of the nature that you include?

When I was making the more biomorphic paintings, plants felt like the most compatible subject matter with the process; I was painting with a lot of water, lying the paintings on the ground, and moving paint around in a very automatic, stream of consciousness sort of way, allowing the paint to dry and pool, and then carving out forms from all the of that after. I still have a great interest in plants, but the way in which they are drawn in the paintings is more specific now. Other than the pure fact that I always preferred being outdoors, and find nature to be extraordinarily beautiful from an aesthetic and spiritual point of view, I also gravitate towards plant life for its sort of abstract flexibility, from a painting perspective: it's more of malleable subject than portraiture, for example.

You seem to effortlessly work both figuratively and abstractly within series—which is challenging to pull off. Has exploring both realms always been part of your practice?

Thank you! I suppose it has. A big realization I had recently was that it's easier to have your cake and eat it, if you start from the ground up and iron out the structural underpinnings of the composition first. If you do this, and have a consistent and considered way of working with your materials, then I think it's very possible to consider figuration and abstraction to be interchangeable characteristics.

Are myths, fairy tales, stories or fables something you consider? Many of your paintings seem to have an eerie narrative at work.

I remember taking a summer drawing class at MassArt, in Boston, while I was in high school, and this punk-rock kid straight out of Ernest Goes to Camp, made this rather questionable piece of art that he refused to explain. When asked about its meaning, he said something like "I prefer to make my art, and think about what it means after the fact..." I thought that was totally wrong at the time, but keep thinking about that kid. He had a great point! Whenever I try to be too prescriptive in my work, I feel like it's failing. There are totally myths and stories in there, but they are anachronistic, in a narrative sense. The recent paintings all play with this balance between generality, and the attempt to lock down a place or feeling or quality of light that is more specific.

You have mentioned in a previous interview that artists that have inspired you evoke a "‘visionary’ and transcendental ethos that attracts (you) to them—specifically their attunement to animals, nature, and the spirit.” Is this something that you also hope to capture in your paintings? Do you know know you are attracted to this kind of energy in art?

Wow, that's right, I did! Yes, I do still love 'visionary' artists, both the insiders and the outsiders. I cannot paint a rabbit without thinking about Samuel Palmer, though the more you dive into looking and thinking about painting, the more revelatory everything becomes. For example, I've been especially fond of Bonnard in recent years, and if you get past the seemingly conventional banality of his subject matter, and begin to really inhabit the space of one of his paintings, you'd be crazy not to think it's more strange, and otherworldly than a Gustave Moreau or Odilon Redon. Then, when you read about the psychological drama that going down in the house where many of those scenes occur, that just gets you even deeper into the web.

In a previous interview with Katherine Bradford in 2014, you said, “It has become clear and incomprehensible that life is somehow separate from art...” and "I think that gets at what is really the subject of my paintings: destabilization, as a zone for self-discovery, and the embrace of the unfamiliar. That is also what the ‘psychedelic’ represents for me.” This is really interesting, as I constantly think of how to incorporate a creative life or studio practice into the ‘rest’ of life. Over time, how has this perspective played out in your life? Does this still ring true for you?

Thanks for citing that! That convo with Kathy came around the same time that Jonas (the older of our two boys) was born, I believe. I was thinking a lot about how to balance parenthood with my painting, which at the time I knew nothing about. Someone once told me, before I had any kids, that once you have kids, your life is never the same again, and that scared me, because I more or less liked my life as it was, though it is always a work in progress. They were right about raising a family, the agony and the ecstasy, though it fills up my time in a very productive way because I cannot easily overthink things. Elisa Soliven, my wife, and I are very busy these days, and we are both artists, which has helped us reach an understanding about studio time. Beyond that, the boys have really opened up the subject matter and the drawing in my paintings, and really are a source of constant inspiration.

Can you tell us about your studio? What do you need to be productive there?

We had sort of live/work space in Bushwick, and now our studio is nearby our home, in Gowanus. Elisa and I share a space, though she also works at a clay studio in Greenwood Heights. The work changed a lot when we moved, and there is a wall between us and my good friend Peter Park. There are other really great people and artists in the buildings, but it's not one of those large artist buildings so it never gets noisy and I feel a lot of positive energy and concentration when I'm there. I'm forever running out of space, but beyond that, it may be my

favorite studio environment to date. As far as what I need to be productive, I'm fairly low maintenance.

Do you prefer to be energetic and upbeat or calm and reflective when working? How do you cultivate the mood in the studio?

This totally varies, depending on the time of day and my mood, etc. Due to my schedule, I often paint at night, which relaxes me because it feels like I am working on borrowed time, and there's sense that everyone is safely at home, and that the kids are in bed and sleeping soundly. I listen to the radio and music often, though a lot of the time I feel too much urgency to take advantage of time and get to work, and a few hours pass before it occurs to me that I've been working in complete silence, and don't need to be. I don't really "hang out" in the studio like I used to, and want to, before I had kids. My new years resolution is to listen to more Podcasts.

In addition to your studio practice, you're a father, husband, and co-run Underdonk, an artist-run space in Bushwick. What is a typical day like for you?

It's really so nice to have someone acknowledge all that, thank you! I adjunct at Pratt and BMCC, so my studio schedule is more or less structured around my teaching schedule. Weekends are mostly spent doing stuff with the family, and painting in the late evening. After a lifetime at the playground, and a jog, we have a pretty consistent ritual of going into the LES to gallery hop, often ending up at a playground, and if we are feeling really adventurous, we will attempt to go out for dinner all together. The boys don't always want to see galleries, but usually they can get into the spirit if some snacks are involved. About twice a month, we head to Bushwick to do our shift of gallery sitting at Underdonk, and Jonas and Emil to Maria Hernandez Park. Other than that, my mother lives in Hudson, NY, so about once or twice a month we pay her a visit.

Who are some of the artists you look at most often?

Lately, Vuillard, Bonnard, Kirchner, Vallotton, Lee Mullican, Eddie Arning, to name a few. It recently occurred to me that I absolutely love Helen Frankenthaler. There are just too many to list. I'm sorry I usually cite the dead ones, but I have come across so many contemporary artists that I love via Instagram. Sometimes I use Underdonk as an excuse to meet them, by putting them in a show. Chris Martin, Erik den Breejen, Sky Glabush, Kevin McNamee-Tweed, Melissa Brown, Karla Wozniak, Guglielmo Castelli, Ted Gahl, Jared Deery, and Sean Sullivan to name a few.

Whats up next for you?

Well, I am very excited about my show that just opened at Derek Eller Gallery, called Fish Tank TV. It runs through December 22nd.



**MULTI
_PLO**

 @multi_plo

www.multiploeditions.com