ARTSLANT

Greg Ito Offers a Pictoral Language for our Dreams
Written by Alex Anderson
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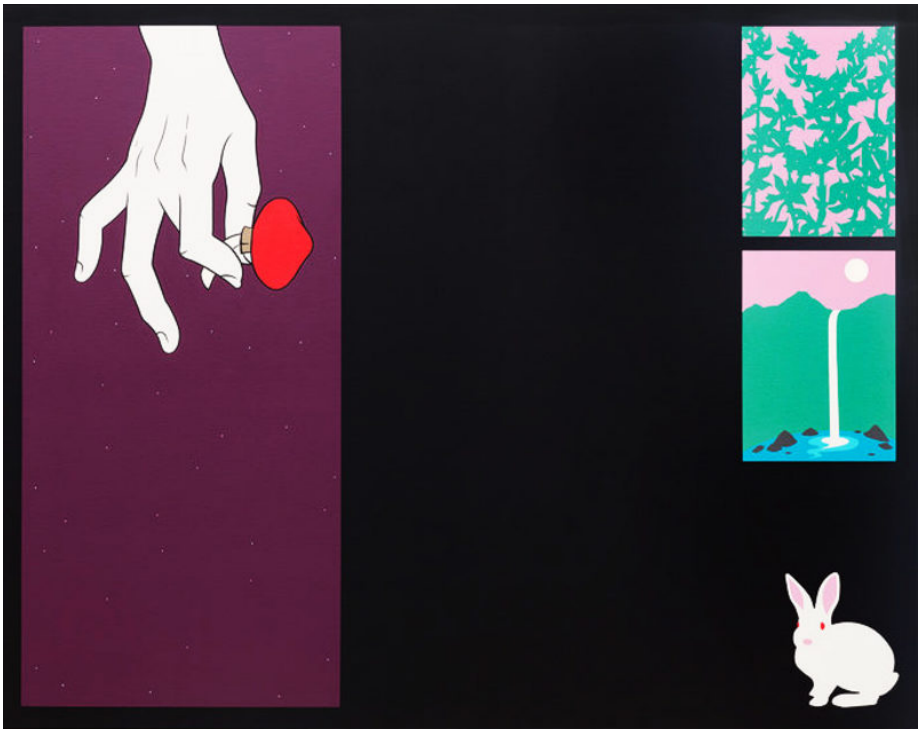


***The Seeker*, 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 38 x 48.25 inches**

Using icons and imagery from childhood fairytales, anime, and classical western art, Greg Ito paints unique moments that form a larger narrative around psychology, love, and life. Each economical vignette evokes a sense of wonder, magic, loneliness, and an underlying darkness characteristic of the contemporary human condition. With diagrammatic precision, Ito gives form to the intangibility of affect as it relates to the lived and imagined worlds we experience when we inevitably fall into his paintings and environments. Nothing is static. Nothing is definitive. Everything is in the distilled experience.

Ito's solo show, *Lullaby*, is currently installed at Andrew Rafacz Gallery in Chicago, and he was included in the recent group exhibition *Broken Language* at Shulamit Nazarian in Los Angeles. I caught up with the artist last month at his LA studio.

Installation view of *Broken Language* at Shulamit Nazarian, 2017.
Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

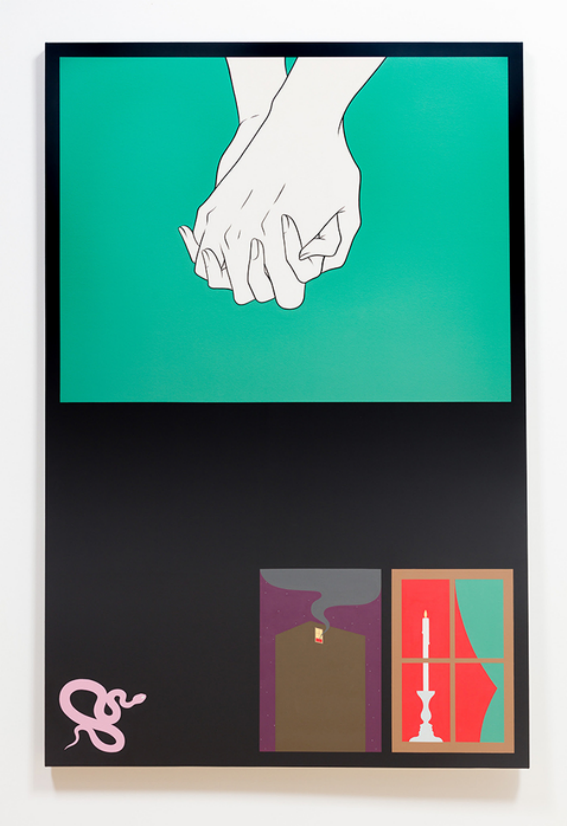
Alex Anderson: I've never seen paintings like this that draw from established systems of representation, but are purely and uniquely of themselves. Could you speak to the development of your aesthetic?

Greg Ito: My art-making career began in school and I was interested in spiritual geometries and old altar works. I was really into celestial patterns like calendars, free masonry drawings, and anything that was diagrammatic. Moving forward, because of my Japanese American background, I always had a relationship with anime and manga. I wasn't obsessed with it, but it was always around me: Dragon Ball Z, Totoro—these very iconic Japanese cartoons. So, looking at these works, I like to think of them as diagrammatic systems where I've given myself boundaries or rules. The rules are: it has a hand gesture and a symbol and a setting, or a combination of these things. The way they're composed is similar to a storyboard or a mood board that shows a series of vignettes.

Also, Rothko. The way he created emotional tension through the color fields was my number one inspiration. Everything else is a backstory, but his compositions started these paintings.

AA: What do you mean by the backstory?

GI: The Rothko paintings are just color fields with blurry edges. It's very basic. But I'm trying to elaborate on the diagrammatic aspect of the work to tell a story. It's a fusion between something that has an operation like a calendar, but then has set boundaries, and evokes emotional tensions like a Rothko.



Greg Ito, *Casual Encounter*, 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 62 x 48 inches.

AA: Hands and hand gestures are a constant throughout the work. What does this element mean to you, and whose hands are these?

GI: The hands are really important to me. I have found the hand as a gateway. It's the first section of the painting I decide on. The hands are the beginning point. They allow me to put subjects in a room or situation. Without the hands there, I can't create a story, because I want the viewer to connect with something. The hands are not supposed to be specific to race or gender. It's more of a gesture, like a performance. What is the gesture of this hand picking up a mushroom? What is that gesture with relation to the other images in that work?

There's a painting titled *Casual Encounter* where the two hands are holding each other and it's very passionate, which sets the tone for this story. For me, this painting is about a one-night-stand and the snake in the corner has a lurking, darker quality, which is something I always like to have in the work. Everything has this melancholy or dark aspect, which also appears in the color choices.

***Lullaby*, 2017, Installation view at Andrew Rafacz Gallery.**

AA: There seems to be a feeling of unspoken and unspecified longing, tragedy, nostalgia, darkness, and perhaps even desperation. Are these feelings something you are actively processing through the work, or do these images and this affect speak to a larger observation on the human condition?

GI: I think it's natural for artists to reflect on their relationship with the world and their relationship with themselves. I always felt that in the time we're in today, fear is a very real thing and it's been real for many generations, but now, with the direction things are moving in, it's even more real for our generation, which never really had many hardships. So I think about going on a vacation and having a plane crash.

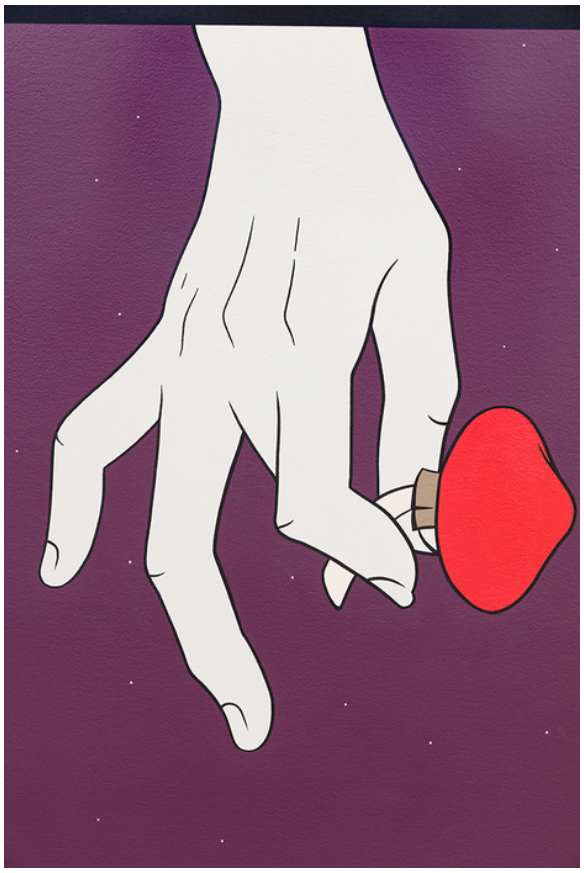
Loneliness and companionship are very important threads in the work because a lot of the paintings are very romantically charged, and our relationships with other people dictate how we live our lives. That's why a lot of these paintings draw from childhood stories and old books. I have a show at Andrew Rafacz called *Lullaby*, which is kind of an "Ito version" of the dwellings of Rapunzel. The room was carpeted and we painted all the walls and there was an eerie red light in the room with a painting of a window wide open, as though she had escaped. I feel like as we're growing up, we're told all these stories about love and romance and happy endings and that really creates an imprint on your mind of what you're looking for in life: romance, freedom, a nice house. I'm trying to use symbols and images that people can connect with. Through these paintings, I'm giving them an offering. The images create a narrative and people put themselves or people they know into the painting. It's important for the work to be accessible.

The accessibility and format of these images gives an experience that places them on a clean, flat plane and all the extraneous baggage gets stripped from it and we're left with only the real content of that image and how it relates to everything else in the plane.

***Lullaby*, 2017, Installation view at Andrew Rafacz Gallery.**

AA: Your work uses signifiers of familiar narratives like Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and the journey of a message in a bottle, which to me are access points that allow us to begin a larger conversation about experience via emotion captured by icons. What is the role of the whimsical and fantastical in your work?

GI: The whimsical…hmm…I want to say magical, because in such a rigid world, where we have to have school degrees and all this stuff, there's still a sense of magic in how things work in the world. Of course, a lot of terrible things happen, but a lot of beautiful things happen too and I feel like these moments are very magical. Everyone wants these things in life. Fall in love, go on a honeymoon. It's all very fairytale and dreamlike. People need to have an escape, so even though some of these escapes can become obsessions—which is again the darker side of it—I feel like it's important to the work to have this magical, playful quality. You want to be able to step into a room regardless of age, race, or culture and immediately connect with these images through what we see everyday.



The Seeker **(detail), 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 38 x 48.25 inches.**

AA: You mentioned that these paintings represent what everyone wants in life. Could you tell me more about that?

GI: There's one thing that always stays in my mind when I'm making the work, and that's this word "desire." I think about the desire to have and experience things. Maybe it's a new phone, or your dream car, or your dream girlfriend or boyfriend. It's very connected to desire and the way the world is structured today. Having a career and a family and a homestead are all very common desires, but desire can go beyond that and become a dream. A dream can be to be famous, or to be whisked away by someone. Having wants and wishes and dreams is something I want to allow people to continue. It's an offering to be part of something larger.

Everyone has wants and desires. The most basic ones are domestic partnership and family, but it doesn't just end there and I feel like it's a very basic need for humans to want something, to obtain it, and to be a part of something. That's normal. That's something that makes us human.

The work is playful, and people can take it however they want.

***The Watcher*, 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 38 x 48.25 inches.**

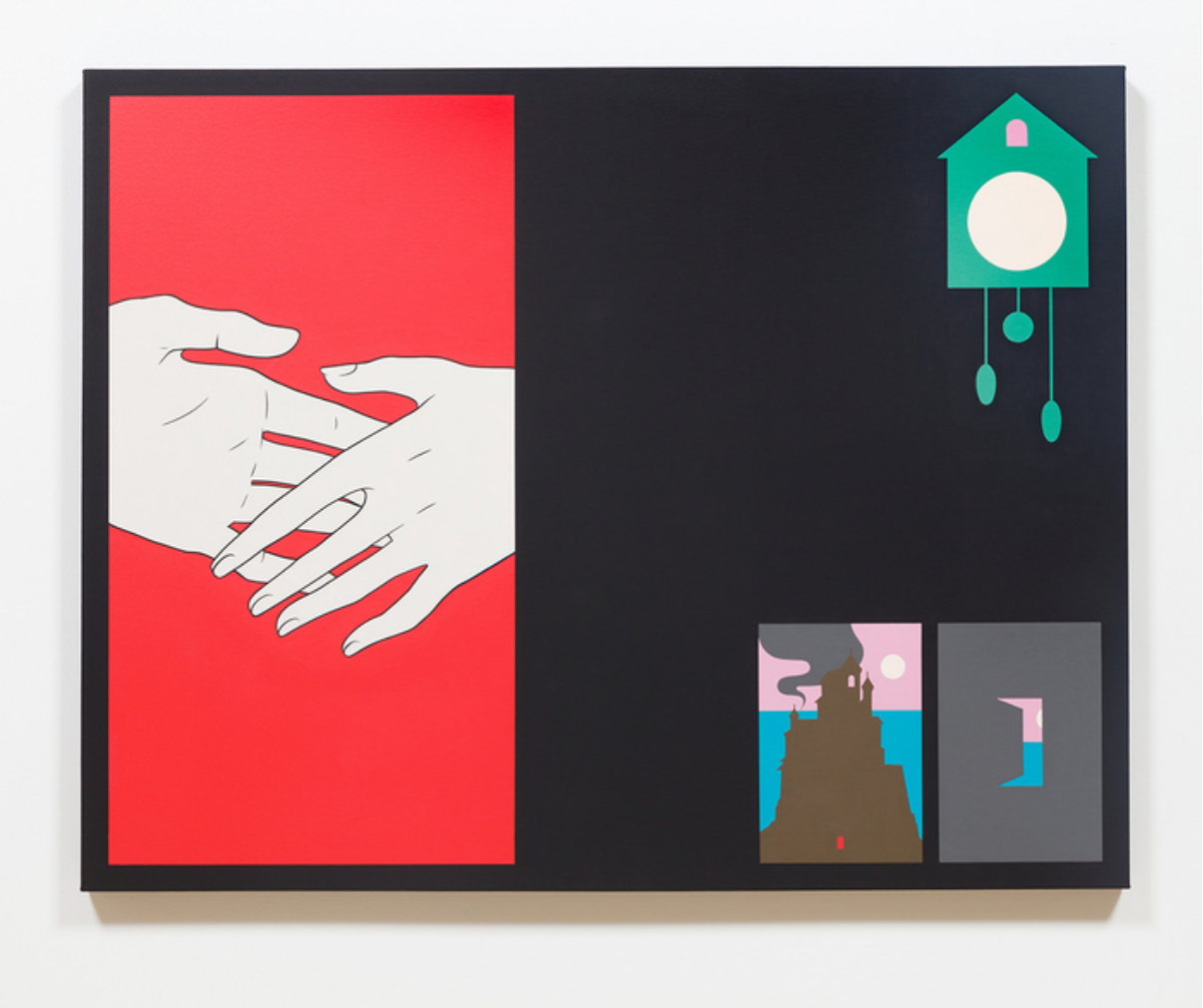
AA: I showed your work to one of my friends and after a moment of consideration, the first thing she said was, "these make me sad, but I can't stop looking at them." What do you think about this reaction?

GI: That's exactly what it does to me. Her reaction sounds very sincere. The paintings are not supposed to make you feel over-the-top happy. It's not a happy ending always and the images that I'm offering to viewers don't have a specific ending. It's always been a challenge to locate and maintain a happy life. Everyone has their own hardships, but to be able to acknowledge a sense of sadness is a strength. To be able to offer that sadness in conjunction with other images shows that the world goes both ways.

There's something about desire and passion and romance…I think all those things are on the edge of sadness. It's that fine line between joy and sadness and that's where all the interesting things happen—at the transitions. I like that little grey area in the middle.

AA: Is art an offering?

GI: Totally. My relationship with art has gone in so many directions. I've loved it and hated it, disowned it, and come back to it. It all came down to what made me happy as an artist, and that was just to make art. The more art, the more offerings. Art is a bigger, more beautiful thing than the art world. Art operates on all levels and it's not just the level at the top of the pedestal. Art exists everywhere beyond that. In looking at a lot of art, I've received a lot of offerings, and this is my way to continue that.



***The Passageway*, 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 38 x 48.25 inches.**

AA: The use of charged imagery like candles, snakes, smoke, castles, and once again, hands, invites a conversation about symbols from 16th-century vanitas paintings, the Renaissance, and western religious artworks. Is the work about reinterpreting the classical western art historical cannon through your lens?

GI: Those are definitely influences, but it's not about that. The symbols and allegories in art have always been interesting to me. I'm not a very religious person, but the way paintings have an underlying operation within them is something I want to use in my practice. It's not about the time in which art was made; it's about accessing visual language to communicate with the viewer. Time is important in the works and showing that time is continuing in the static plane is important. For a sentimental person like myself, I always think about the past and how that dictates the future. It's this constant push of time we can never control.

***The Journey*, 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 62 x 48 inches.**

AA: Many of the works have titles that refer to what I assume are people, events, or destinations. For example*, The Seeker, The Journey, The Passageway*. Can you tell us more about how these titles manifest?

GI: The titles are the last thing I do, but they act as gateways into the paintings. I was doing one painting recently and the first title was *The Warrior*, but that felt too violent, so I changed it to *The Guardian*—because who doesn't want to be saved from a terrible situation?

AA: The idea of a destination seems especially salient to understanding you and the work. What are these images trying to find or reach?

GI: The most recent paintings all have a tropical scene with smoke in the distance. Everyone has this romantic relationship with the idea of an island vacation no matter where you're from. I think that location is a stand in for your soul mate: that one person you want to get to. Those two go hand in hand. Ha.

AA: Is there a destination?

GI: Always.

The Watcher **(detail), 2017, Acrylic on canvas, 38 x 48.25 inches.**

AA: I'm not asking you what the meaning of life is, because that's annoying, but you seem to explore life through a reflection on impactful moments. With that in mind, based on your observations and the life you have lived so far, what is life from your perspective?

GI: Life is just one long, amazing journey that will keep going on forever. It's just a journey and a lot of these works are journeys within themselves.

AA: What should we know about your work in the current show at Shulamit Nazarian in Los Angeles, *Broken Language*?

GI: These are my most recent series of vignette paintings with the use of a new black background. The previous series used skin tones as backgrounds as a nod to the collective consciousness of people and it says these story lines are enveloped by skin tone and that they're being embodied by somebody. Moving to the new black background allowed for the symbols, images, and colors to be enriched with contrast. All these works have a specific set of symbols, gestures, and settings from a lexicon I've created over the years. Each one has a separate story, but it also shows how the works can operate as a chapters. I feel the work is fully activated in a scene where it includes, paintings, installation, and objects, but this show demonstrates how the paintings work on their own.