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'Is It Disgusting or Is It Beautiful?': Sought-After L.A. Artist Alec Egan Taps Into the Theater of Artifice in His Maximalist Interiors

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The artist's latest poetic scenes will be on view with Anat Ebgi during the Armory Show.



Alec Egan, 2023. Photography Matthew Kroening.

Dreams of wandering through a home—one familiar to you, conjured up from childhood memory perhaps—are quite common. Such dreams are often comforting and disorienting at once, as familiar rooms and belongings take on uncanny dimensions.

One specific home continues to haunt and inspire the Los Angeles artist Alec Egan who cultivates a similarly hard-to-place sensation in his thickly impastoed domestic interiors. For the better part of a decade, the artist, who shows with Anat Ebgi in Los Angeles and Charles Moffett in New York, has been creating paintings premised on a single, fictitious house. These canvases sometimes picture whole bedrooms and living rooms; in others, Egan (b. 1984) crops in on a basket of fruit or a store-bought bouquet or swatch of fabric, so that our perception of the house comes in and out of focus. Maximalist in decor, these interior spaces are characterized by riotously floral wallpapers and colorfully upholstered fabrics—picture a grandma's house on steroids.

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Over the years, these opulently, confrontationally, cluttered canvases have made for unforgettable exhibitions in which Egan explores a different portion of the imaginary home. Egan patterned the gallery walls with a dizzying navy-and-pink floral wallpaper plucked straight from a canvas at Charles Moffett for “The Study” in 2021. Floral carpeting capped off the visually saturated installation.

That sort of bravura is bound to make an impression, and, over the years, collectors and institutions have taken notice. Currently, the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center in Vermont is presenting Egan’s solo show “Drawing Room.” The museum is housed in a former railway station, with a distinct architectural language. The idiosyncratic setting works to underscore the questions of time, architectural memory, and cultural exchange that permeate Egan’s work.

“Nostalgia and anxiety can go hand-in-hand in our homes,” Egan said from his Los Angeles studio. “I’m interested in symbols that operate on different timelines. We see it all around us, an Old World moving into the New World. For a time, they’re sandwiched together in this beautiful marriage of conflict, floral wallpaper, and a TV, for instance.”

Right now, Egan is preparing for a devoted solo booth with Anat Ebgi at New York’s Armory Show at the beginning of September. The presentation will bring together a group of new large-scale canvases that Egan has been working on for months. These works were originally slated for an exhibition in Hong Kong that failed to materialize, and Egan had the rare luxury of completing the canvases without a deadline.

“I didn’t rush it at all but gave each work a lot of care and precision and thought,” said Egan, “All the imagery in my shows is usually based on one key painting, with tales departing from that central painting. This is a departure in that each painting is its own complete painting. The paintings are in conversation, instead. It’s less formulated.”

In these new compositions, one gets the sense that Egan is bringing his viewers closer and closer to a visual ledge. In several paintings, the viewer seems to be looking out of a window, curtains flowing down both sides of the canvas or blinds cutting starkly across the top. Beyond the window one sees the fluorescent vistas of Southern California.

“These paintings are moving towards the surreal, looking out over hallucinatory, psychedelic Los Angeles sunsets and scenes of parking lots with strange reflections and puddles,” Egan noted.

Certainly, Egan has a fluency with art history and little easter eggs have been known to appear in his works—a Van Gogh-like pair of boots, for instance, made their way into a previous series—and his compositions with their plays of compressing and flattening interior and exterior spaces, and with patterns so vibrant as seem nearly sentient, can call to mind artists from Richard Diebenkorn to Matisse.

Theater and film are other significant influences. Egan’s mother is an actress and his father is a theater director. “I grew up in theaters. As a young kid, I was running around behind stages, looking at sets, or watching plays,” he noted, “It’s an integral part of who I am. Scenes and sets are a movable or manipulatable reality, which is also a motif in my practice. I draw on these cinematic tropes of light and color to exploit those aspects even more.”

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From this theatrical perspective, Egan's visually complex works take on a doubling, slippery quality. The curtains on what appears to be a home window might actually be the curtains opening onto a proscenium. The winding road unfurling beyond the windowpane in another work might just be a backdrop. Egan is unconcerned with realness, however, and instead, drills into the artifice of the everyday.

When Egan was in his twenties, he moved to Iowa and rented a barn where he spent his days painting. Often, he would drive to visit his grandparents in a different part of the state. "I remember going inside their home and seeing floral wallpaper, floral fabric, and flowers cut from the yard in vases," he recalled. Those interiors made a powerful impression on the artist.

"What I found is that this desire to have beauty is so strong that we have to replicate it, put it on our walls, cut plants, put them in our homes," he said. "We want to make something impermanent permanent. In my work, there is a staging of that effect of pattern upon pattern. If I do it right, the work comes to a place where we wonder: Is it disgusting or is it beautiful? I like that kind of ad nauseam, confusing conceptual space, where beauty becomes more surreal and psychological."

The allusions to theater are also hinted at in a more literary, narrative sense. In one painting slated for the Armory, *Open Book on Window Sill* (2023), a splayed book appears as though on the sill, the unseen reader has just stepped away. Through the window one sees a car winding down a lonely road, headlights beaming. The scene seems to fall from the pages of the book, projecting out onto the canvas. Egan, who attended Kenyon College as an undergraduate, earned a B.A. in creative writing with a focus on poetry, agrees that language, the possibility of narrative, exists in his work's collapsing and contrasting of spaces.

"The teachers at Kenyon were great but it was an older program where you had to sound like one of the five modernist poets," he recalled. Egan, who was also on the school's rugby team, was invited to the painting studio by a teammate, where he ultimately found his voice.

"The poetry funneled into it the images that I wanted to make," he explained, "I'm not interested in people believing that what I'm painting is based on real life. It's not. As a poet, writer, or painter, the throughline is that reality becomes a basis to stretch from in imaginative ways."