

CURBED

A Studio Visit With *Nest* Founder Turned Painter Joseph Holtzman

By Wendy Goodman



Joseph Holtzman's *Aegean Landscape* (2020) hangs on the wall to the right.

Photo: Michael Mundy

with red carpets on the floor. It was filled with books— a decorative-arts collection. The front section was pretty much the way it was, with the marijuana linen on the wall. It was my library, but then I moved things out. You know, I had carpets on the wall, and it served as an office and a guest room.

This week, I spoke with Joseph Holtzman about the book his friend Todd Oldham made about his eccentric and influential magazine, *Nest*. Since *Nest* folded in 2004 — after scaring off Condé Nast, which had wanted to buy it — Holtzman began painting. Well, he returned to painting. As he told me, “I was painting when I was 20 and kind of a nutcase, and I have some really good paintings from that period. But I just didn’t think I was good enough. I switched over to decorative arts and became obsessed with English furniture, and I really thought I didn’t understand painting and instead became interested in frames ...” He showed me around the apartment (down the hall from the apartment where he lives) which he once used for the *Nest* offices. He now uses it as a workspace and guest room. On the tour, we discussed Holtzman’s paintings, which have been hung throughout the space in preparation for an upcoming exhibit. Holtzman’s gallerist, Sam Parker (of Parker Gallery in Los Angeles), wanted to do a pop-up exhibition of the work in New York, so they are having it here.

What was this space like before you hung your paintings in it?

It’s a rent-stabilized apartment down the hall from my apartment ... I rented that when I started the magazine. When it was the office, it was all white

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What's new?

All of the linoleum I just added; it's all vintage linoleum, which is a product I've been interested in for a while. I used to collect carpets, and I don't think carpets belong, really, in a Western home. My favorite floors are kind of beat-up raw wood floors. These were polyurethane, unfortunately. I was going to hand scrape them off, but I didn't have time to do that ... so much of what I had planned for the room I couldn't do because of COVID. I had all the walls scraped through, and then COVID hit, and then I left. It started because Sam Parker from the gallery wanted to do a pop-up exhibition. His gallery is in a house, and he likes showing art in domestic settings. And this kind of came up, and I needed to freshen it up anyway, so I offered to do it. But I was immediately kind of regretful. I'd rather have paintings be in white box, frankly. I want them to be seen the way other paintings are seen and judged. But I committed to do this, and I didn't want the room to overwhelm the paintings.

The walls are felt?

All of the walls, including the baseboard, are felt which we backed with two sides of acrylic backing and muslin.



The entrance hall has Holtzman's own marijuana-leaf fabric design on the walls and ceiling. The runner and floor covering in the studio is vintage linoleum. Photo: Michael Mundy.

The workmanship is incredible.

It's John Nalewaja. I've been working with him for 35 years. I couldn't have done it without him and his team. It was like a decorator show house! We did it quick, and I took what I have. My lighting is all old pieces, as early as late 19th century ... it's industrial, but with flair. Some of these were made for dentist's offices, so they give off a precise light. It has this sort of high-tech, sort of Jules Verne — I think I am in the wrong century though — effect. Which makes sense for a dentist's office. So often we think that light is like this neutral thing that doesn't really matter, but lighting fixtures and chandeliers are something a designer really wants to figure out.

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Tell me about the sofa.

This sofa is interesting. It was originally in Florida. It's by the American company Davenport. You've heard old ladies say, "Oh, you're sitting on my Davenport"? This is truly a Davenport, from about 1918. I had it restored in felt. It's completely tufted. The fabric is old vintage fabric. It had the original tag on it. I think it's 50s bark cloth. It's not exactly what I would want in there for color, but I like this room to look a little bit like a nursery, and it does look like something you'd have in the nursery — a certain nursery.

Where is that chest from?

That's a nice aesthetic English wardrobe. Japanese panels incorporated. That was there, and I used it as a wall separator. I bought that thing from some ex-rock-and-roll person, a star. That sort of stuff was not so in fashion, but it works really well there. I think it creates a good entrance, so you're not looking into the kitchen. I like the way the room is approached. You kind of scrape your head coming in and then there is a change of light, and the focus turns to the outside view.



From left, Holtzman added the red brackets to the entrance between the hall and studio. The color blocks on the walls and ceiling are done in felt and the ceiling is also done in silver leaf. Photo: Michael Mundy.

Did you add those brackets in the doorway?

Oh, yes. I like to present the room the way Mongiardino does, where I show a rendered floor plan and then each elevation. So that was part of my original drawing, and I made those brackets. It was going to be a more involved installation, but this was kind of the bones of it. I made those here. I didn't want any seams in the felt. I don't like seams ... that is part of the reason I chose those colors. I was restricted to the width of felt.

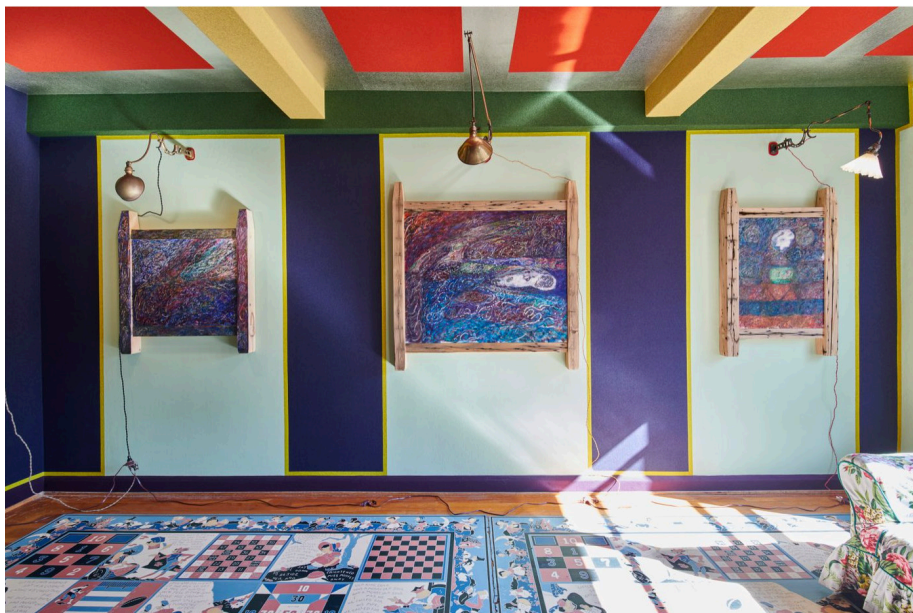
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Tell me about the paintings. You told me they are painted on pieces of marble, and the frames are recycled chestnut?

It's a local wood (nearly a dead species up here). I get beams from old barns. And basically the frames were developed as systems so that I could store the paintings and slide them around my studio. And that's how it started, and that's why we're keeping them in the frames. But that's not integral to the paintings.



Installation view of "Six Recent Paintings." From left, *Aegean Landscape* (2020) and *Wine-Face Sea* (2019). Photo: Michael Mundy



From left, Joseph Holtzman's *Untitled* (2019), *Artist Hibernating* (2019), and *Athena by the Sea, a Nocturne* (2020). Photo: Michael Mundy

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Why paint on marble?

I wanted to work on a hard surface, and so I started working on slate. But I was gessoing the slate white, and so I went to the mine up in Vermont to pick out my slab. It's an incredible place. I'm almost embarrassed to be working on marble; it's so heavy, so pretentious. But I could handle the marbles myself in the studio. I don't think I fully explored the medium, but I love it. I paint on canvas, too, kind of to prove I can. It's just that my muscles are trained for the marble. It's like switching sports or something. It's like I feel at home when I am back on marble. But it's daunting to face one ... you know, they are beautiful as they are. So you have to justify your splattering in a way. Anyway, it's just one of those struggles, dear.

So you have the marble cut ...

To my size.



Joseph Holtzman, *Humpty Dumpty Nocturne*, July 4, 2017, 2020. Photo: Michael Mundy

And then the marble is visible through the paint?

Yes, particularly in earlier paintings. This collection of paintings now these six paintings were all done in the past three years. And I found that I went quite dark, so there is less direct marble in these paintings.

It's so much about the surface I want to create, and I don't think they show in photographs and that is kind of in my idea, to their credit.

I'm not interested so much in my own work in imagery, you know?

And us old fashioned kind of athletic painters, it's not about imagery, we painters have to compete against backlit images, you know? And these are all front lit.

Are the paintings seascapes?

I went to Greece for the summer, I rarely travel, but my godson was being baptized in Hydra, and so I was there for about a week, so yes, it's the Aegean landscape. One painting is the wine-dark sea ... that has always haunted me. I've loved the archaic statues. This is a show, in most cases, of landscapes and nocturnes

Summer 2019, I take it.

Yes.

What is next now that this series is finished?

Well I just finished, Hon, the paint is barely dry. Then I had to do a decorating installation of the room. I can't wait to get back ... all this commotion right now is not easy for me [laughing]. Exposure of any sort is always problematic for me.

Joseph Holtzman's "Six Recent Paintings" is open at Parker Gallery from October 16 to December 20.

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Joseph Holtzman on his Davenport sofa. Photo: Michael Mundy

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