

Chris Trueman's innovative paintings may be abstract but they still explore what's real in the world we live in

Story: Dave Weinstein

Art: Chris Trueman

Lead photography: Adriene Biondo

IF IT'S A SUNNY DAY in Upland, California—and it usually is—you can learn about Chris Trueman's art just by walking by the studio where he works. All you need to do is listen.

The artist often keeps his large roll-up studio door open so he can take in the San Gabriel Mountains that loom to the north, making it easy to hear his workaday artist's soundtrack—mixtapes of dance, electronic, and downtempo sounds.

Trueman is an abstract painter, continuing a tradition whose Western fine art beginnings reach back to the start of the 20th century. It's a tradition that has been declared dead numerous times, most succinctly by the conservative artist and writer Wyndham Lewis: "The abstract is dead of a very customary complaint of civilized man: boredom," Lewis wrote in 1940.

And let's not forget, by the way, how many times over the past several decades the entire enterprise of painting has been declared dead.

Early on, Trueman contemplated focusing on digit rather than paint. Alas, he had no choice, as he learned while studying at the San Francisco Art Institute. His digital creations kept looking like paintings.

"My professor told me, 'You're switching media, but you are essentially painting.' When I graduated, that stuck in my mind. So I thought, rather than creating new media with old ideas, I would use old media with new ideas."

"We are hopefully making work about what is happening now," Trueman says of his paintings.

Abstract his paintings may be, but they explore many of today's hottest topics, depending on who is looking and how closely they look. Moods range from dystopian to exuberant.

They delve into people's retreats from the real world into virtual space, explore where virtual reality begins and real reality ends, and can suggest speed and violence and malevolent weather.

You can see in Trueman's paintings



our changing landscapes, seascapes, and urban-scapes—and much else.

"When I look at Chris's work, there's a kind of joyfulness, there's a kind of extemporaneous-ness, there's a kind of motion that happens in his work that makes me feel a kind of freedom, a kind of boundlessness with how I experience the world around me," says Edward Cella, who shows Trueman's art at his eponymous gallery in Los Angeles.

Jim Lampley, the sportscaster known for his work on HBO's boxing broadcasts, sees other messages in Trueman's art. Lampley has five Trueman canvases

in his home in Del Mar, near San Diego.

The first piece that caught his eye "has a white background," Lampley says. "Diagonal lines are gray, and within the gray is a kind of turbulent assortment of colors—black, orange, and red. When I look at it, it talks to me about war. It looks like a bomb has gone off or there has been some other explosive event. It stirs both fear and realism in me."

"In every painting there is both a marriage and a collision of order and chaos," Lampley says.

A Trueman painting often combines ordered, straight-line, or curved grids

with areas of seemingly splashed-on color put together in the way a DJ might combine different sounds in a mixtape.

Trueman never worked as a DJ, but he often listens to DJ-based mixes while working. "There's a consistency to the beat. It's sort of regular," he says. "If music changes too rapidly, it really throws me off in my work."

Trueman compares his work to a mixtape in the way he may combine in a single work hard-edge and Op Art-style moiré patterns with the emotional, gestural, dramatic strokes of abstract expressionism.

His Op Art elements create a strong





sense of three-dimensionality. Elsewhere, swirling washes of translucent color suggest a kind of otherworldly, smoky, even celestial space—but sometimes with a degree of menace.

"At first I was looking at the work as [my being] more of a DJ," Trueman says, "taking elements from hard-edge painting and combining it with abstract expressionism, sort of a counterpoint idea. I was taking the emotive qualities of abstract expressionism and mixing it with the blue collar, anti-ego [attitude] of hard-edge."

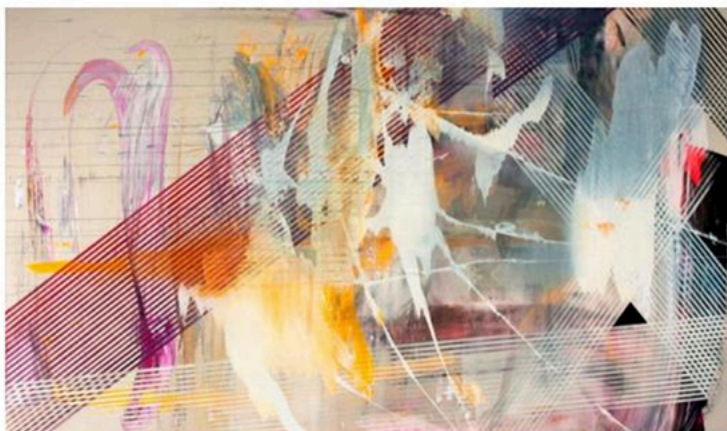
"Everything kind of gets mixed up. It's like in cooking—fusion cooking,

from the sky. It's deeply saturated, it vibrates. It's the color of cinema, the color of illumination."

Many of Trueman's paintings, with their color gradients morphing from blue to purple, can suggest psychedelic poster art of the 1960s. Other effects could include woven patterns, iridescence, and shiny silver.

These are seriously sensuous paintings. Are they too pretty to be taken seriously?

"Early on," Trueman says, "with young painters, there is often a tendency to make things that are unattractive, all black and white, or brown,



**OLD MEDIA, NEW IDEAS.** As an abstract painter, Chris Trueman (in his studio - top left) continues a tradition whose Western fine art beginnings reach back to the start of the 20th century. Left: Trueman has provided a number of new originals, including this striking one outside the elevators, for the 181 Fremont skyscraper, San Francisco.

like Korean tacos."

"It's like taking a piece of A and a piece of B," he adds, "putting it together and getting something different."

"[Trueman's] color is so important and distinctive," Cella says. "He works in both a kind of silver, gray, black monochrome. But he can switch into a very saturated, almost-illuminated panel of color that comes from light, that comes from electrical light, that comes

as a way to say, 'This is not decorative.' Mine, there is so much activity, there's so much happening, I'm not concerned with something coming off as pretty, or even garish."

Speaking of the range of people who collect his art, he says, "[The work is] aesthetically pleasing, a good chunk of it. So I end up getting a real variety of people. Some people buy because it matches the color of a couch."



A recent Trueman exhibit, at the San Francisco gallery Themes + Projects, had his paintings priced from \$30,000 (large originals) to \$1,500 (small). Limited-edition prints were \$400.

Trueman clearly enjoys making these paintings, often using squeegees to apply acrylic to an unusual material for painters—a relatively new trademarked plastic film called Yupo that repels rather than absorbs paint.

“Modernism is all about innovation, about pushing the material,” Cella says. “Chris is innovative in that way, the way mid-century architects were innovative, with new materials.”

“He’s had to invent his own choreography, his own set of gestures, to apply the paint,” Cella says, noting that in painting on Yupo, Trueman can both put paint on and wipe it away.

“In a way it is translucent,” Cella says of Trueman’s painted surfaces. “The works almost seem like they are constructed digitally, or like there is a light source emanating from it.”

“I like to have a big bag of tricks or materials to use,” Trueman says.

These include spray painting and silkscreening, and also ‘interference’ paint, which can create a different set of colors and shapes depending on the angle from which a painting is viewed.

With interference paint, he says, “A photo can only show one aspect of the painting.”

Andi Campognone, who has known Trueman for a decade and is curator of the Museum of Art and History in Lancaster, says his work is all about today—especially today in Southern California.

“One thing that makes a really great painting is the artist’s ability to tell their stories about the time they are living,” she says. “He makes paintings that reflect his current landscape,

not just the landscape of the place but the landscape of painting, the landscape of politics, the landscape of being a family man.”

Trueman lives in Claremont, a

lovely art-soaked town filled with colleges an hour east of Los Angeles, with his wife, a hospice social worker, and three young children. He teaches art at Chaffey Community College in



URBAN ELEGANCE. Top: In the art collection at the entrance to the Los Angeles luxury hi-rise condo Ten50 hangs this large canvas by Trueman, part of the decor’s mix of moody and industrial glamour.



Rancho Cucamonga.

Trueman often emphasizes to his students that art is about more than working in your studio. It pays to know other artists, dealers, and curators.

tions. He is part of the creative spirit."

Trueman's art delves into the murky world where reality and virtual reality mix. Although his paintings may suggest abstract expressionism in part,

other showed the identical paintings as digital reproductions. "They were as close as possible to the originals," Trueman says. Wall panels made clear which were original paintings and

influencing their value," he says.

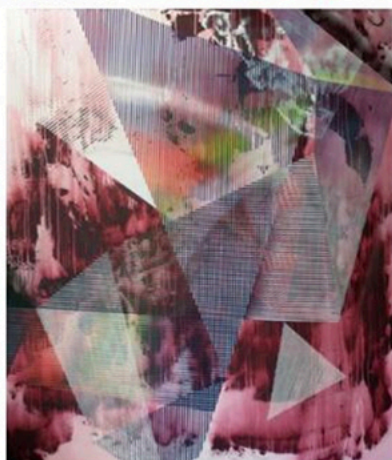
"I had to think, how do I price these? Because as sort of a performative piece, they were almost original, in that sense."

"I think painting is largely a perceptual practice at this point," Trueman adds.

Trueman, who was born in 1978, grew up in Chico and gravitated towards San Francisco as the closest major art center. He studied first at the Art Institute there, then at the Claremont Graduate School, where he got his MFA in 2010.

Things have been going right for Trueman. Not only does he show in galleries in Northern and Southern California, Australia, Tulsa, and Houston, he's gotten some large commissions, including at the office tower Ten50 Grand in Los Angeles.

His biggest commission is new—at the new 181 Fremont Street tower in San Francisco. One of the building's



**MIXTAPE ON CANVAS.** Top: Trueman in his studio, applying the spray-and-peel method that often unveils ordered, straight-line, or curved grids with areas of seemingly splashed-on color, like his work above.

"You spend half your time in the studio and half your time in the art world," he tells students. "That's where you find shows and collectors. If you don't go to people's shows, who's going to come to your show?"

Much of his art mingling also takes place online, mostly through sharing images and comments on Instagram, which enables him to become part of an active art community that is worldwide. "You can quickly scan 30 or 40 things," Trueman says. "You can keep an eye on what people are doing."

It also helps that Los Angeles has become "an epicenter" for new artists, says Campognone. "It's a place artists are coming to from around the world—with new approaches to artmaking here—and they're looking at innova-

Trueman avoids textural paint handling. From a bit of distance the images could be, well, computer generated.

"You're stewing on these ideas," he says. "How images are dispersed and communicated, how much life people see on their phones, where art is devoid of tangibility. Seeing an art show on Instagram—it's a whole different ballgame when you see it in person."

He played with this idea two years ago in a sort of 'is it live or is it Memorex' two-continent-paired exhibit—one in Brisbane, Australia, the other in Los Angeles. (Remember the ad campaign from the early 1970s? Were you hearing Ella Fitzgerald sing—or a recording of Ella on Memorex tape?)

One of the exhibits featured paintings done by the artist's hand. The

which were reproductions.

"I was thinking so much about how people look at the world through their devices and social media," he says. "I wanted to see if it would cause a pause in the way people perceive the work."

Was there a difference between original and copy? Yes. "The sheen on the [digital] surface was too uniform," he says.

The artist and gallery priced the digital versions 30 percent less than the 'originals.' But why was that, Trueman asks. "Is it just the romantic attachment that we have to the painting, that the artist touched it? What is the intrinsic value of an original? Does it matter if it is an original?"

"Even by pricing them, we were

tenants is Instagram. Trueman's mural will be alongside the elevated Salesforce Park, an oasis of greenery atop the City's Transbay Transit Center.

"I'm supporting a family from my art shows," he says.

Trueman is producing art for a 2019 show at Edward Cella Art & Architecture. He'll travel to Australia for a solo showing there. He's also hoping to get a solo exhibit in New York, to show more in Europe, and to be featured in museums.

He's optimistic, saying, "I'm on a sturdy trajectory." ■

• For more of Chris Trueman's work, visit [ChrisTrueman.com](http://ChrisTrueman.com)

Additional photography: Laure Joliet; and courtesy DES Architects + Engineers