

SCOTT SAWTELL

Right Before Your Eyes

SCOTT SAWTELL: *Right Before Your Eyes*
Tuesday September 7 – Saturday October 23 2021
Latcham Art Centre

“The creation of a single world comes from a huge number of fragments and chaos.”
- Hayao Miyazaki

Regional artist Scott Sawtell is celebrated for his imaginative abstract oil paintings. In his explorative approach, he is inspired by comics, animation as well as experiences from everyday life. In this recent selection of his work, there is purposeful tension between realistic and familiar imagery with palpable abstract and gestural mark making.

Right Before Your Eyes represents a recent body of work that characterizes endless transformations in the balance between realism and abstraction. Sawtell’s energetic paintings confront traditional notions of abstractionism with the inclusion of recognizable shapes and forms that suggest a combination of dream-like realities. By combining various colours, forms and patterns with recognizable elements of nature and humanity, Sawtell presents new fragmented realities that seem to be constantly emerging and rapidly changing from one state to another. In doing so, his artwork continually shifts and unfolds in front of the viewer, encouraging deeper engagement.

Latcham Art Centre is pleased to be reopening the Gallery to the public with *Right Before Your Eyes*. In August, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Scott Sawtell on a selection of his artworks featured in the exhibition. In addition, the following conversation highlights his art practice, creative influences, career and artistic development over the pandemic.

Carolyn Hickey, Curator

Carolyn Hickey, *Curator*
Scott Sawtell, *Artist*



An offering for Miyazaki's wonderful crumbling machines. (We stand), Oil on canvas, 72 x 48 inches, 2020.

CH: What influences or cultural references were you drawing from while completing this body of work?

SS: This series of work is not meant to have one cultural reference. It has really stemmed from things that I absorb in everyday life. I'm careful to not have a set of cultural references but rather a variety of tropes from several different cultures. I take from Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory of looking at different myths and stories that transcend all cultures. I try to be open to everything that I am experiencing and taking in on a daily basis. This last year, especially since I have children, a lot of cartoons, anime and superheroes have entered into the work because those are things that I have been absorbing. I can't pin point any one culture as its more a collection of cultures that I am experiencing daily.

When the pandemic happened, I started to really experience a lot of television programs with my children. There is a lot of American pop culture influences like Marvel as well as Ghibli Japanese animation movies. In fact, there are four or five paintings in the exhibition that are influenced by those movies specifically. One of the pieces, *An offering for Miyazaki's wonderful crumbling machines (We stand)*, is named after the Japanese animation director and producer Hayao Miyazaki and I have been influenced by the visual denseness and the magic that happens in those films. In my work, I can see those cultural influences in a much more abstract way.



Whirrr, Clunk, Whirrr, Clunk (Over the hill and through the waves), Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches, 2019.

CH: Your work suggests a feeling of momentum, change and constant fluctuation. Almost as if the viewer is only getting a glimpse of what is transpiring in the world you have created. I feel this especially when viewing works like *Whirrr, Clunk, Whirrr, Clunk (Over the hill and through the waves)* and *The Water Cycle (The Urn on the Fireplace)*.

SS: Part of that feeling comes from the process of making the paintings because I don't come up with one initial image to work off of. All of my work starts out as abstract shapes and then they slowly turn into something else. Often, I'm reacting to something that I'm seeing or something that is happening in the paintings. If you could x-ray *Whirrr, Clunk, Whirrr, Clunk (Over the hill and through the waves)*, there's probably twenty or thirty layers of painting under there. At one point it was a portrait that then became more abstract overtime. My paintings change so much overtime as I'm not working with them continuously and sometimes I take a few years because I am constantly revisiting them at different periods. This is purposeful because I want them to have a sense of history and philosophically I am interested in the fact that it becomes almost a diary of all these different experiences in one image. I let the painting continually change from what I am seeing every day.

Looking at *The Water Cycle (The Urn on the Fireplace)*, although the final date on this painting is 2021, I believe I started it in 2016. This painting has gone through many changes but in the end these shapes started to appear like rain drops. I felt a sense of growing, moving up and coming back down and that became the theme of the painting, a sort of natural water cycle. I was reacting to the environment changing, natural movement and crystallization.



Detail: The Water Cycle (The Urn on the Fireplace), Oil on canvas, 34 x 70 inches, 2021.

CH: I am fascinated by the fact that each individual work changes so much in the process of their creation and how that is very much reflected in the sense of change and fluctuation in the work. Can you speak to your process of reusing or refurbishing old paintings?

SS: Most of my old work doesn't exist anymore as most of it has been reused and refurbished. My old work was much more didactic, political in its meaning or straight forward. Most of the time the intent behind it was a lot more obvious. At the time, I felt trapped in that feeling and I wanted to make paintings that had more possibilities in them in terms of how they are read by an audience. So, I began to paint over my old work. I became more attracted to an art making philosophy about making the work as expressive as possible and revealing opportunities for different readings of the paintings.



Nomad Clouds Middle Names (Side Back Covers), Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches, 2021.

CH: Looking through your portfolio, your practice has clearly developed throughout your career, what have you always found is an integral element to your art making practice?

SS: One thing that is fairly consistent in all of my work is creating a sense of tension and balancing dualities. I made a series of paintings in the past that were based on the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa and I was interested in the duality of the myth of war and the real history of war. Like I mentioned before, the meaning of the image was much more didactic and now it is more of an open poetic meaning. Other than the incorporation of abstraction into realism, I've always tried to put different elements together and I think I may be a maximalist in the way that I paint. I'm interested in the idea of mash-up culture, or taking all these different images and combining them until they feel cohesive.

CH: In some of the work, there are elements of nature as well as human like features enveloped in each other, such as the rock formations, flowers, foliage, eyes, and teeth. Looking at *Nomad Clouds Middle Names (Side Back Covers)* can you speak to your choice to incorporate the recognizable elements alongside the rotating abstractions?

SS: In this particular painting, I am trying to create triggers for experiences for people. I'm looking for a sense of climbing out of something and I want the viewer to experience the work not in terms of the

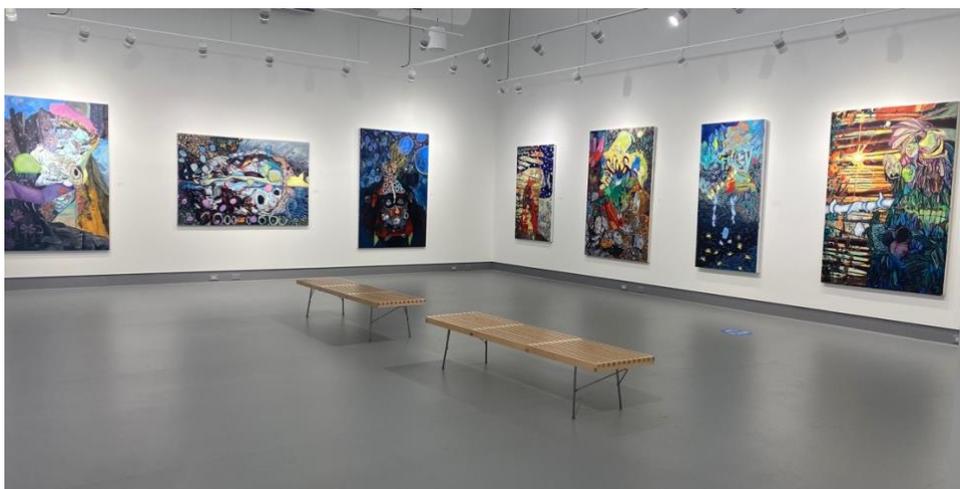
content but instead in terms of the emotional resonance. I want the viewer to look at it and start asking questions. When I was in art school, I was more attracted to purely abstract artwork because it didn't have references that were so easily identifiable and it wasn't a goal to figure out what exactly the painting meant. So it's easier to think of my work as poetry instead of prose and the attempt to be evocative but not necessarily lead into a final meaning. For me when I look at *Nomad Clouds Middle Names (Side Back Covers)*, the theme is more a face that is falling and climbing, a simultaneous feeling of trying to escape and come out of something.

CH: How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your most recent artwork and your thoughts on making art?

SS: I think the hardest question to ask yourself is 'what is the value of my work?' or 'why does my art have to exist in the world?'. During the pandemic I had more time for self-reflection and really amplified my art practice. To me, my work has always been about the tension of realism and uncertainty in the future. The pandemic made that feeling more obvious. I think I began being more influenced by elements of my own paintings and looked for stimulus within them. Again, I think being exposed to the programs my children were watching, the work became denser and more narrative driven. Although, it's not the most obvious storytelling, there is still more of a storytelling element.

CH: As an art educator, what is a piece of advice you always find yourself repeating to your students that stems from your own artistic experience?

SS: There is a general teaching philosophy that aligns with my art making practice. I believe that making art is as much about discovering who you are as a person as it is just simply making art. When I teach painting, there is a technical approach of course, but the process of making art is very personal. It takes a lot of self-reflection and trial and error to find out what you want to communicate as an artist. I believe that is one of the best things about teaching art is that you have to learn to adapt.



Installation view. *Scott Sawtell: Right Before Your Eyes*. Latcham Art Centre, September 2021.

Scott Sawtell is a Canadian artist, instructor, and curator based in Newmarket, Ontario. He received an MFA from the University of Waterloo (2002) and a BFA from OCAD University (2000). Since 2000, his work has been exhibited in both public and private galleries across Canada and the United States including: Orillia Museum of Art and History, B Contemporary, and the Aurora Cultural Centre. Scott has continued his artistic career through teaching visual art at Georgian College in Barrie, Ontario, and Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario and at the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto, Ontario. Scott has previously curated exhibitions for The Town of Newmarket, the City of Kitchener, Oakville Galleries and Humber College. This is Scott's first solo exhibition at Latcham Art Centre.

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