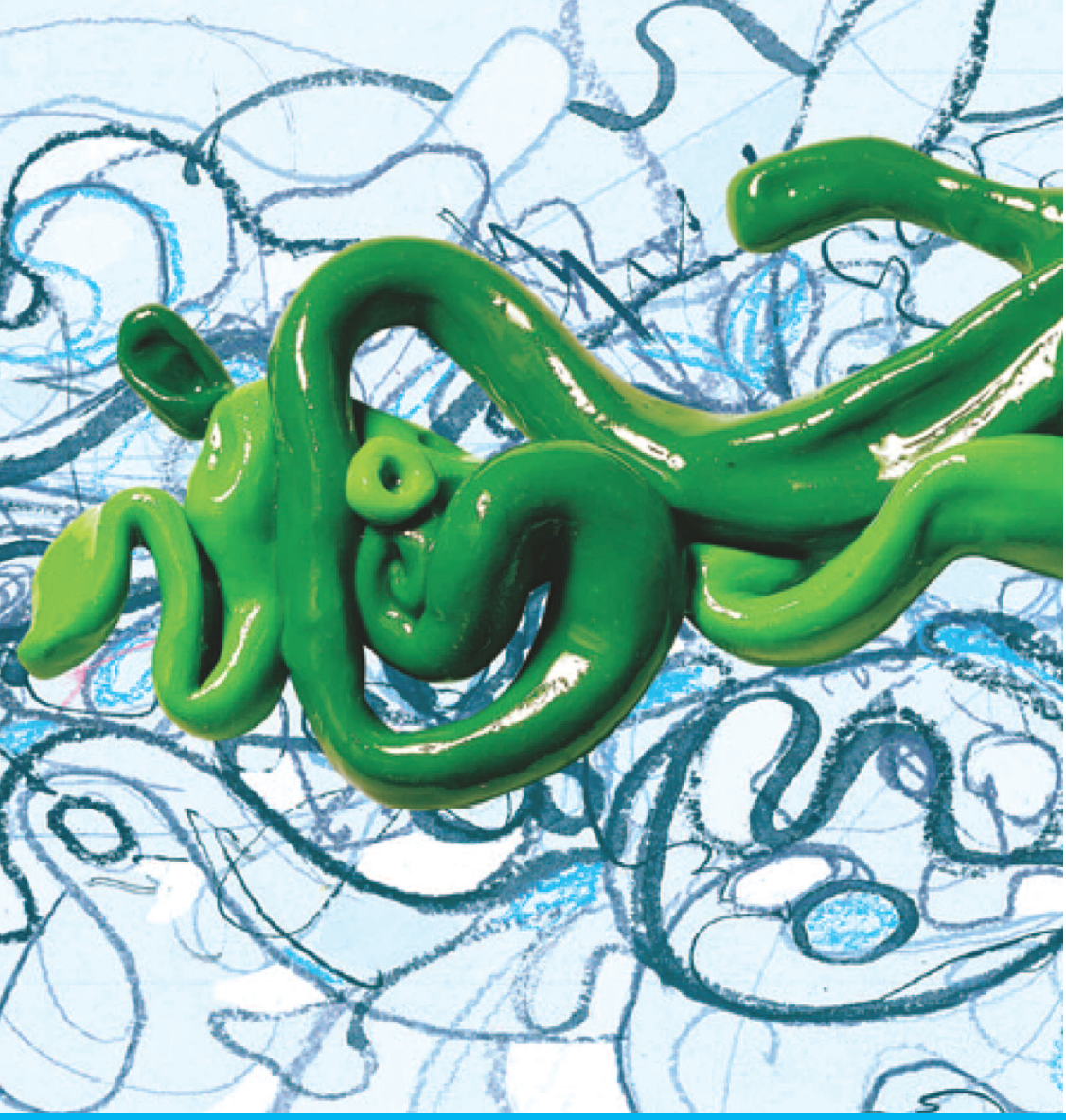
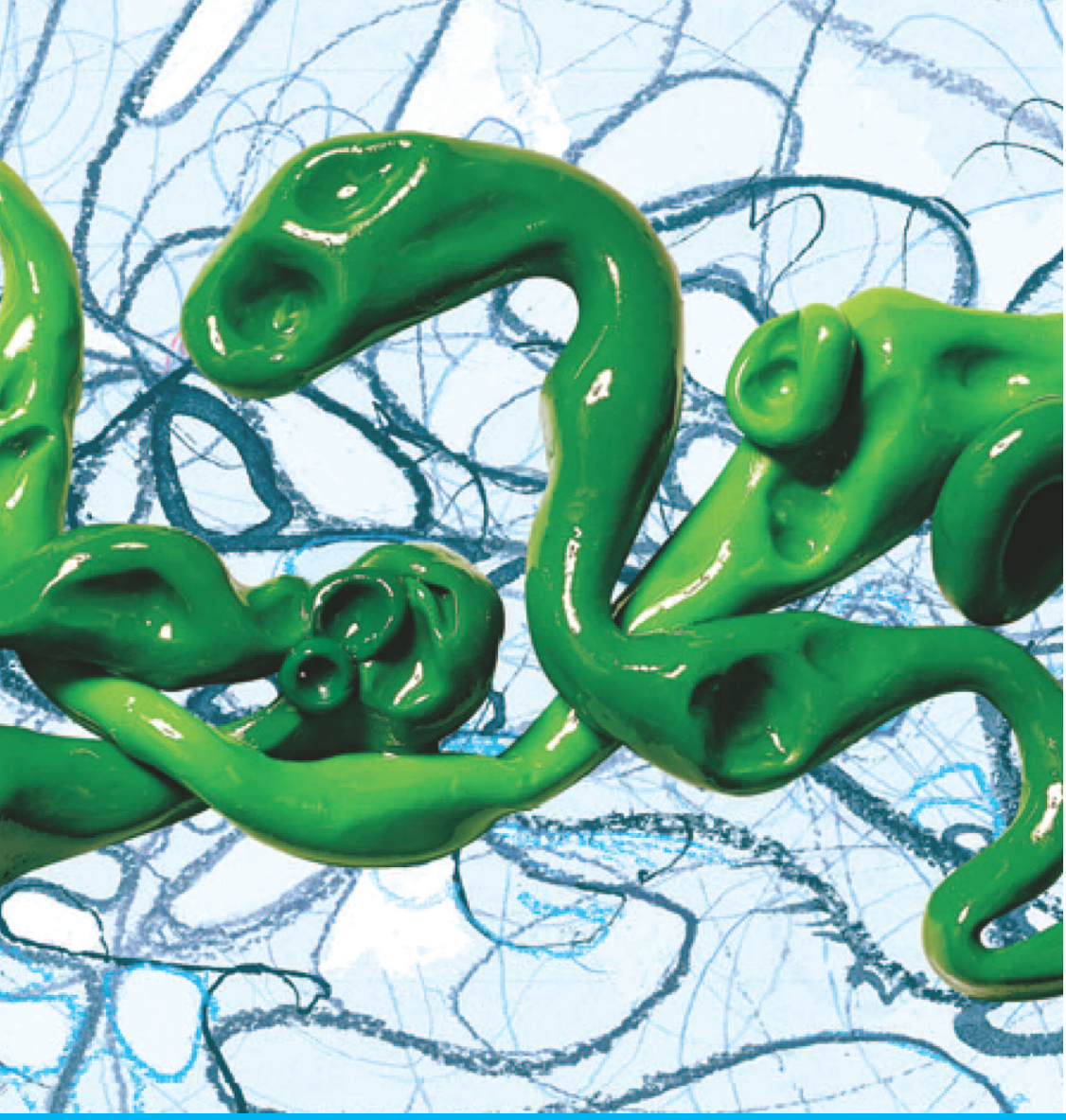


March 2007 – Spring 2008

Untitled, 2007, inkjet on paper, 17′ x 67′. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery

This exhibition is generously supported by a grant from the Artist's Resource Trust, the Don & Mary Melville Contemporary Art Fund, and Marlene & David Persky. Other generous support provided by Worcester Magazine.



Wall at WAM

Alexander Ross

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

Alexander Ross

Installation view of Renaissance Court. Photography: Stephen Briggs

Wall at WAM: Alexander Ross

On view through Spring 2008

When I extended an invitation in the summer of 2005 to Alexander Ross to create a mural for the Museum's *Wall at WAM* series, it was in large part because of my interest in his paintings' uniquely hybrid nature. In his laborious studio practice, painting is a process mediated conceptually and formally by sculpture and photography. Ross begins by sculpting detailed biomorphic forms in jade-colored polymer clay. These tabletop-size maquettes are then digitally photographed. It is only at this advanced stage that Ross begins to paint, *not* from the model as in conventional still life but from the photograph of it, which he has edited and cropped on the computer. Rendered in oil paint (with tactile, "stroke-by-stroke" brushwork that brings to mind Giorgio Morandi and Chuck Close[1]) yet born of digitally interpreted data, Ross' painting practice expands the possibilities of this very traditional medium while it also serves as a mirror of our complexly layered culture at the beginning of the 21st century.

Considering the hybrid aesthetic precedent of Ross' work within the context of the mural's unique setting—a second-story, 17 x 67 feet expanse situated in a faux Renaissance-style court and overlooking a Roman floor mosaic—I imagined that he might need (and want) to modify his studio practice somehow (in other words, I wondered if he might not make a painting). The commission was intended as both an opportunity and challenge for this gifted artist at this important time in his career. Not surprisingly, Ross appeared undaunted by the undertaking at the time of his first site-visit, but how the *Wall at WAM* commission would translate into a changed process for Ross and a new image (his most monumental to date) for the Museum would need to evolve over the course of a year.

Increasingly, since his first one-person exhibit in New York in 1998, Ross is recognized as one of the more innovative painters of his generation who is exploring the possibilities of a synthesis of abstraction and representation (alongside Franz Ackermann, Laura Owens, and Matthew Ritchie among others[2]). Whether painting on canvas or drawing on paper, Ross favors a palette of greens (jade, eucalyptus, algae) amidst blues and white, allying his subjects to the natural word. Crafted with exacting detail yet purposefully unidentifiable, Ross' enigmatic imagery morphs between the organic (cells, plants, roots, tendrils) and the artificial (pixels, topographic maps), the tangible and the imaginary, all the while refusing to settle neatly into any category.[3] He cites current trends in biotechnology, materials science, artificial life, and microbiology as some of the influences behind his images.[4] Patterns and shapes are derived from myriad sources including scientific illustration and photography as well as direct observation through a microscope.[5] Mysterious yet specific, Ross' forms assume the roles of surrogate figures multiplying in space, bringing us to the threshold of narrativity where pictorial experience flourishes as unknowable (thus his consistent preference for "*Untitled*").[6]

The Museum's *Wall at WAM* , a unique series of temporary wall projects now in its 7th incarnation, is sited in the most public of the Museum's spaces—the Renaissance Court—and is meant to be encountered from a variety of vantage points, equally accessible to viewers in transit and those lingering to experience it at the balcony level or from the ground floor.[7] Ross responded to the second-story setting and grand scale of the site with an ingenious adaptation of his signature imagery and technique. The dramatic result is a new kind of hybrid, incorporating sculpture (generating the image as object), drawing (an intuitive response to the object), photography (translating the sculpture and drawing into digital data), and inkjet (resulting in billboard scale)—all utilized in the service of the monumental *Untitled*.

The image started in typical fashion as a 14.5-inch model sculpted in oiled clay, [8] but what followed was an ink and crayon drawing made directly in response to the sculpted form. Using digital photographs of each, Ross superimposed the images on the computer to arrive at the final composition. He collaborated with commercial printers using inkjet technology to print the mural to scale (in 17 vertical panels), which was installed wallpaper style on site.

Studio table, 2006. Courtesy Alexander Ross.

Clay model and drawing in studio, 2006. Courtesy Alexander Ross.

Installation in progress. Photography: Stephen Briggs

Reflecting on the evolution of his *Wall at WAM* image, Ross explained that he incorporated drawing as a way to "reference my hand" in lieu of the tactile brushwork that characterizes his paintings. He said he purposely chose a heavily textured paper and created occasional scumbled effects to counter the smooth, unmodulated finish of the digital translation (which has something of the cool detachment akin to much surrealist and photorealist painting).

In the mural, as in his paintings, the figure/ground relation is critical to the overall image. The second-story setting of the wall lent itself to a variant of Ross' frequent incorporation of "sky" as a "natural and yet empty" stage for his alien forms.[9] Here, the field of drawing functions similarly to the networks of pixilated units or topographical banding in the backgrounds of many of his paintings, that is, reinforcing (by contrast) the hyper-real aspect of the figurative elements. "I always think of the background as a rhythmical and material counterpoint to the green elements, playing alternately with and against the more slick foreground imagery in order to find a balance. In response to working on this scale and not painting, the volume has been 'turned up' between background and foreground in the *Wall*. And because there is less translation of the photo-elements in the mural than in my paintings—here they are treated almost verbatim—the effect is a step towards the real." Ross conceived of the green imagery as both hovering in front of the drawing and looming from above with the effect of dwarfing viewers looking up at the apparent underbellies of the forms in the mural from the lower level of the Court.[10]

As Robert Storr has pointed out, "the transposition of three-dimensional details into two-dimensional formats initiates the disorientation of scale on which Ross's pictorial realm is premised."[11] Equally critical here is the scale shift from model to mural, which translates in terms of imagery as perceptual fluctuations from microscopic to colossal—an ever-changing drama that has parallels throughout the natural world. This effect reinforces a fascinating ambiguity in the mural's subject—are these monstrous creatures from another world or magnified life forms normally invisible to us? The monumental arabesque of Ross' original drawn marks, now graffiti-like, echo the curves and rhythms of the model; the once-intimate drawing translates into an indeterminate, blue universe animated by the entangled frieze of gargantuan, glistening, green mutants. Playfully

aberrant, Ross' imagery seduces us with equal doses of fantasy and fear, amazement and apprehensiveness. With the stirring convergence of the "Hunt" mosaic and Ross's mural, the Renaissance Court has become a 15-century timeline, powerfully conveying humans' relations to our worlds, then and now.

Susan L. Stoops
Curator of Contemporary Art

Notes

Unless otherwise noted, information from the artist is drawn from conversations with the author, December 2006 – June 2007.

1. Jerry Saltz, "Sleepers Awake," *Village Voice,* 6-12 November 2002, 57. Of course, Saltz's apt description of Ross' brushwork as "Morandi meets Chuck Close," begs additional relevance of these two painters as precedents for Ross. In the case of Morandi's still-life paintings, there is a complete transformation of solid objects into the realm of paint—Ross describes Morandi's bottles as "soft-edged" and "a little droopy, like they were really made of soft clay to begin with." In the fusion of abstraction and representation that takes place in Close's portraits, painting is mediated by photography and results in a tension between the mosaic-like expanse of hundreds of miniature abstract compositions and the finely rendered likeness.
2. From the previous generation, Carroll Dunham's "abstract figuration with its cartoonish exaggerations" is cited by Ross as an important precedent for his own "abstract elements with personality or character."
3. Frances Richard, *Artforum,* March 2001, 144-5.
4. Unpublished artist statement provided by Feature Inc.
5. In an exhibition catalogue, a photograph of Ross' studio table from around 2000 shows a copy of the seminal publication, *On Growth and Form* (1917) by Sir D'Arcy Thompson. See *Alexander Ross* (New York: Feature Inc., 2000), title page.
6. Ross feels an affinity for the canvases of Max Ernst, which he describes in terms of "a forest wall filled with what I call plantimals."
7. Previous *Wall at WAM* commissions included murals by Arturo Herrara, Sophie Tottie, Annette Lemieux, Denise Marika, Julian Opie, and Jim Hodges.
8. Ross mixes standard colors of "Sculpey" for a customized palette. Right before photographing the clay model, he covers it with almond oil to achieve a luminous surface.
9. Ross in "Q&Q 1.28.00," in *Alexander Ross* (New York: Feature Inc., 2000), 7.
10. With this strategic perceptual relation of wall (image) to the floor (vantage point), Ross indirectly points to the marriage of image and floor in the ancient *Hunt* mosaic.
11. Robert Storr, "The Art of Alexander Ross: Warts and All," *Artforum,* September 2003, 186.

About the Artist

Born in 1960 in Denver, Colorado, Alexander Ross studied at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston and now divides his time between New York City and the Berkshires. He has exhibited regularly throughout the United States and in Europe, Canada, and Mexico since 1998. Important recent group exhibitions include *Remote Viewing,* Whitney Museum of American Art (2005); *Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque,* SITE Santa Fe (2004); and *Greater New York,* PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City (2000). The artist is represented in New York by Marianne Boesky Gallery.

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