

Tanya Leighton

Press Release

John Riepenhoff
'A MORE DISTANT PRESENT'

19 February – 8 March 2025

Saturday 15 February, 3 pm: an artist talk with Gabriel Ritter, Director of the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara
4654 W Washington Blvd, Los Angeles

Tanya Leighton spoke with John Riepenhoff regarding his exhibition 'A More Distant Present'. In their conversation, they discussed the origins and evolution of his *Night Sky* paintings, the balance between abstraction and realism, and the role of perception in his work.

Tanya Leighton: John, you are widely recognized for fostering meaningful connections between artists and communities through a diverse range of collaborative projects. From organizing exhibitions, screenings, and performances at Green Gallery in your hometown of Milwaukee to engaging with food production and even brewing your own beer, your work transcends traditional boundaries. Equally acclaimed are your *Night Sky* paintings, which seamlessly merge the poetic and the tangible, delving into themes of perception, experience, and our relationship to the natural world. In your exhibition with us in Los Angeles, you are presenting several new *Night Sky* paintings alongside an owl sculpture. Can you share what initially inspired you to begin painting the night sky and how this theme has evolved within your practice?

John Riepenhoff: This series began as an attempt to distill ego out of authorship. For the first twelve years that I painted the sky I would do so in the dark of the night, favoring conditions that allowed me to see subtleties of the stars over the colors of my canvas. I would paint through the night and when morning came, the painting was complete, and I would see it in the light of day for the first time. As a gallerist I'm skeptical of my own aesthetic predisposition, often searching to learn from beyond my understanding. Painting in the dark was a way for me to actually discover something new, a new way of seeing, and a new aesthetic without defaulting to the familiar or being overly concerned about the author. The early seasons of this series were all painted in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in Northern Wisconsin which offered stellar access to the night sky.

TL: How do you balance abstraction and realism in your representations of the night sky?

JR: These are actual attempts at describing skies as I perceive them, connecting what can be seen with what can be imagined. Looking at the sky is an invitation to search. What are you looking at? How far are you seeing? The paintings can be read through the vocabulary of abstraction, or as describing a plurality of realisms. I think abstraction is emergent and these paintings are an extension of natural phenomena as experienced from the skies.

Perhaps the only realism we can have is the present, the moment it slips into the past it becomes abstract. Painting is the present suspended.

TL: Are there specific memories or places tied to the skies you depict in these works?

JR: Yes. These paintings were made over the course of many sessions, many days or nights, and typically are associated with a season, natural and social settings they were produced under. All my painting activity from the last four years has taken place in Milwaukee. Before that I would paint skies on beaches, rooftops, and backyards under stars all over the world.

TL: Can you walk us through your process of creating a night sky painting?

JR: They start with observation: seeing colors, light-play in atmosphere, stars or light pollution. Each painting is a beginning of something for me, potential for discovery.

They include both outward input composing an idea or approach to the painting and then, being present with the pigments and mediums, allow for improvisation. The series started out much more intuitive and almost performative because each painting was tied to a single night of painting en plain air, but now the process looks a

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bit more familiar to studio painters' relationship to making. These latest works can be looked at as an internalization coming out of their origin series' outward searching and circulation in the world. Multiple passes on the paintings accumulate over time to frame and reform the layers below.

TL: How do you capture the feeling of vastness and intimacy simultaneously in these works?

JR: Vastness is an emotion. Sometimes I look at them and struggle to focus on anything. Other times they are vast containers describing systems and recursive continuums. I don't really know. I am still searching.

TL: What role does colour and texture play in conveying the emotional weight of your night sky paintings?

JR: Different styles within each painting and the range throughout the exhibition allow multiple inputs to bounce between formal, natural, and social reads, as well as invite us to see the paintings as both analytical and emotive objects. I'm interested in rewarding a range of readings at different scales, lightings, emotional states, and how they age as objects. Style, material, and a humility to what they can be play a role in that.

TL: What emotions or ideas do you hope viewers take away from these paintings?

JR: What do you see when you look at the sky? Can paintings be portable ineffable changing worlds?

TL: The night sky can evoke both a sense of wonder and existential contemplation. How do you see this duality reflected in your work?

JR: Painting the sky has become for me as much about where the mark isn't as where it is. The space around, under, before, and after become the breath of their being. Scale, flow, time and presence are the setting, ego and id the subject.

TL: How do you see your night sky paintings fitting within the broader context of your practice as an artist?

JR: This too is emergent. All of my projects are driven by interest and engagement. Often, it's only in hindsight do I see how they relate. In some ways one could argue the paintings are my least collaborative part of my output. But when in the studio I keep the company of many influences. Other artists, my galleryists, patrons, and friends in my mind are influencing my idea of what looks good, if I should keep going. I think the paintings are perhaps the most abstract form of collaboration, where the John Riepenhoff Experience, Handlers, cheesemaking or curating are more tangible forms of creating socially.

I find painting very closely related to cooking: we use limited ingredients and time to make something that we want to share with others, to give them something nutritious and pleasurable. Making a painting to me requires a level of accountability. How can I honor my guest's attention, set the paintings up to be good hosts on their own.

TL: Do you see your night sky paintings as part of a larger dialogue with other artists who have explored celestial themes, such as Van Gogh, Georgia O'Keefe, or Vija Celmins?

JR: Yes. The sky is perhaps the first highly imaginative screen that early humans projected our stories onto, and will likely continue as long as our gaze can reach the cosmos.

TL: Are there any personal philosophies or beliefs that inform your focus on the night sky?

JR: Looking into the depths of the farthest light that we can see with our naked eyes has held my interest longer than any other series. I use it to reflect on the depths of my own self. This is perhaps the unattainable action that is attempted to be captured through the act of painting in *A More Distant Present*.

TL: How has your relationship with the night sky evolved since starting this series?

JR: My optometrist says my vision has improved, possibly from spending so much time letting my eyes relax at distances.

TL: What has been the most challenging aspect of working on these pieces?

JR: Showing up and starting to paint. It's all fun from then on.

TL: Do you see the night sky paintings evolving in any way, or are there directions you'd like to explore within this theme?

JR: These days the paintings have become much more ambient, portraying systems with atmosphere and murkier light relations. The earliest sky paintings were describing light from much further away, old star clusters and a much more distant celestial curtain.

TL: In the exhibition, there is also a sculpture of an owl. As universally recognized symbols of wisdom, mystery, and nocturnal observation, owls act as intermediaries between human curiosity and the unknown. The owl's connection to the night feels particularly resonant with your *Night Sky* paintings, as both evoke a sense of wonder and contemplation of the vast unknown. How do you see the owl sculpture interacting with or complementing your *Night Sky* paintings in the exhibition?

JR: This northern saw-whet owl is invited into the gallery space as a companion for the viewer, to help calibrate how we look at the paintings. The owl is a reminder perhaps, that these are not abstractions, they are blankets of time, interwoven with all the majesty of nature, portals equal to it.

TL: Does the owl serve as a guide for viewers, inviting them to explore the same sense of curiosity and mystery that the night sky inspires?

JR: Absolutely. *The Decoy* changes our emotions and influences our reading of the work. The company that we have while viewing work informs what we see. The representation of an owl orients how we look at these paintings of skies. Imagining the super senses of our owl companion is a device to invite us to see these pictures more expansively, beyond our social standards. Welcoming the inability to perceive both the sky and the painting, not at the same time. The owl can both see and rarely be seen. The paintings become a midpoint between trying to perceive something you can't see and trying to imagine how an owl perceives. Looking at the owl, its eyes, we imagine increasing the clarity of the perceived world to stretch beyond our anthropomorphic ways.

TL: What's the next step for you—is there a new body of work in progress or connected ideas you'd like to pursue?

JR: More skies, making another functional sauna and a slew of art advocacy and gallery projects.

John Riepenhoff (born 1977, Milwaukee, Wisconsin) lives and works in Milwaukee. Riepenhoff's artistic production spans a collaborative, community based praxis to a studio practice focused on painting and ceramic sculpture.

Art, New York; Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin; Arlington Arts Center, Virginia; New Bedford Art Museum, Massachusetts; Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Wisconsin; Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago and Times Art Museum, Beijing.

Recent solo exhibitions include Broadway, New York in 2024; Various Small Fires, Dallas in 2023; Broadway Gallery, New York in 2022; Artbeat, Tbilisi, Georgia in 2021; Center for Contemporary Art and Culture, Portland and Night Gallery, Los Angeles in 2018; Green Tea Gallery, Fukushima, Japan in 2017; Marlborough Gallery, New York in 2016; Atlanta Contemporary Art Center and Misako & Rosen Gallery, Tokyo in 2015, among many others. His work has also been included in group exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American

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For more information and high-resolution images please contact info@tanyaleighton.com.
The gallery is open Tuesday–Saturday, 11am–5pm and by appointment.