

HESSE FLATOW

Cummings, C. (2026, June/July). "Strange Horizons: Jonathan Ryan's Textured Landscapes Arrive in Aspen." *Patron Magazine*, June/July Edition. Print.

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Clockwise from left: Jonathan Ryan. Courtesy of HESSE FLATOW. Photograph by Ruben Diaz. Jonathan Ryan (b. 1989), *Blue Ridge*, 2023, oil and sand on canvas, 62 x 80 in. Courtesy of the artist and HESSE FLATOW, New York. Photograph by Jenny Gorman; Jonathan Ryan (b. 1989), *Horizon*, 2025, oil, sand, and decomposed granite on canvas, 60 x 92 in. Courtesy of HESSE FLATOW. Photograph by Ruben Diaz.

STRANGE HORIZONS

JONATHAN RYAN'S TEXTURED LANDSCAPES ARRIVE IN ASPEN.

INTERVIEW BY CARROLL CUMMINGS

Longtime Dallas Art Fair director Kelly Cornell leads this year's Aspen Art Fair at the historic Hotel Jerome in July. Among the invited galleries, HESSE FLATOW returns to Aspen with textural landscapes by painter Jonathan Ryan. Houston-based art advisor and the gallery's former sales director Carroll Cummings visits with Ryan about his artistic practice:

Carroll Cummings (CC): *Jonathan, I've deeply admired your work since my time at HESSE FLATOW, and as someone from Texas, I've watched it find a strong audience among Texan collectors. What has the evolution of that relationship between your work and its audience felt like from your perspective?*

Jonathan Ryan (JR): I felt it begin when I started showing with HESSE FLATOW, partly because of the gallery's relationships with collectors and advisors there, but it also coincided with a meaningful shift in the imagery of my paintings.

My work is rooted in my experiences of the strange, vast desert landscapes of Southern California and the Southwest. I have a vivid memory of doing a motorcycle trip across Texas about twelve years ago, riding from east to west across the entire state. The scale of it stayed with me—how geographically and culturally diverse it is, and

especially the deserts in West Texas, where the roads feel infinite, and the sky seems almost impossibly large.

CC: *As you prepare to exhibit with HESSE FLATOW in Aspen once again, what feels distinct or new about the body of work you're bringing to this year's fair?*

JR: My practice has come a long way since I last showed in Aspen. At that time, I was just beginning to incorporate imagery and a deeper pictorial space into the paintings.

Now the work feels untethered in the best possible way. My command of color has also deepened over the years, through an involved process of weaving many transparent layers atop one another. The paintings depict strange landforms and unusual atmospheres, and they function as meditations on memory and experience: time spent in the world, and time spent with art and images.

CC: *You've mentioned being influenced by '80s video games like EarthBound, where highly artificial, monochromatic environments somehow still feel emotionally immersive. Did that early experience of navigating constructed digital worlds shape the way you think about atmosphere, color, or psychological space in your paintings?*

JR: I came to those old games at a moment when I had hit a brick

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wall with my work, shortly after finishing graduate school and moving to Los Angeles. Up until that point I had relied entirely on direct observation to generate ideas: plein air drawings, photographs, studies brought back to the studio. But the work had grown dull, and I needed to find another path.

I spent that summer making experimental work and looking for landscape imagery that existed outside of my usual framework. What struck me about those old games was the tension between limitation and invention. The creators had to be wildly imaginative within technological constraints, yet the worlds they built still had to have their own visual logic. Otherwise, you couldn't play the game. They also used color and inventive optical techniques to carry emotional weight and drive narrative, which I found compelling as a painter. And of course, these games were part of my childhood, worlds I had moved through as a kid.

CC: *The surfaces of your paintings have become increasingly physical and textured over time. What drew you toward incorporating materials like sand and decomposed granite?*

JR: That same summer was also when I started using sand and rocks in my paintings. I was mixing all sorts of materials into the paint—it was a frenetic time in the studio, and most of what I made was quickly thrown away. But there came a moment when, rather than folding some new material into the paint, I poured sand directly on top of a wet layer of oil paint. The effect stopped me. Because the sand was poured on top rather than mixed in, it kept its texture, but the oil paint and color still showed through. The materials were in conversation with each other, and I finally felt like I might be on to something.

I kept exploring sand after that, half expecting it to eventually feel limiting or exhausted as a material. The opposite happened. It became a crucial and expansive element of the work—the visual scaffolding of every painting. Initially it was a way to counteract a certain slickness that had crept in, since I was briefly working from digital references and making more visually constructed images. It literally added grittiness. But beyond that, it also has a symbolic resonance with the earthen imagery in the paintings, and it has completely transformed the way I apply paint.

CC: *Your paintings balance ruin and construction simultaneously — they can feel ancient and futuristic at once. Is time something you think about consciously in the work?*

JR: It's probably one of the longest-running themes in my work, going back to my undergraduate years. When I was in college in Louisiana, I would travel up and down the Mississippi River, painting active industrial sites along the banks. Throughout my life I've also been drawn to abandoned quarries in Pennsylvania, ancient ruins in Mexico and Europe, and so much in the Southwest: the Hoover Dam, Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, and an almost infinite variety of confounding geological formations.

These places share something, despite their differences. They are vast and complex, shaped by both nature and human hands, and they resist easy comprehension. Some are ancient. Some are entirely modern constructions, but at a certain scale, it becomes difficult not to see even these as ruins for the future.

My work has become increasingly removed from any of these specific references, especially now. But I've always been chasing the feeling they produce—that particular mix of curiosity, disorientation, and wonder. I want the paintings to hold your attention and make you ask, *what am I looking at?* They should feel ancient and futuristic, of this world and somehow beyond it, natural and manmade all in the same breath. **P**

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Monstrance (detail), Naples, 1746, gold, rubies, emeralds, and diamonds, Terra Sancta Museum, Jerusalem. Photo by Joseph Coscia Jr.