

Nicole Wittenberg

Why the Butterflies

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MASSIMODECARLO is pleased to present *Why the Butterflies*, Nicole Wittenberg's first exhibition in Asia. The new paintings of coastlines, flowers and gardens at dusk are each made in a single day and never reworked, painted in the narrow window before a feeling becomes tangible.

Prince recorded the album *Piano & A Microphone* when he was twenty-four years old. The album is a 34-minute recording of Prince in his home studio at his own piano with a microphone. You can hear him at the beginning of the recording calling out to the sound editor to balance the relationship of the voice and the piano. Within this 34-minute cut, we can hear some of Prince's most iconic songs move seamlessly from one to the next-- beginning with *17 Days* flowing right into *Purple Rain* and transitioning directly to *a Case of You*. When we think of Prince as a musician, we think of discrete movements, spanning decades, yet this album makes clear that Prince, through all of his different periods, was just one man, one artist and the vision he had for his work was continuous. This album was not released until 2018, two years after his death.

The final track is called *Why the Butterflies* and the entire album was continuously playing while Wittenberg painted the works for this show. The parallel is exact: each canvas made in a single take, never touched again.

This fits naturally into the practice Wittenberg has been developing from the start, built on the conviction that *immediate sensation* is painting's real subject. Working first in pastel *en plein air*, Wittenberg has developed a way of moving from the drawing to the painting without losing the momentum of the present. In this sense, the paintings are not observational, but rather the product of allowing an image, space, and encounter to endure. Wittenberg describes this as "the way things look when my eyes are closed".

The exhibition includes paintings of various scales. For the smaller works, the method is striking, painted with a broom, the same type she uses for much larger paintings, she compresses a wall-sized gesture into

something intimate, likening the experience to "dancing on a handkerchief."

Some of the works come from the coast of Maine, where the artist has returned to for years. This landscape has become a site of accumulated knowledge held in the body. *Dark Harbour 3* is a painting of a small island on a lake in Maine just after sunset, an image the artist has been engaged with for years. While the image *Night Bloom*, is from her friend's apartment in Paris, the original pastel was from memory, "I was painting what I remembered of the hot summer night, three tulips just about to lose their petals. I was trying to return to a fleeting moment." *Seat of Buddha 2* was made at dusk in the mountains of Thailand. This image was a response to the Buddhist proverb: the lotus rises from the mud to become a jewel.

What can a painting do in a particular moment in time? Wittenberg has said, "that chord between what's happening outside and what's happening inside you is never actually cut. In uncertain times I think painters instinctively go back to nature, back to the intimate. Not for escape but for proof." The natural world, here, is not a retreat from the turmoil of society but a way of steadying oneself within it — a place where feeling still has weight, temperature, consequence, where solid ground can still be found, and with it, affirmation.

Wittenberg has spent years moving through Southeast Asia, and *Why the Butterflies* is her first exhibition in the region. It is perhaps inevitable that this work, committed to the interior life of places, to what lingers in the body after the eye has moved on, is finding its moment in a city that holds multiple worlds at once. The question in the title was never meant to be answered. It was meant to be felt.

Nicole Wittenberg

Nicole Wittenberg (born 1979) is an American artist based in New York City. She is a curator, professor, writer, and painter.

Throughout her career, Nicole Wittenberg has developed an expressive body of work that includes paintings that span landscapes, portraiture, and erotica. Best known for her vibrant use of color and dynamism of mark making, Wittenberg creates seemingly spontaneous images from studies and drawings en plein air and synthesizes them together in her studio into much larger paintings on canvas.

Wittenberg was born in San Francisco, CA, and received her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2003. She received the American Academy of Arts and Letters coveted John Koch Award for Best Young Figurative Painter in 2012. From 2011–2014 she served as a teacher at the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, and the Bruce High Quality Foundation University, and in 2017 she was a professor in the Critical Theory Department at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

Wittenberg's works are included in prominent collections, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Albertina, Vienna; the Portland Museum of Art, Portland; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and the Aïshti Foundation, Beirut, the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, the Fansworth Museum, Rockland; and others.

The artist's first comprehensive monograph was published in 2025 by Monacelli Press, coinciding with her recent solo institutional exhibitions in Maine and France.