

# TWO COATS OF PAINT

## Nicole Wittenberg's big yellow painting

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The Yellow Kiss, Nicole Wittenberg (Installation view). All photos courtesy of the artist and yours, mine, & ours. Photo credit: Sean Fader.

Contributed by Kate Liebman / Nicole Wittenberg's second solo show, "The Yellow Kiss," is on view at the new LES gallery yours mine & ours through October 16. The exhibition features a single seven-foot painting that hangs on the gallery's main floor. In the basement, like an excavation site, Wittenberg presents all drawings and studies that went into the painting's making. I stopped by her Chinatown studio to discuss the show.

*Kate Liebman: How did you decide to do a single painting show? Or why?*

Nicole Wittenberg: It's a single painting show, but it is not just a single painting—there are also studies and other objects that inform how the image developed over time. So there is more of a comprehensive view. I think the process of arriving at the painting, at the big painting in this case, required many steps and transformations along the way. This show seemed like a really nice way to describe myself and my work to people who I hope would be interested, rather than just showing some discrete individual objects together, which of course is something I want to do. For me, especially at this moment when people are just starting to know my work, it's nice to be open about how the work evolves and it creates its own logic. It's a show about process, which is essentially a show for painters, for the people I adore.



(left) Nicole Wittenberg, "The Yellow Kiss," basement installation view. (right) Nicole Wittenberg, installation view, basement studies.

*KL: How do you find or choose your images?*

NW: I spend a lot of time looking at photographs and things online, facebook, instagram, and also out in the world taking pictures and make observational drawings. I do a lot of things from moving video on my computer and sometimes there are also models in the studio. I always start with an ink study, or many, of any particular image I'm interested in. And I have at least three or four variations. Usually I put those things in the closet, and they live in the closet anywhere between three months and three years before I reinvestigate them as paintings.

*KL: Is there any unifying feature or pattern among the images or is it a gut instinct?*

NW: I'm looking for anything that feels fresh, anything that engages with the feeling of being alive right now, so I could pick pretty much anything! But usually there is a feeling that comes off an image, if it's appealing I chase after it.

*KL: When do you go to the closet?*

NW: I go through the stack of drawings probably a couple times a month, and pick things out... It's like shopping.

*KL: The ink study is about value?*

NW: Yes, about value, about image. There's a way to pull out the relational things in the drawing, to change the drawing in a way where I think it might make more sense as a painting.

*KL: What would be an example of a "relational thing"?*

NW: Well, I have that kiss image — I've been working on it for a year and a half. And about nine months into the image, I realized there had to be a lot more space on the left side of the canvas. I took a big piece of paper and added it to the other piece of paper and pinned it on the wall. And realized 'oh wait, now I have the right format.

I realized that the gesture was a grabbing and a pulling towards gesture, and it came right out of the Giotto painting I was looking at...two heads becoming one. But now it was more active now, like a movie! The vacant space on the left side of the canvas feels substantial because it shows the person was there and then catches the very moment the two figures come together, so now the whole painting made sense. But I didn't know it until nine months in. And I'd already made a six by eight foot painting in the

other format, and three other four by three foot paintings, and fourteen ink studies in that other format! Sometimes the most obvious things are the hardest for me to see. It felt relentless. I kept coming back to it...and being like, what's wrong with it? I don't know. How could I be so stupid. All those things go through your head. But there it was, one day, staring me right in the face!

*KL: Can you talk a bit about your tools?*

NW: Having a studio in Chinatown that's half a block from the world's most fabulous 99 cent stores you've ever seen your life meant that I inevitably had to go in it. You can buy like a hundred sharpies for three dollars. When I started making some paintings here, I started scaling up. So I thought, oh, If I get a broom then I can make big gestures from afar. I don't know if other people were as mesmerized with those Matisse drawings with the charcoal on a really long stick? The broom handle extends a nice small gesture, so a move of the wrist could be about five feet long.

*KL: What are the challenges with scaling up? Are there some tried and true tricks?*

NW: Drawings, good drawings I guess. Once I have a drawing and I put the drawing on the canvas, the tricky part for me is finding the good rhythm in the paint, the way the brush touches the surface to make a rhythm throughout the painting. It's a question of finding the rhythm of the paint in the scale I am working with. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

*KL: What do you think is attractive to you about repeating images, using the same ones over and over?*

NW: The repetition gives me a sense of familiarity. It touches upon the question of engagement, which is a big question in painting. My engagement with the image over the course of repetition is heightened, my own imagination about it. I hope that communicates.

*KL: It's a place of freedom, too. You kind of know where you're going to start.*

NW: Yeah, totally.

*KL: Who are you looking at right now? Who are you stealing from?*

NW: Some photographers always stand out, and some filmmakers. I've been looking a lot at Giotto for gestures and Caravaggio for images. But there are photographers — Outerbridge up in Chelsea at Silverstein Gallery. I look a lot at films, just to see what movies touch upon the feeling right now. I love that Greek filmmaker, Yorgos Lanthimos, he did the Alps, Dogtooth, and most recently, The Hotel. I think the new moving image format of 16:9 is interesting, the panorama. It used to be square like a portal, like a TV 4:3. And now it's long like a landscape.

*KL: So what's next for you in the studio?*

*NW: Probably going to try to work on some of these landscapes I made over the summer by a pond. Im interested to see if I have the time and resources to make paintings from life, because I feel like paintings from life is an audacious move. It means you have to be in life in the places you want to paint. I've got to seek them out or create them in the studio.*

"Nicole Wittenberg: The Yellow Kiss," yours mine & ours, LES, New York, NY. Through October 16, 2016.