

Rising Artist Emily Weiner's Hypnotic Paintings Channel Cosmic Mysteries

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During the second year of her MFA at New York's School of Visual Arts (SVA), Emily Weiner received some humbling feedback: "You need to learn how to paint."

The critique came from Marilyn Minter, the acclaimed photorealistic painter, who was Weiner's instructor. "It broke my heart," Weiner recalled over an iced matcha at a café in New York's Chelsea gallery district late one June afternoon. At the time, she had been painting *alla prima*—completing works in one sitting by applying wet paint to wet paint—in the style of one of her artistic heroes, Belgian painter Luc Tuymans.

Minter pushed Weiner to refine her technique and abandon *alla prima* painting in favor of building layers steadily, over time—a process that had not been emphasized in her previous instruction. "When I was in school, it was very out of vogue to make a technical painting," Weiner noted of the early aughts, when interdisciplinary and neo-conceptual practices were in favor.

You'd never guess that history by looking at Weiner's work today: tightly controlled, crisp paintings on which the artist's near-invisible brushstrokes create hypnotic illusions of depth. On the evening of our interview, Weiner opened her first New York solo show, "Now Eve, We're Here, We've Won," at nearby gallery Miles McEnery. This milestone adds to a flurry of recent interest in her work: Last year alone, Weiner had solo exhibitions in Mexico City, Berlin, and Nashville, and her works featured in group presentations and art fair booths from Chicago to Seoul. Her debut in New York holds a special place for Weiner, though. This is where she was born, attended college, and worked until she moved to Nashville in 2018. Her homecoming is "a validation that I was on the right path the whole time," she said.



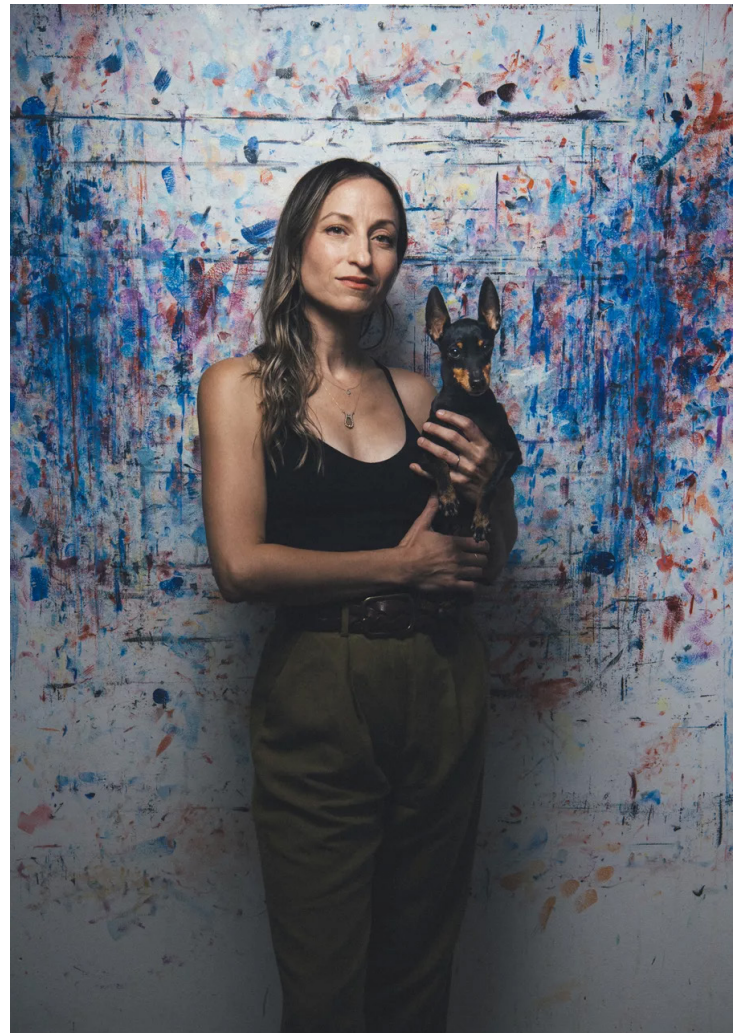
Marionettist, 2025, Oil on linen in painted wood frame,
61 1/2 x 46 1/2 x 2 inches.

That path hasn't always been smooth. As a teenager, Weiner harbored ambitions to paint but lacked familial support to go to art school. She pursued a liberal arts education at Barnard College instead. She studied art history and environmental science, supplementing her coursework with painting classes that were more conceptually than technically rigorous—then later “had my ass kicked” in grad school at SVA, she said. “When I was in undergrad, I was so full of it,” she recalled with evident amusement. “I really thought I was great, and nobody had ever told me otherwise.”

Following her graduation from Barnard in 2003, a string of rejections from residencies and graduate schools brought her back down to earth. After ultimately being accepted to SVA and finishing her MFA there in 2011, she pieced together teaching gigs to keep the lights on, continuing to paint in her personal time. But once she and her husband, a musician, became parents in 2017, the economics stopped making sense. On their son's first birthday, they moved to Nashville, where Weiner took a curatorial job at Vanderbilt University. “I physically have a lot more space,” she said of her adopted home. “But the economic worries are also not taking up so much mental space anymore.”

Ultimately—and perhaps counterintuitively—the move away from the world's art capital was the accelerant that her career needed. It was also around this time that she departed from more muted tones in her painting and adopted the vibrant palette that defines her work now. It's almost as if, after she white-knuckled it in New York for so long, her loosened grip allowed more color to seep onto the canvas. In Nashville, Weiner struck up a fruitful relationship with local gallery Red Arrow, which tapped her to curate a group show in 2022 and began formally representing her the following year.

It's not hard to see why Weiner's new work has taken off. Her smooth, highly saturated gradients of paint catch the eye, and she deploys framing and compositional devices like spirals, curtains, and atmospheric perspective to draw it inward. Moons, instruments, amphoras, and hands folded in blessing recur in her work, part of a symbolic repertoire that conjures associations with the divine, the cyclical, and the spiritual. The idea of universal appeal underpins the work conceptually, too: Weiner is heavily influenced by the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung and his theory of the collective unconscious, which posits the existence of a symbolic language shared by humans across time. The artist's role, Jung wrote, is to translate those symbols “into the language of the present.”



Portrait of Emily Weiner in her studio, 2025. Photo by Yve Assad for Artsy.

Weiner does this translation from her studio in her historic East Nashville home, a fitting setting in which to develop a visual language that holds potent connections to the past. The Victorian house was built in 1899 and has a colorful history of its own: Its previous owner was the daughter of country music star Barbara Mandrell. Weiner, who quit her day job in 2020, now treats painting like a nine-to-five. But while her work time is highly structured, her intuitive process is not. She cycles between many paintings at once—“as many as will fit on the walls”—and often doesn’t comprehend the significance of what she’s depicted until after it’s complete. She likens the experience to reading tarot: The image presents itself fully formed, and then she projects meaning onto it.

While there’s a definite mystical element to Weiner’s practice, science also plays a role. For “Now Eve, We’re Here, We’ve Won,” she worked with her sister’s partner, a woodworker, to create custom wood panels using 3D modeling software. The surface of one resulting work, *Interference* (all works 2025), mimics the ripples of wave interference patterns; another, *Guidance*, is shaped like a Fibonacci spiral. Painted atop these forms are familiar, ethereal motifs: celestial bodies, prayer hands, Crayola-colored sunsets. For Weiner, whose teenage obsession with Stephen Hawking was her “nerdy dirty secret,” physics and spirituality are part of the same exploration into “what’s behind the version of reality that we see” and comprehend. She finds a sort of comfort in this mystery, she said. In *Guidance*, a black keyhole contains a tiny slice of galactic imagery that Weiner lifted from the findings of the James Webb Telescope—a suggestion that the secrets of the universe are locked away, out of our reach.

Broadly, Weiner’s work approaches the vastness of observable reality with a wide, searching lens and a physical presence to match (most paintings in the show are human scale at around five feet tall). One work, though, stands out as more personal. *Magician’s Assistant*, a smaller canvas with a custom ceramic frame, depicts a white rabbit in profile. The animal is Weiner’s avatar, she admitted. For all the years that she worked in art-adjacent jobs before becoming a full-time artist, she felt like the white rabbit in a magic show—the supporting actor who “does the work, but doesn’t get any of the credit,” she said. The creature has a secondary meaning, though, as a symbol of curiosity and adventure. In Lewis Carroll’s classic tale, it’s the herald that Alice follows into Wonderland. Now, Weiner is that rabbit—the one whose paintings lead us down the rabbit hole, into the mysterious wrinkles of the cosmos.



Passing Through, 2025, Oil on linen in painted wood frame,
61 1/2 x 46 1/2 x 2 inches.