

# ART

## James Siena on Human Attention in an Automated Age

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*In a studio conversation with ArtRabbit's Morgan Everhart, Siena reflects on scale, systems, and why abstraction depends on deviation at a moment when images are increasingly optimized and automated.*



New York, NY: Miles McEnergy Gallery, "James Siena," 30 October - 20 December 2025.

At a moment when images are increasingly produced by machines, optimized by systems, and consumed at accelerating speed, James Siena's paintings insist on something stubbornly human. Long before code became a cultural metaphor or artificial intelligence entered everyday language, Siena was working with self-imposed rules and visual systems. Today, his paintings feel newly urgent not because they resemble machines, but because they refuse automation. They depend on sustained concentration, human deviation, and time. In a studio conversation with ArtRabbit, Siena reflects on scale, deviation, and why abstraction still depends on sustained human focus.

In this ArtRabbit interview, recorded during Siena's current exhibition at Miles McEnergy Gallery, the artist reflects on his shift to large-scale painting, the discipline of working almost every day for decades, and abstraction as a form of visual knowledge. The conversation moves through grids, emergence, teaching, and legacy, returning again and again to a single question. What does it mean to make work that cannot be optimized.



*Anion*, 2023, Acrylic and graphite on linen, 75 x 59 inches, 190.5 x 149.9 cm.

## James Siena's Long Game: Attention, emergence, and painting beyond the present tense

When James Siena talks about his recent paintings, he does not begin with technology or theory. He begins with scale.

“Less than ten years ago, I started making really big paintings,” he says, sitting in his New York studio. “That was a big difference. That was a huge difference. I started really digging kind of straight down instead of working on these discrete, algorithm based works that had specific categorizations.”

The shift was not simply technical. It changed how Siena related to the work physically and perceptually. “On a personal level, the feeling of being smaller than the work has been really... yeah. A big difference,” he says. “They’re still very labor intensive, and I produce very few works a year. But they have a presence I couldn’t get with the smaller work.”

The paintings on view at Miles McEnery Gallery are matte rather than glossy, painted on linen rather than metal. For several years, Siena has worked primarily on linen primed with clear acrylic gesso. “They contain a very different kind of space,” he explains. “Instead of the paint being glossy, it’s matte. Over time, I settled on that surface.”

The result is work that feels dense without being rigid. Compressed yet expansive. “The smaller works were very intense and very compressed,” Siena says. “These are compressed too, but they’re really big and compressed.”

Seen in the context of an image culture driven by speed and replication, Siena’s paintings assert a different value system. They make no effort to hide their labor. They resist smoothness. Their rules generate variation rather than efficiency. The result is not optimization, but surprise.

### Attention as necessity

Siena is often described as methodical or systematic, but he resists the idea that discipline is an aesthetic position. For him, attention is not a style. It is a requirement.

“I’ve had people say things about focus and sustained presence,” he says. “But I don’t think of that as an attribute of the work. I think of it as a necessity. If I didn’t stay with the work, I wouldn’t be able to make it.”

That attentiveness extends beyond the studio. For decades, Siena has maintained a steady rhythm of teaching, studio visits, correspondence, and long lunches. It is not networking as strategy, but continuity as practice.

The same steadiness defines his working life. Asked whether he has ever taken a real break from making work, he pauses.

“Two weeks? I don’t think so. Maybe for a week.”

When his son was young, Siena adapted his habits rather than stepping away. “I carried a small kit of drawings,” he recalls. “I worked whenever I could, at the playground, waiting for guitar lessons. I made little boxes to keep drawings clean. I still do that, but much less now.”

For Siena, the idea of innate talent holds little weight. “I don’t believe in talent,” he says. “I believe in desire. Maybe some tendency toward manual dexterity. But if you really love something, you do it.”

That commitment includes remaining with work through uncertainty. “I work on very few pieces at a time,” he says. “I work until I finish it. If it’s fucked up, I keep working anyway. Sometimes I throw things away. Sometimes I make changes. Usually I stay with it until I’m satisfied.”

## **Systems, emergence, and deviation**

Siena’s work is often described in terms of systems or visual algorithms. Earlier bodies of work were clearly organized into categories. Recent work is more fluid.

“There’s a common thread over the last few years,” he says. “I’ve been drawing grids, very complex grids. Two or more grids overlap, and then something else is done with them. A third thing takes shape. You see something you don’t expect.”

He compares the process to color mixing. “When you mix yellow and blue, you get green. Green isn’t yellow or blue. It’s an emergent thing. And there are greens that lean more yellow or more blue. That’s closer to what I’m thinking about.”

Although viewers often reference water, sound waves, or resonance when encountering the work, Siena is careful not to fix meaning too tightly. “Those associations are fine,” he says. “I’ve used terms like resonator or feedback loop. Sometimes reluctantly. Titles can help people enter the work. But I don’t like fixing what it has to mean.”

What matters more to him is visual knowledge, a form of thinking that precedes language. “There are things that happen visually that there just aren’t words for,” he says. “You can try to describe them, but the work doesn’t owe anyone a conclusion.”

## **Art as a time machine**

When asked who his audience is, Siena answers without hesitation. “Anyone who’s interested. And hopefully many people in the future.”

He describes art as a time machine. “When you stand in front of a Jan van Eyck painting or a Joan Mitchell, you’re standing where they stood,” he says. “That humanness is deeply moving to me.”

He quickly undercuts any reverence. “They were bioorganisms. They farted while they were painting.”

For Siena, abstraction is not an escape from the human condition. It is evidence of it. “When people ask what abstraction is,” he says, “it’s the product of a bioorganism just like you. Someone who finds an activity compelling enough to sustain focus.”

In an era when abstraction is often framed as neutral or decorative, Siena thinks in longer arcs. “If your audience includes people who haven’t been born yet,” he says, “you stop thinking so much about immediacy and start thinking about a longer conversation.”

## Teaching, structure, and longevity

Siena has taught for decades and estimates that he has worked with nearly nine hundred students. Yet he has never tried to build a school of followers.

“My teaching was never about getting students to think like me,” he says. “It was about helping them understand how long things take.”

He is frank with them. “I tell students it might be ten years before they have a significant solo show. A lot of them don’t want to hear that.”

Before exhibiting widely, Siena worked as a picture framer, an experience that still shapes how he thinks about art’s survival. “A properly made frame preserves a work on paper for a long time,” he says. “It allows the work to enter more minds over more years.”

He also worries about visual literacy more broadly. Why can most people write fluently but not draw a basic object. “If visual literacy were more common, we might have better artists,” he says. “But we would also have many people who never become artists at all. Just like not everyone who writes becomes a novelist.”

## The next unknown

Despite having a major exhibition on view, Siena is already working through what might come next. Recent drawings introduce straightened grids, drawn first with a ruler and then inked freehand so the lines subtly wobble.

What follows is still an open question. “I’m thinking about thickening those straightened lines,” he says. “Taking them from line into mass. And I’m thinking about color. Not just black and white.”

There are also lithographs he made in Paris that evolve step by step until the final image is almost unrecognizable. “You can see every stage,” he says. “You think, how did that become this?”

What remains constant is not direction but commitment. “I’ve got a show up now,” Siena says, “and I’m already on the next thing.”

In a moment shaped by automation, speed, and machine logic, Siena's work offers something quieter and more durable. Sustained attention. Human deviation. And the patience to let meaning take shape over time. The long game, played one line at a time.

See his solo exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery through December 20, 2025.