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Sacred Space and Ceremony: Chris Watts at Welancora Gallery in Brooklyn

BY VITTORIA BENZINE

Vittoria Benzine is a Brooklyn-based journalist and essayist covering contemporary art with a focus on storytelling, counterculture, and chaos magic. She contributes to Artsy, Maxim, and more.

Spiritual leaders oversee religious rites because they have the power to do so, whether from study, practice, or divine dictate. New York-based artist Chris Watts is precisely this kind of initiate. He's shaped reality with his will and traveled widely, working with shamans and craftspeople to concoct relics of resin, pigment, and more on sheer fabric. [Ceremony](#), Watts's first solo show at Welancora Gallery, harmonizes disparate series from his practice into a ritual.

Leveraging his opportunity to take over the gorgeous Brooklyn brownstone

gallery, *Ceremony* presents Watts's iridescent, intensely mixed media abstract paintings alongside new standing screens that feature softer, if still enrapturing panels. These new structures, Watts told me, "have been living rent-free in my head the last five or six years." A warm Nigerian mahogany known as *sapele* wood frames their dreamy clouds of color. Wall-hanging artworks watch on.



Chris Watts, "The spirits that lend strength are invisible XXXVI", 2023. Peruvian pigments, acrylic, resin, poly-chiffon, stained wood. Image courtesy of Welancora Gallery.

What makes Watts equipped to oversee this ceremony? He's well-versed in making the immaterial real — in his art, and his life. Watts grew up in High Point, NC — furniture capital of the world, amongst the Deep South's history. As a kid, Watts decided architecture would make for a sophisticated, creative career. He learned to draft and render by hand in high school. Later on, the dean at UNC Charlotte's architecture program encouraged him to take more art classes. Watts ended up with a BFA in graphic design and painting. "Painting was like your first love," he reminisced. "It opened up the doorway for me to look at materiality and the way things can be arranged to tell a story, or express a way of thinking, or translate ideas in a nonverbal way."

A number of history's abstract artists pushed representation only after they mastered figuration. Watts began in the literal too, drawing first for practical design, then pairing his countercultural penchant for tactical surfaces and photo transfers with mixed media collages often featuring Black iconography, and expanses of empty space. The artist's own heritage traces back to the Caribbean, West Africa, and the Cherokee tribe. Watts also studied abroad during undergrad at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in

Wroclaw, Poland, at the behest of a mentor, and discovered glassblowing. In 2012, he entered Yale's MFA program, and began experimenting with new mediums to an unprecedented degree. Overwhelmed especially with society's fraught projections on Black bodies and their diverse experiences, Watts sought out purer translations.

He took film classes at Yale, began crafting video installations, and experimented with light as a sculptural element. His stylistic refusal to conform eventually got him kicked out of the program, a story that until recently, Watts never thought he'd tell. Instead, the saga of his dismissal anchors the 2021 documentary [The Art of Making It](#). When I asked Watts about his greatest milestone so far, he didn't mention the fairs, auctions or galleries he's worked with over the past decade. Instead, Watts cited returning to New Haven to finish his tenure alongside his classmates from outside the confines of Yale, making art and bartending to make ends meet. Watts called that decision "one of the scariest things I've done." Afterwards, he moved to Paris, where he mostly made visuals for his musician friends since he didn't have a studio. Back in the States, with a work space, Watts's chemistry experiments evolved into this current style.

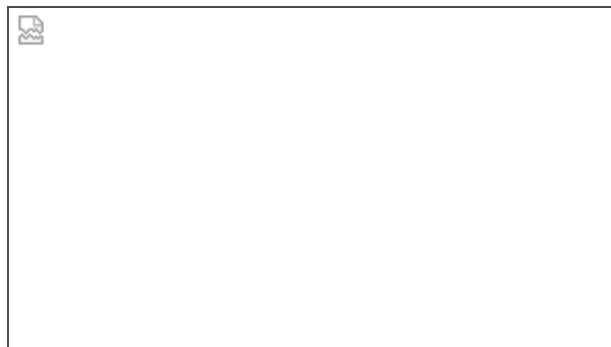
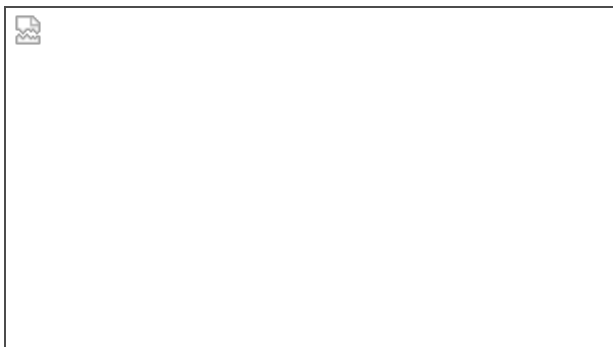


Image 1: Chris Watts, "Ambient Painting III (Levitate)", 2023. Sapele, metal fixtures, poly-chiffon, resin, acrylic, natural and artificial pigments. Image 2: Chris Watts, "Ambient Painting II" (Detail), 2023. Sapele, metal fixtures, poly-chiffon, resin, acrylic, natural and artificial pigments. Images courtesy of Welancora Gallery.

The artist calls the four standing screens across his show "ambient paintings." Viewers must decide whether they're named for their forms, capable of surrounding and directing bodies, or if it's because their gem-toned abstractions encapsulate an energetic breeze.

Here, Watts takes inspiration from architecture and stained glass at The Baha'i House of Worship in Paris, the Nasir al Mulk Mosque in Shiraz, Southern Baptist churches, and the Ellsworth Kelly chapel in Austin — which he visited recently. "It's one of those spaces that works when you're there for a while and the light shifts and you see colors rise and dance on the wall," Watts recalled. He compares his own work to "a firework show."

Welancora Gallery is on the first floor of an elegant residential building in Bed Stuy, the same neighborhood where Watts works. The railroad-style unit activates a spectrum of interactions between the light and the show. The sun doesn't reach the screens at the room's center, but Watts has installed one before the front window, staging a shifting daylong spectacle. Sorcerers say dusk and dawn are the best times for magic — moments where the door beyond our plane cracks open. Similarly, *Ceremony* wedges portals ajar by teetering on different fulcrums. Are these ambient paintings art, or design? Watts even honored the long tradition of furniture making by partnering with a craftsman from Ridgewood, Queens to construct the ambient paintings' standing frames with an impeccable finish. His collaborator suggested the sapele.

Save for his previous video installations, these ambient paintings also mark Watts's first foray off the wall. By comparison, Watts envisioned his 2017 ["Blahk on Blahk on Blak"](#) series, an answer to proliferating imagery police violence, only for display on black walls. Otherwise the nuanced narratives of their colors would change tune. "[Galleries] are usually white spaces, so there's this challenge against the institutional platform," Watts said. "Why use the wall at all?"

The adjustable shape of his ambient paintings most clearly references Ming Dynasty standing screens — ornamented gifts for priests and royalty which proliferated early tracks of the very power structures that impacted Watts's ancestry. But these translucent screens are decidedly not functional. Silhouettes show through, and those shadows further activate latent meditations. Works from his ongoing series "The spirits that lend strength are invisible" loom in their large scale from the surrounding walls with palpable personalities. Each draws on a gift that Watts got from a shaman in Peru: 10 kilograms of pigments for ceremonial garments. Visible stretcher bars beneath unite the whole series, underscoring the matter of whether they're paintings, too.



Chris Watts, "Ambient Painting IV (Beyond)", 2023. Sapele, metal fixtures, poly-chiffon, resin, acrylic, natural and artificial pigments. Image courtesy of Welancora Gallery.

By synchronizing these varied projects in Watts's practice into one motion, *Ceremony* scores a spatial symphony of interconnected histories — across triumph and trauma, light and dark, domestic and commercial — from both personal and collective stories. In many

faiths, the fervor necessary to transform a routine to a ritual thrives off that critical balance of suffering and exaltation. Watts won't be there if you visit the exhibition this month, yet his hand prevails in these adjustable screens and paintings, guiding viewers through their rites. "It's ceremony as an unveiling of a memorial or a place of meditation, or a sacred site," the artist said. "Ceremony as an object of tradition, or a gesture that speaks to something higher than our physical self."

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