

## GAGOSIAN

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### In the Studio With Harold Ancart

*A blend of talent, drive, and frankness has made the Belgian painter an art world star. Ahead of a major gallery debut, the artist reflects on how far he's come.*

Arthur Lubow



*Harold Ancart in his studio in Brooklyn, with an untitled painting from 2022 (right). Ancart wears his own clothing and accessories (throughout).*

Harold Ancart bristles with so much energy that if you didn't see the cigarette between his fingers, you might think the smoke was coming out of his ears. Since arriving in New York in 2007 from his native Brussels, Ancart, 43, has ascended the art world on a vertiginous incline. When he ended his representation by the prestigious David Zwirner gallery, in January 2022, his departure might have seemed an uncharacteristic step backward. Not to worry. A few months later, he received a call from the biggest dealer of them all, Larry Gagosian. "It was one of the best studio visits I ever had," Ancart said. They quickly reached an agreement, and Ancart will have a solo show at Gagosian's Chelsea outpost in May. He admires the dealer's straightforwardness. "He is not a wolf in a sheep's coat," Ancart said. "He *is* a wolf."

Bluntness is one facet of Ancart's passionate enthusiasm. "Sometimes, I wish I had the ubiquity to be five Harolds on one day and do five different things," he said. When I visited his studio in Brooklyn, it was chockablock with paintings, including the series based on an indeterminate plant—with a long, segmented stalk and sparse foliage, it is either a sprouting bamboo or a palm tree—that will make up his May exhibition. "My girlfriend is always telling me to stop having ecstatic moments," he joked. "I will see a shadow and think, This can become a painting."

To direct the installation of the show, Ancart had constructed a cardboard maquette of the gallery in his studio and placed tiny images of the spiky plants, with generous spacing, along its walls. A visitor, on entering, will be greeted by a tondo painting of the horizon—an overture to the exhibition that follows.

Tall and lanky, with a close-cropped beard, Ancart was wearing a mustard yellow jumpsuit that was marked *grand flâneur* on the pocket. Ancart identifies with the Baudelairean notion of a fervent observer who moves with the ebb and flow of the urban crowd. "He doesn't wander in a specific direction, but he aims at finding the marvelous in one way or another," he said. "Most of my ideas come to me when I find myself walking around and my mind is wandering. Sometimes, I'm struck by the intuition that I can do this in a certain way. That hunch is enough for me to start putting it in motion."



*Untitled, 2022, and Untitled, 2020 (right).*

He works with oil sticks, not paintbrushes, and thinks of his pictures as drawings. "I was always more concerned with the practice of drawing than the practice of painting," he explained. As he sees it, a drawing is provisional, and one drawing leads to the next. "'Painting,' in a traditional understanding, is more concerned with achieving," he said. "Maybe drawing has less to do with the thing being achieved."

He began using oil sticks for practical reasons. When he came to New York, he scrambled to support himself. "For four years, I was living on nothing and would eat half a bagel in the morning and another half for lunch," he said. "When you're eating dust, hours stretch like weeks." He rented a small studio in Brooklyn but couldn't afford a separate apartment. "I was living and sleeping there," he said. "These oil sticks dry relatively quickly. You don't need to use

thinners or extremely unpleasant-smelling products.” Olivier Babin, a close friend he met at that time, when both were struggling artists, said, “Harold would make these beautiful works on paper that he would stack on the sofa that was also his desk and probably his bed.”

Ancart has been drawing since he was a small boy copying comics. He earned his MFA at La Cambre art college in Brussels, where he was directed to make only abstract and conceptual work. Although he liked abstraction and conceptualism, he hated the imposition. “Coming back to figuration, and the pleasure I had of drawing as a young kid, was an exhilarating liberation,” he said.

He took the leap of relocating to New York. “I had the idea that nothing would happen to me if I stayed in Belgium,” he said. “I was curious to see where painters and sculptors who had not died, as they had in Europe, would be found. I loved American abstract painters. I guess I wanted to be part of that conversation.” Even though he barely spoke English, he felt New York was the obvious destination. “I came here because I wanted to become professional,” he said. “If you want to be a professional skier, you don’t live in Quito. You try to find a mountain with a lot of snow. New York was the mountain with a lot of snow.”



*Oil sticks, Ancart's preferred medium, in the studio.*

He knocked at Richard Serra's studio in TriBeCa and told the studio manager he would work unpaid. Though he was greeted skeptically—“They asked if I was a crazy person, if I was a thief”—Ancart left his phone number. He was called that same day and summoned to a warehouse. Serra hired him sporadically, and Ancart also sold vegetables at an outdoor market and waited tables in restaurants. “It was a tremendous help that they would give me some work at the Richard Serra studio,” he said. “When I would go to openings or parties, people would ask

what I did, and I could say, 'I occasionally work at the Richard Serra studio.' People are curious. You are fresh meat."

The art he was producing was conceptual and sculptural. "Before he was using oil stick, he was making complex installations using wire and black dust," said David Breslin, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who met him soon after Ancart arrived in New York, when they were both at the outset of their careers. "You'd walk into a room, and it would seem like a cube was sitting in space. This guy is extremely detail-oriented and a maniac, but is also so ambitious that he'd create something that 10 people would see and nobody would buy."

Babin steered visitors who came to his studio, which was near Ancart's, to check out his friend. "Eventually, people were paying more attention to my work than to his," Ancart recalled. That is when Babin resolved to reorient his practice. "He had way more raw talent," Babin explained. "I was a trickster conceptual artist. He had found a unique style already, in his own way. He was following his path, which I didn't have. I said, 'I'm going to help you become a great artist,' and he said, 'I will help you become a gallerist.'" When Babin opened his gallery, Clearing, in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood in 2011, Ancart was one of the two artists in the inaugural show. Like Ancart, Babin has done well. Clearing moved in April to a three-story space on the Bowery in Lower Manhattan, near the New Museum, with Ancart included in the opening exhibition.

Following the Clearing show, Ancart's work was exhibited at Xavier Hufkens, then at Michael Werner. "Before you know it, you're the next hot shit," Ancart said. "Then you have to really keep your head on your shoulders and focus on what you're doing. I couldn't hire people to do things for me. One reason is that I don't know what I am doing. For me, that is a blessing." In the process of making a painting, he determines what the painting will be.



*Ancart in his office.*

To use the oil stick, he mounts canvas on wood panels; otherwise, the force of the marking would push through the fabric. There are pros and cons to oil sticks. “It gives a lot of oil and is very generous in the way the paint applies itself, but at the same time it doesn’t allow you to be as precise regarding certain details as one could be with a brush,” he said. “I was very concerned with separating the fields of color so they were not contaminating each other. That made me angry until I realized, if it was happening, why wouldn’t I let it happen?”

Ancart likes to work in series, varying the color palettes and cropping the images in different ways. He has done many paintings of trees in which the sky peeks through the foliage with ragged edges that evoke the Abstract Expressionism of Clyfford Still. “When it comes to abstract painters, among all of them he is probably the one I admire the most, for reasons that are strange,” he said. “He is a great framer of nothing, and that really moves me.” Ancart also loves Barnett Newman. “Both are great painters of color,” he said. “That is something important to me too—color and movement. It overcomes the subject of the painting. I don’t know if the color overcomes the subject or the subject dilutes the color.” Abstraction and figuration coexist happily in his paintings, but there is also a distinctive tension, similar to that created by the torn lines in Still’s work and the emphatic verticals that Newman called zips and used to divide his flat fields of color. “Abstraction is real, and real things are also abstract,” Breslin remarked.

Before the tree foliage series and the new bamboo-meets-palms series, Ancart would find depictions of earthly paradise on the Internet. He would print out an image of a tropical beach, then cross it with a line of soot. He did a series of paintings of matchsticks, which call to mind Newman’s zips. Those led him, formally and conceptually, to the next series, in which the wooden matchstick, which in form is a strong vertical like a tree trunk, has magically gone back in time to become a tree. “He has an incredible sense of humor, for a Barnett Newman zip to become a match, and then a matchstick to become a tree,” Breslin said. During the pandemic, Ancart made paintings of UFOs. “I said, ‘Harold, you’ve really lost it,’ ” Breslin recalled. “But I remember walking down a New York street, and there was no one else there, and it might have felt okay for a UFO to land on Fifth Avenue.”

Ancart lives in SoHo with his girlfriend, the actor Dianna Agron. They’ve been together for almost two years. When I was at the studio, she arrived from the airport, having returned from Los Angeles. They greeted each other as if they’d been separated for months, but when I asked, it turned out that she had been gone overnight.



*Untitled, 2023.*

In a relatively short time, Ancart has risen from obscurity to prominence, from penury to affluence. “New York is a place where you can put your foot in Richard Serra’s door, and 15 years later, you’re working with the same gallery as him,” Babin said. Speaking in late 2020 with another publication, Ancart listed among his favorite places and things the Park Hyatt hotel in Tokyo and Villa d’Este on Lake Como, L’Ambroisie restaurant in Paris, and Huntsman suits from London. These are not options available to up-and-coming artists.

“Life unfolds as mysteriously as when you are making a painting,” Ancart said. “There were a lot of disappointments and failures that ended up being for the better.” Even in the darkest times, he didn’t feel abject, and he never second-guessed his decision to move to New York. “In Brussels, if you don’t have a car, people look at you—what’s wrong with you,” he said. “Here the definition of who is doing well is not clear. The richest person can look homeless. I never had self-esteem problems here. It made the whole thing bearable and exciting.”

He absorbed the élan of the city. “There was always this great energy,” he said. “I had the feeling that people were still dreaming. You hear young people talking in the subway, and it’s not resignation that you’re not going to make it. It’s the idea of the American dream, and I was permeable to that.”

*Photography assistant: Jordan Zuppa.*