

## Robyn Ward: Walking in the Dark

Shai Baitel, Curator  
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The immersive experience features large painted canvases and six freestanding sculptures that speak to Ward's nomadic lifestyle driven by a need for both escapism and its darker counterpart, avoidance. Though known for his figurative work, Ward explores these themes through abstract compositions and mixed media sculptures.

This exhibition speaks to the themes of migration and traumas - both national and personal - by asking the question of: why do people roam? What is the aftermath of perpetual movement? Like the abstracted nature of Ward's artworks, a nomadic sensibility often abstracts the deeper reasons for such roaming. His work begets questions around what exactly Ward is veiling through his travels. Like the act of walking in the dark, viewing Ward's work requires one's eyes to adjust to see what would otherwise not be detected.

Using wet, loose brush strokes with distinctive markings on the oversized canvases, he tells his story through a nostalgic veil of innocence and naivety, revealing snapshots of the past while simultaneously obscuring or hiding others, with each layer depicting different fragments of time that are indeed screen-shots of the artist's life. There is an abundance of hidden psychological, political, and emotional meaning to be discovered in *Walking in the Dark*, exemplified by the labyrinthine and shaded design of the space where the artworks are being shown.

It narrates a story that is both timely and provocative, reflecting the artist's personal experience with chaos, governance, and violence, while commenting on the breakdown of society and referencing both historical and modern-day global disputes. While engaging with themes of destruction and conflict, Ward's work addresses his own life, defined by a perpetual sense of movement and a constant feeling of geographical restlessness.

Everyone has concealed, repressed, and latent personality traits we keep in the dark. In psychoanalysis this part of the psyche is called the shadow self. The famous analyst Carl Jung wrote that this universal, dark underside of the psyche is "the thing a person has no wish to be." Yet, the shadow self is not simply a source of pain, shame, and conflict. When it is brought to the light—and accepted for what it is—it can

provoke a great range of insights and creative impulses. Embracing the shadow, while difficult, provides a greater depth of character and individuation. This process of shadow integration takes many forms and can be seen in a grouping of recent work by Robyn Ward.

Ward was born in Dublin in 1982 and raised in Belfast during the peak of civil conflict of the Irish “troubles.” He takes his personal experience of chaos, governance, and destruction while commenting on the breakdown of society, relating it to both historical and modern day global disputes. Using wet, loose brush strokes with distinctive markings he tells this story through a nostalgic veil of innocence and naivety, revealing snapshots of the past while simultaneously obscuring or hiding others. “Each layer depicts a different fragment of time” Ward comments “often they are screen shots of parts of my life.”

In much of his previous painting, Ward embraced a more formulaic, figurative style. Canvases were diligently sketched out and filled in with objects that suggest an affinity for hyperrealism and elements of Pop-Art. The paintings and objects in this exhibition speak to a new, distinct visual language from Ward. They are both interconnected and spontaneous; a wide array of often primary or unmixed colors seep between the medium to large-scale canvases, replicating color schemes in a highly abstracted manner. Gone are the signature, realistically painted motifs of his own life seen in Ward’s earlier canvases.

These new works are largely composed of wide, vigorously applied brushstrokes and emphatic paint splatters. Taken as a whole, they speak to the sensibility of an artist undergoing a significant transformation. These are the works of a man embracing his shadow.

Growing up in Northern Ireland during the end of the twentieth century was a difficult experience for Ward on both a personal and political level. The intensity of civil conflict— bombings, assassinations, massacres— translated to a sense of rage amongst his childhood peers. Proximity to violence of this caliber can certainly traumatize a person, and both amplify and excavate the latent shadow self. Yet, mapping the effects of trauma can rarely be attributed to a single event. A traumatic experience is mutable, it is given potency through the psyche’s efforts to evade or suppress it. Trauma—and its roots—is often elusive and attempting to describe or model it risks becoming so figurative that it becomes mythic fantasmagoria.

To understand Ward's work as a simple, autobiographical manifestation of his personal trauma would neglect so much of its relatability and reduce the complexities of his own narrative. Ward's art, through its grace and its strife, speaks to the universal human experience of grappling with the darker, more sinister part of our psyche. This psychological arbitration of balancing the ego and its shadow can take a lifetime to navigate and can often feel so disorienting that it is akin to walking in the dark.

While engaging with themes of destruction and conflict, Ward's work also addresses his own life experience defined by an almost perpetual sense of movement. Imbued with a constant feeling of geographical restlessness, Ward is regularly moving between disparate places. This wandering ambivalence can be seen in his pillar-like glass and metal sculptures. Composed of metal bases and marbled glass pinnacles, these objects present a material and visual contrast representing distinct segments of Ward's life.

According to Ward, the metal bases of these sculptures are inspired by the Brutalist public architecture he encountered throughout much of his young life. The failed promises of these utopian built environments echo with the troubled geopolitics of his own upbringing and is contrasted by the ebulliently colored glass objects composing the top section of his sculptures. Produced by the father and son glassmaking duo Narcissus & Orfeo Quagliata, these semi-opaque glass rectangles are buoyant, suggestive of an optimistic sensibility, and as unknowable in their form and function as an arrival to an unfamiliar land. And, like much of Ward's painted work, these objects present a study in contrasts between lightness and darkness, and openness and secrecy.

Ward has spent much of his adult life living, for short and medium time frames, in cities throughout the world. Since leaving Belfast, Ward has set up studio practices in London, Los Angeles, Mexico City, and New York, among others. Taken as a whole, this group of artworks obliquely addresses themes of migration and traumas — both national and personal — by questioning why people roam, and what is the aftermath of perpetual movement..

Ward's canvases and freestanding glass sculptures speak to his nomadic lifestyle fed by a need for both escapism and its darker counterpart, avoidance. His work suggests questions around what exactly Ward is veiling through his travels. Like the abstracted nature of Ward's visual art, a nomadic sensibility often abstracts the deeper reasons for such roaming.

Escapism is often necessitated by an urge to escape oneself, and to escape an inevitable confrontation of the shadow. But the shadow self is universal. Coming to terms with the darker elements of one's psyche is a lifelong process that transcends urban areas and national borders.

To embark on Ward's art journey and see the subtlety of this ubiquitous psychological tension manifested in his work requires an openness to experiencing catharsis this impactful—of seeing one's life in all its tensions and contradictions reflected through the artist's creation.

Like the act of walking in the dark, viewing these objects requires one's eyes to adjust to see not just the obvious, but what would otherwise not be detected. In Ward's work there is energy, a level of brightness, that shows the ability and possibility to emerge from and embrace the shadow.

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Shai Baitel is the Artistic Director of the Modern Art Museum (MAM) Shanghai.

## Robyn Ward

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Born in Dublin and raised in Belfast during the tail end of the Irish “troubles”, Robyn Ward (b. 1982) was at school when he got into painting graffiti on the school roof, which got him expelled. “I was fifteen. All my friends were in school so I would always go to the same place.”, he says. That place was a derelict house. “I would go and smoke and paint a piece. When I was finished, I would paint the wall white. And begin again.” He didn’t miss being at school. “When you’re in a school you spend maybe an hour or two in your class,” he says. “I was spending six to seven hours painting,”

Hardscrabble years followed though during which Ward took jobs across various bars and building sites, but the painting never stopped, and he began to get work into shows, most often large abstractions, plus some graffiti-like signage and some with a figurative element. As with the series he painted in 2016, based on the shrill street signs such as No Blacks, Dogs or Irish, which were up in London in the 50s and 60s. The Dublin-born artist handled the theme not with rage but ridicule, using cartoon characters he pulled off the Internet, such as Speedy Gonzales, saying No Mexicans, and Marvin the Martian, both from the vintage cartoon series, Looney Tunes, who insists No Humans No Humans No Humans. That body of work was shown in Mayfair, London.

As Ward was selling more work, he took to living a nomadic life, taking studios in London, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, Mexico City and New York. He was moving into a zone of pure abstraction, but his abstractions weren’t thinky, conceptual, Minimalist. “I paint from my emotional state a lot,” he says. “Depending on what I’m going through. I also revisit different moments in my life, and I use certain music to get me back to a certain place. And when I’m waiting for a piece to dry, I know I must go back into that space, where I was, to finish it off, which I can find quite distressing.”

Which is why Ward prefers not to work on a pre-stretched canvas, with the size of the painting to be- determined in advance. “It’s intolerable to be stopped by the frame’s edge,” grumped Clyfford Still, the great Abstract Expressionist painter, but Ward goes further, treating an entire area of canvas as terra incognita. “Why should I have a size chosen for me?” he asks. “I’m trying to create a canvas and now suddenly, I’m captured. But I can make it bigger, I can turn it into a diptych”.

“So quite often when I’m painting, I will go through months when I don’t touch anything”, Ward says, “And then other times I have to paint because I have an urge to

paint. And then I get blocked. That's why I like to have two studios; I can just get up and go to another and get fresh inspiration from a culture, a smell, a sound, people”.

Ward can work on a single canvas over several years and his choice of art-making tools, aside from the usual, is variegated, and includes an iPhone box he noticed by his feet as he was painting. “I wanted to create a certain motion, a certain stroke, and I started using it,” he says. “I liked the marks it was leaving so I started using it quite a bit. I do that quite a bit. I'll use wooden blocks. One of my favorite instruments is an old window wiper which I found on the street. And I flew it back on the plane with me to Mexico City.”

How did he use the window wiper? “I'll use the long piece ... I'll use just the point ... often I'll use the handle. I go through a small artillery of objects to spread energy across the canvas”

How does he know when he's done? “I know it when I see it,” Robyn Ward said. “Sometimes I fight with the canvas, it's a struggle, I'm hitting the canvas with something in mind. Another time I go to the studio and look at a piece for hours and all of a sudden it starts to work ... a certain feeling and emotion comes in ... shapes and figures from another time that I bring back into the world.”

Ward has worked under pseudonyms and different collectives throughout the years, until breaking the cover of anonymity in 2017. He has exhibited at the Museo Tamayo & the Museo Nacional De Arte in Mexico City, with paintings included in auctions and group exhibitions in London, Los Angeles, New York, Paris and Hong Kong. He currently works between New York, Los Angeles and Mexico City.