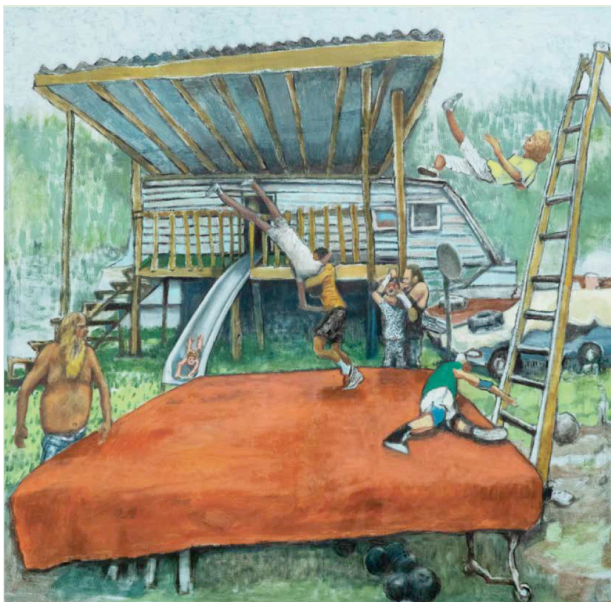


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Painter Of Tights By Janelle Zara



Rob Thom isn't a wrestling painter, per se. The 45-year-old artist, born in Santa Barbara and now based on Washington State's Brainbridge Island, specializes more generally in painting the chaotic bustle that takes place in public spaces. His most recent exhibition, *The Beast*, hosted by Los Angeles gallery M+B in the spring of 2019, zoomed in on the crowds that gather at festivals and on the beach, rendered in the kind of muted palette evocative of the faded pages of vintage magazines. The piece that struck a particular chord with his audience, though, was "BRWC," a melee of wrestlers dog piling in the ring. Here, he unpacks the sport's enduring, widespread appeal. — Janelle Zara

Art and wrestling is an unusual combination. Where did this subject come from, and what inspired you to look inside the ring?

There are a lot of images of wrestling on the internet, which is typically how I source my

subjects. Generally speaking, I want them to be unsettling, and for me, there was a lot of pathos in those images. I thought about how they would appeal as a painting. Usually when I'm looking at something, if I respond to it, then I feel like that's a good reason to paint it. I use my gut. In my impressionable years, I would look at old Renaissance paintings and not really understand the context in which they were painted, but that they contained a lot of emotion.

Were you surprised that so many people named it as their favorite piece in the show?

A lot of people responded to that painting especially, and I couldn't figure out why. I suspect that some of it was nostalgia. I don't watch wrestling anymore, but for an 11 or 12-year-old, the characters were totally believable. I remember thinking that it was somehow real, and being very emotionally involved. I've never

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been to a wrestling event, but I remember at some point crying in front of a TV, having fully bought into them actually hurting each other. It's easy to forget that wrestling was a formative part of so many male childhoods. I think the appeal is that it's like a soap opera, you know, with heroes and villains. We've come to this point in time where that somehow seems relevant; that tension is a reflection of society at its base level. Wrestling appeals to different sorts all across America. Vince McMahon is a millionaire 100 times over, and he's still crushing it. And I think there's an old-school vibe to this painting that appeals to a sense of nostalgia. It doesn't quite align with the wrestling you see on TV today. I definitely gravitated towards images from my childhood. In those days you didn't have all those flashy fluorescent colors that I think wrestlers use now. My paintings are also loose interpretations of images that I see. I might change the colors to be more nostalgic, or more painterly. And when people recognize an article of clothing or hairstyle specific to an old wrestler, and ask "Is that supposed to be this person?" It's actually a mix of different characters. I tried to make them their own wrestlers, not the wrestlers from a bygone era.

When and how did your interest in wrestling end?

Probably when I found out it was fake. I didn't want to believe it. My dad came in at one point and said, "You know it's not real?" But to me, it was. I thought I might be able to channel that experience into a painting, to put that on display for someone else and elicit their emotions with it.

