

In the Studio with: Mark Ryan Chariker

By Daniel Mackenzie, 09 November 2021



Mark Ryan Chariker produces paintings that possess deep, mysterious atmospheres, often substantiated with tense, if unidentifiable interactions between human beings and their surroundings. We are led to believe there's a significance to the familiar and fantastical worlds of his creation, yet the precise nature of these is often kept at a distance from us. Instead of conclusion and resolution we feel both connected to and distanced from the scenes in his paintings, caught in a sense of profound suspension.

The work, generally speaking, hangs on a form of contemporary surrealism, highly influenced by French Rococo painters, the deep melancholy of Antoine Watteau and the tense power of Goya. The reasoning behind the most striking elements of his work, however, appear to evade even the direct understanding of the artist himself—fixed terms and clear intent are not applicable here. Instead a kind of referential fluidity allows rich speculation, without offering the answers we seek.

On the afternoon of bonfire night in the county that houses the world's largest and most explosive ceremony, Daniel Mackenzie caught up with Mark for the last of a series of chats attempting to uncover the influences on and meaning within his work. Over the exchange the pair took a deep dive into the murky worlds of psychology, mysticism, magic and ritual, and the forces guiding humankind's insatiable quest for knowledge. To say it's a conversation about art would be too one dimensional—art in this instance is a carrier of something far more abstract and ineffable. What follows is an account of a spirited discussion where even the format of the interview and the need for questioning themselves are concepts that come undone.

Daniel Mackenzie: I wanted to outline the development of this interview so far as it has been a little unconventional. We had a video call several weeks ago, followed by some specific questions, then a decision to chat further and more informally. That chat became quite meta, and indeed this sentence is the last part to be thought or written. So, perhaps that's the best place to start.

Mark Ryan Chariker: Well, I think the trouble I run into is that I'm not a good writer, and with those email questions I took some to mull over them and ended up overthinking, nothing sounded right, and I'd only have a few sentences. That's why I paint. I would love to write because it's just such a great way to get ideas out and put them into a format that makes sense, and you can flesh them out. In my experience talking with other artists, most of the time they have written things and they have offered them to me to read them, but they don't make any sense to me.

DM: Well, you're an incredible painter and your work has such depth of substance that I think you can be excused for not possessing the abilities of a master writer or analyst. Others –like myself– try a wide variety of creative avenues and attempt to stick with them, ending up not really being incredible at any one of them.

MRC: It's really hard to just pick a thing. I was building bikes, and then I was doing music for a while—I always wonder if there was a turning point, like when I was 18 years old and I could either do music or I could paint. That was how it was in my head, because I had to pick a school to go to, and it was going to be painting. So then I just stopped playing guitar or getting into like electronic music or whatever, but then in school there were all these different ways you can make art, and I was doing video and sound and printmaking and sculpture. And then there was a point where I was going to pick painting.

DM: I'm always interested to know what other artforms artists associate with. Many interviews concentrate on the artistic background within the discipline that the artist is working in, and that's fine. Sometimes though you find out these fringe interests that they have, and it often makes so much sense when you revisit their work with this knowledge. Your work is quite cinematic for instance, so I would be interested to know if you've had any practical experience with film or photography.

MRC: I don't look at a lot of photography, but I love films. I think I'm envious of what film can do in terms of character development.

DM: Do you tend to draw inspiration from encounters you experience in real life?

MRC: A lot of the time, yes, but I'm not always aware of it while painting. It can be a kind of surprise actually. Lately I've noticed my figures are starting to represent how I interact with myself. I think we're all wrestling with different versions of ourselves. It's messy and confusing. I'm starting to recognize familiar figures popping up again and again.

DM: Right, there's a really strong suggestion that the human experience, in a universal and more personal sense, is somehow connected to your work. Is this a concept that you have a particular interest in?

MRC: Yes, in both my painting and my personal life, the more I learn about myself, the more I relate to other people. I think we all want to connect to other people in some way.

DM: Absolutely. Kakuzo Okakura wrote that art ‘might be a universal language if we ourselves were universal in our sympathies’. I find this notion holds a certain supernatural or parapsychological influence, which I can relate to your paintings.

MRC: I would say I’m more influenced by psychology. I find the mind is more mysterious and awe inspiring than anything else, but then I think that accounts for the supernatural feeling in my paintings. I think about psychology all the time and about human relationships. It just gets really murky talking about it. That's sometimes the issue with getting in deep—there's territory where I don't really know anymore, I don't have the answers and I'm trying to work it out through these paintings.

DM: I suppose these notions that we have, along with mysticism and magic and metaphysics, they're all rooted in the mind anyway, and to me your paintings to me have this overt sense of being activated, in terms of the character of the environments. Those are the ways that I approach the paintings, like products of the mind, a sort of psychological manifestation.

MRC: It’s weird because all of that makes sense in the act of making the painting. Sometimes I'm just sort of feeling my way through it and trying not to overthink. There was a time when I made very different paintings and would be thinking a lot. What does this mean? What does that mean? What I found lately is that I’m trying to create a feeling or a mood through asking ‘Does this feel right?’



All the Diaries We've Written, 2021
Oil on canvas.
81.3 x 71.1 cm

DM: This certainly shows as, although your paintings appear incredibly well thought out and finely executed, there is a very natural sense of flow to them. How do you combine both planned and more improvisational creative processes?

MRC: I don't work from studies or references so beginning a painting feels very improvisational. After a certain point, I start reacting to what I have painted and I start getting a clearer understanding of what the painting needs in order to work. I do a lot of editing via repainting and glazes until it's done. In terms of say composition it's about painting the problems, which is a very non-glamorous way to think about making art, but you have to think 'Does this color work with this color?' or, 'Is this composition making sense?' And then, 'Who is this person and how are they feeling?'. I guess I'm trying to figure out where that influence comes from, what is seen as mysticism or magic or the supernatural.

It could be from those external influences we've spoken about before. Like certain

electronic music - that definitely has this sort of supernatural feel. If I'm starting a painting and I'm not in the mood or distracted, I try to recenter myself. So, I'll put it on something like Boards of Canada. I think there's something about that music where I'm getting towards a feeling that everything is starting to fall into place and the decisions start making sense. There's this one song of theirs called *Seeya Later* that is my foundation for almost everything. I've listened to that song for over 20 years and I'll still put it on repeat and listen to it all day.

DM: I can connect your work to the woozy, nostalgic sound of Boards of Canada. The cover art for *Music Has the Right to Children* makes loads of sense in this context. It's strange asking quite dry and direct questions about what's not even really an approach or a process—it's just existing, a flow state. It's tricky though because we're engaged in this exchange to find answers; human beings are always under pressure to find the answers, but I just don't necessarily think that's what life is. Sometimes you just don't know, things just fall together, and it's chaos.

MRC: In art school you could have an answer for everything in your work, and you have to explain that this is this because of this, and this is about this, and then you could just talk about it. I was really good at that, but I remember just feeling it was all bullshit, it's all ridiculous, and the work meant nothing to me. I was frustrated by that, and very suspicious of the answers that I could come up with—like maybe that's true, but it doesn't really sit right. And it doesn't last. I was very reactionary to art speak and thinking about the work in those terms.

I knew that I needed to paint but I didn't know why, so I made a pact with myself where I was like, 'You're just going to do this and you're going to dive deep and figure out the why, but if you live to be 80 years old and you still don't know, it's fine, you at least attempted to'. It was really scary because I felt like nobody else was approaching art making in that way.

DM: I'm always so grateful when interviewing artists, or anyone really, to get a very true reflection of what's going on with them. So it's pretty telling how we're going right into these more granular, abstract topics. There was a question I had concerning Goya and El Greco but it just seems kind of forced now that we're already basically questioning the entire interview format. What I was wondering was how you connect to these artists and whether you think they were orbiting a similar set of influences to you.

MRC: Goya was very involved in psychology and human interactions and the dark sides of that, which I'm drawn to. How we hurt but also feel compelled to connect to one another. The older that he got, the less fucks he gave about anybody else. There's something really satisfying about that honesty. I could just imagine him in his space, his body falling apart, but he just has to make paintings. I've learned the most from Watteau, specifically the upper right corner of *Pilgrimage to Cytheria*. I was inspired by his paintings of leaves using thin glazes; that discovery began a long process of learning to construct a whole painting like that. It's fascinating that nobody really knows anything about him, he was a sort of recluse. So when you look at the paintings you wonder what's going on there, and that makes me even more compelled. There's a sadness there, a longing for connection. There are implied narratives, and when you compare it to his student, Jean-Baptiste Pater, who made Watteau-like paintings where everybody's naked or touching each other, there's the release.

In Watteau's *The Faux Pas* there's this failed kiss between a man and a woman—it's about the impossibility of making that connection. So to link that to Boards of Canada, they have their recording studio in Scotland, but nobody really knows what they're up to. They're super secretive. It creates an attraction to want to know—like you were saying earlier, we need to know answers. You can't ever know what was in Watteau's head and what kind of person he was, you can only go by the paintings. So you're just looking for clues. There's that movie *Under the Silver Lake*, where the whole movie is full of clues, and people rewatch it frame by frame, picking out clues. People found a secret location in California and think it's of some significance, and have been making treks to the middle of nowhere based on this movie.



Tooth Puller, 2021
Oil on canvas.
50.8 × 40.6 cm

DM: So it has this extra layer of understanding, but you can't quite work out how to get there. That's fantastic. I get something similar with David Lynch—*Mulholland Drive* is a good example. The film has ended and I feel like I've seen something beautiful and devastating and I feel absolutely terrible. But the film itself is this shattered story, where everything points towards tragedy, that leaves this equation in your mind. The logical part of your brain decides that solving the equation might make sense of the story and hopefully offer some relief to the emotional part. It sounds very similar, opening a need to know more, or to conclude.

MRC: With *Under the Silver Lake* there are whole message boards dedicated to it that have been going on for years. People have not given up on this and the amount of time and energy on just one fucking movie is incredible. People are buying plane tickets to go to a spot and it has nothing in it, but they believe that something's there. So again with Boards of Canada, people scour the internet, they are looking for clues, like if they think a new album is going to be released and

want information. People have made pilgrimages up to the recording studio in Scotland. And I find it just fascinating because it's from the lack of information, it's from the lack of answers.

DM: That's the crazy bit. The lack of knowledge in friction with that blind pursuit to know. Wasn't there something really early that was only released on a tape—I think maybe the first album. And people still argue about whether it's real, whether the digital copies you can find online are just part of a hoax. The same thing happened with [Canadian band] Godspeed You! Black Emperor—33 copies of a tape that almost nobody is supposed to have, but people say they have it somehow. There's still this big question mark though—is it actually it? Or is it not?

MRC: Yeah that's totally captured me, the denial, I love it. The denial of answers excites something in us all. When I went into painting it felt like there was something there. I don't know what it is. And I find that to be this great motivator in trying to figure it out because I don't know. Life just creates a situation where I don't know, I can't know. Really it's frustrating, but it inspires that search, it inspires the act of pursuing and discovering and trying. That's why every painting in a way feels like it's not there yet, not figured out, not done. What in the grand scheme of my work and my life is this saying? And there's a clue that leads to the next painting, and it's sort of like uncovering more and more of something that is being kept from me that I want to figure it out. I find that really gripping, that subconscious parallel, how I think about my own work for myself. So that's why it's really hard to give straight answers because I think any straight answer I would give, I don't know if that's true or not. Sometimes my answers change from day to day where I have conversations with myself about my own work. I'll have a really interesting idea, and then a couple of days later I'll have a totally different conversation about it. So there are no real satisfying, complete answers that I can sit with—and that's a good thing.

DM: It's like an artist's statement evolving and moving closer to something that it has been pointing to the whole time. I thought I needed a fixed set of ideas to be able to focus on my work, but I don't really think like that now. Some particularities of my intentions have changed, yet looking back over everything, an updated statement of intent still makes sense. You can retrospectively refocus your work. And why not? Nobody can tell you otherwise, and personally that's just not the way that I view time, or intention. Things are just so much more fluid than that. And in fact within your work again the sense of time itself is another fluid concept—they are hard to age,

they disturb our accepted notions of time.

MRC: I want my paintings to be for our present time but not necessarily of this time. I think not being able to place time allows the possibility for the paintings to exist in multiple times. That just feels more exciting to me.



Warm, 2021
Oil on canvas.
91.4 x 101.6 cm

DM: To me fluidity and impermanence are key elements in your work—they make them more exciting and potentially more approachable. But then what is quite remarkable is how alongside this everything makes geometric and proportional sense... in a fantastical way. The more fluid energy associated with improvising seems to have become imbued into the brushstrokes themselves. Things almost appear to be moving; there's a very distinct liveliness.

MRC: I remember there was this one time I was sitting at a friend's parents' house and they had these flowers that had this texture where they seemed to move or shimmer like there was a slight wind. And I think you can sometimes see a kind of static, almost like static on a TV, in the spaces between things. That idea has definitely played into the work. I try to give every section of a painting this kind of energy through the brush stroke, and I think that there is something about that

psychedelic kind of mindset that I actually do consciously reference or think about. Every part of the painting has to be energised and charged by the brush stroke. The brush and how the brush moves is the clearest connection that you have to the artist that has been there, the energy that they're feeling in that moment. With every brush stroke you're seeing the honesty in that state, in that one moment, and that energy is put into it into the painting. So it becomes this charged thing, charged with these little psychological moments.

DM: I was obsessed with this book *The Post Human Condition* by Robert Pepperell. There's this part where he's talking about the word 'concentration' and how it suggests a greater amount of something in the same amount of space—think fruit juice and acids. In remembering or ruminating on something, you concentrate more energy into a particular part of your mind. It's quite obvious but we just don't tend to think about certain words and their literal readings. There is something alive about your paintings—the play of light and the movement of air. When you make artistic decisions—the tip of a paintbrush, the mixing of colour, the amount of paint on the brush, applying to the canvas, the interaction with previous strokes—this is like a corralling and transfer of concentrated energy that ends up sitting as a living framework within the painting.

MRC: I love that explanation of concentration. It's like a removal of the excess and a focusing on the active agent. I used to play a lot of *Dungeons & Dragons* when I was a kid. I would sometimes play by myself because I didn't have many friends at the time whenever I moved to a new place, and I was fascinated by that whole world and all the different kinds of wizards. Some focus on illusion, some focus on conjuring, and then there were some that enchant. I remember this weird moment where I was painting one day, and I thought, 'I'm like a magician, the wand is the paint brush, I have all these books open on how to make all these different paintings, and I'm sitting studying, you know, in my studio, enchanting this object to have this power'. It's so nerdy to talk about.

DM: No, I mean, I have certain groups of friends where we openly recognise and place significance on magic and cosmic ordering and spells and things. It seems like a rational way to deal with the unknown, to view our potential in the world.

MRC: Yeah, people come up with all of these placeholders and categories—religion and philosophy; mysticism and metaphysics; stories and legends, things like that—and it goes back to what we were talking about a little while ago, about

how we deal with not knowing things. In that drive to know we come up with these really bizarre and unusual and fascinating ways to attempt to find meaning, even if it's flawed in some way. With magic it's like a placeholder for what's actually going on.

When I dive into something that's mystical, thinking about things in terms of something that I feel is suspect in its truth, or honesty, I always try to consider that it's rooted in psychology somehow. I'm always thinking like, 'Well why does the brain need that?' You know? There's something about playing around with these ideas of magic and Dungeons & Dragons, and making a painting of a space that doesn't necessarily exist, or could never exist... It's playing in those psychological spaces. I can think that I'm this magician, I'm making this object and I'm concentrating my mental energies on this one thing. Then it becomes an object that makes other people feel something, hopefully. And that's just fucking cool.



Soft Deceit, 2021
Oil on canvas.
91,44 x 76,2 cm

DM: People are a lot more powerful than they think. I mean, I'm not a psychologist, or kind of historian of habitual behaviours or anything like that, but there must be thousands of things that average people do every single day that help convince them that they've got more control over a situation than they actually have—which, in my mind, is an attempt at magic, an attempt at changing the fabric of your reality. And then there are habits that are rooted in ritual and ceremony that have somehow stuck. Halloween is an amazing example actually—the night where the veil between the living and the dead is at its thinnest. I wonder how many people really think like that, I definitely do.

MRC: Halloween is really fascinating. You know there's this pressure valve kind of thing where the system of authoritarian rule over people would actually be stronger if the people knew there would be something to look forward to. Something where they could just let all of their inhibitions out, where they could pretend, they could throw out their morals for a day, dress up and act crazy and get drunk and do whatever they want. There's one day in the year when you don't have to behave or act how you're supposed to for the rest of the year.

So the rest of the time you're more likely to actually do what you're supposed to and behave, to the king or to the church or whatever. So I think Halloween is some kind of extension of that. People will say it's one of the most fun holidays because they just get to be whatever. Especially here in New York, people get to be extra crazy, extra ridiculous. And not even in a costume, just something they want to wear that they feel like they could never wear on a normal day, an alter ego. I generally have a lot of social anxiety, depending on the day, but on Halloween nobody gives a shit. My costume would involve drinking a 40 of Colt 45 and get pretty drunk and then I would just start putting things on, as ridiculous as possible, and then be drunk enough to go out and actually interact in the world, wearing like a tree branch, duct taped to myself, and like carrying an iron, wearing the American flag with leggings and cowboy boots. And it's just like one of those rituals that we have, that mean something to us. And there's so many different versions of that, like getting a cup of coffee in the morning, like the most mundane things. But they still create some kind of stability or meaning, or they're a distraction.

DM: I wonder how many of these things are politicised, because if you give people the impression that they're more in control of their own life then, like you were saying, they're less likely to be rebellious the rest of the time. Maybe that's a bit of a tangent for another time. All these kind of behaviours and

rituals and things have just become so deeply ingrained in people, with their strange roots and sometimes quite questionable histories, but yes –thinking about what you said– sometimes I think ultimately people just want to feel like they have more of a grip on their existence, in direct and transcendental ways, like there’s something else existing alongside our basic perceived reality.

MRC: Yeah, that’s like what magic could be, or religion could be—you're escaping having to look at the cold, brutal, harsh reality of certain things. We can be very nihilistic, right? Looking for truth but suspecting the meaninglessness of our existence, looking at things in a very bleak way. But then, there's also something really important about creating meaning out of nothing.

* Portrait by Steve Wallington.

** Mark Ryan Chariker will be opening his next solo exhibition with 1969 Gallery in January, 2022.



Mark Ryan Chariker, October 2021 in London.